

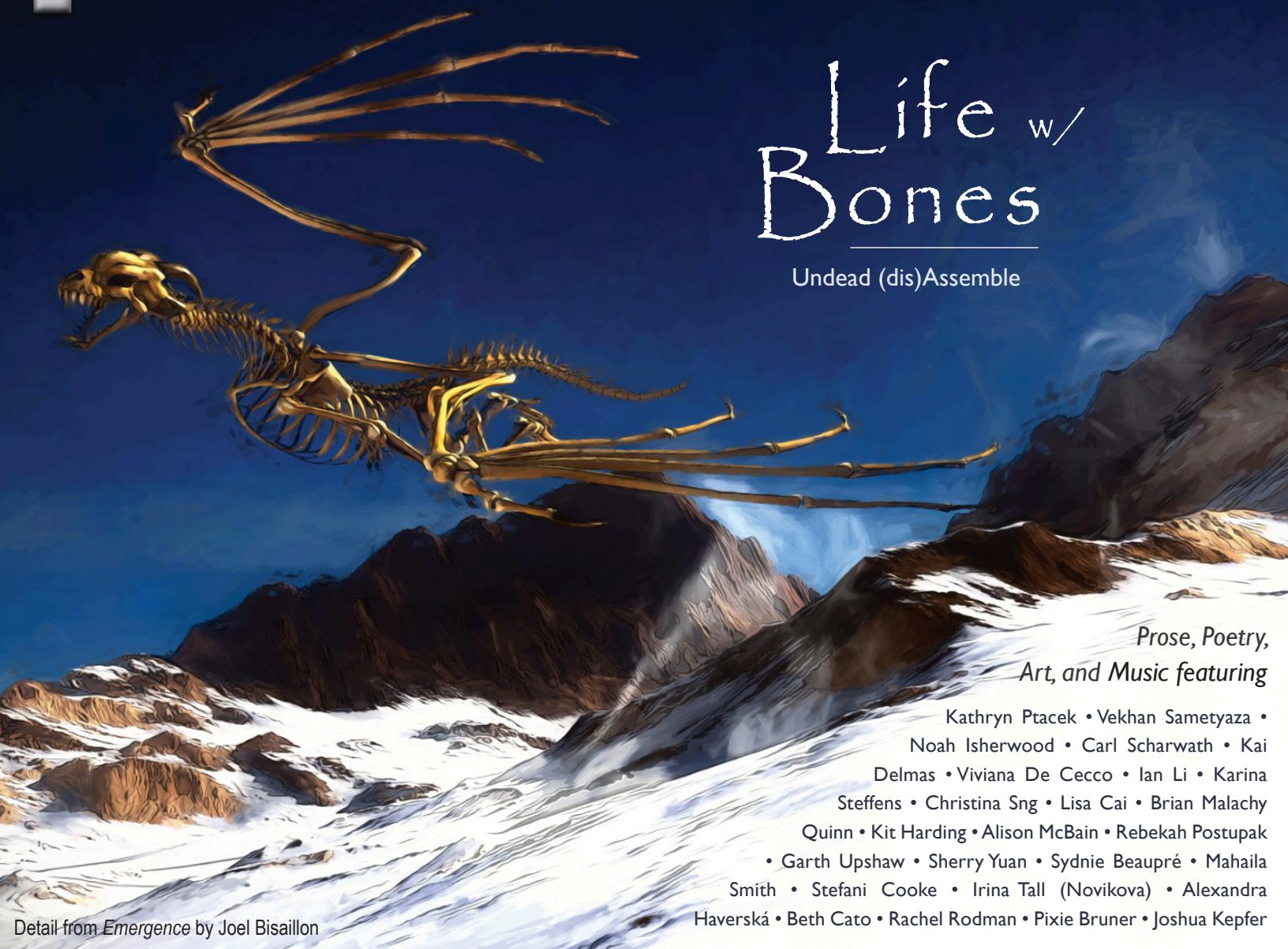
penumbric

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fiction mag

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Life w/ Bones

Undead (dis)Assemble



Prose, Poetry,
Art, and Music featuring

Kathryn Ptacek • Vekhan Sametyaza •
Noah Isherwood • Carl Scharwath • Kai
Delmas • Viviana De Cecco • Ian Li • Karina
Steffens • Christina Sng • Lisa Cai • Brian Malachy
Quinn • Kit Harding • Alison McBain • Rebekah Postupak
• Garth Upshaw • Sherry Yuan • Sydnie Beaupré • Mahaila
Smith • Stefani Cooke • Irina Tall (Novikova) • Alexandra
Haverská • Beth Cato • Rachel Rodman • Pixie Bruner • Joshua Kepfer

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

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cover: *Emergence* by Joel Bisaillon

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

It's your* ninety-ninth rejection. You've seen too many comments: "I've seen this before"; "Nothing new here." You begin to believe "I have nothing new to offer the world." Or conversely, you think, "These idiots! Everything I have to say is new! And wonderful." I've had both these mindsets. Neither is ultimately helpful.

The latter of these is sometimes an ego survival instinct and isn't helped by the fact that we live in a world that encourages us to forget what happened yesterday and to pay attention only to the now; is it any wonder that we recycle even recent ideas? Which is so weird; the half-life of cultural artifacts/ideas seems to be shrinking rather than expanding, which is the opposite of what you'd expect it to do given the availability of basically all of film and written history at our fingertips; it's like the availability of more knowledge makes us want it less, or to be overwhelmed maybe and then pointedly ignore it all. Which sucks; I look at this expansion of knowledge as such an amazing opportunity, and what I'll call the "social media world" wants to reinvent fire every five seconds (and wants us to be educated only on cat memes; but that's another discussion). We're encouraged to have an attention span no greater than a few minutes; we're encouraged to think everyone much older than our attention span is a different generation (well, hyperbole, but more and more true), to be marketed at (rather than "to") in a

different and siloed way. Which just makes it easier for us to dismiss any ideas older than today years old and think everything is squeaky new. And then be crushed or put up our ego defenses when we discover that they aren't (if we come out of our cocoons long enough to discover this).

I understand both the desire to put one's stamp on the world and the crushing depression brought on by thinking one's ideas have all been done before. Just one of many examples is my Master's dissertation.** When I first started it, I was sure I had an idea no one had thought of before—I wanted to create human-like personalities for NPC characters. Yet as I looked through the papers written by others, I discovered I wasn't the first to travel this road. I lamented this to my advisor, thinking I had to abandon hope and kind of wishing I'd never looked for these other works, and he said to me, no, this is good! It means you have a base to go from, an academic foundation to build on. You just have to work at developing your idea, but using what you've learned as a springboard (or something like this; I've forgotten the exact discussion).

I think this is still good advice, and it's good advice for things outside academics; being aware of the stories that have been written before yours isn't a death knell for your writing; instead, think of it as an opportunity to refine your ideas, to maybe take

* I've written bits of this in second person, but obviously, if you don't resemble the "you" in these remarks, please don't take it personally.

** Yes, dissertation, not thesis; this was in the UK, and the terms are a little different than in the US.

those other stories as what has been said before, but here's your twist on that. Not every story has to be The Next Original Idea; maybe it presents an idea in a new way, or to an audience that might not have thought about it before.

I suppose Hollywood would see every remake as doing this, which is why they seem to market everything as “the [whatever] for a new generation” or some such malarky. But I’m saying you build on what came before, not just do it again (and not just paying “building on the idea” some sort of lip service that you think will market well to today’s audience).

And although it’s just easier to pretend that nothing like your thoughts has ever happened before, and thus any idea you have is the Coolest Ever, doing the harder work of knowing what

came before and honing your thoughts using that will let you say or do something that stands a chance of lasting more than the next twenty-four hours, when tomorrow’s new generation just says the same thing about your work that you said today and pats itself on the back.

And honestly I think it is just better to know things—old things, last year’s things, last decade, last century. This is how we build civilization rather than tear it down, break cycles rather than re-live them, grow as people and as a world.

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbric

Bones

by Kathryn Ptacek

Every night, I go to bed a whole unbroken person.
Every morning, I wake up, and my bones are broken splintered charred.
I dread my sleep, my demon bed.
I know what morning brings.
The pieces of bone spill out of me.
They lie around me, lost bits I have not swept up yet.
Fragments I have not yet reclaimed.
As the day hours go by, the bones
return to my body until, once more,
at night I am complete.
Except for the hole in my heart
that you dug so deeply.
It is healing, but my grief has leached into my bones.
I split them, I twist them, I hammer my bones,
just as I did
with yours that I now
wear in a necklace around my neck.
I touch the hard whiteness in the hollow of my throat.
One morning, my bones will not mend,
and you and I will be together again,
bone to bone.

Neon Wanderer

by Vekhan Sametyaza



Arbitration

by Noah Isherwood

Cigarette butts line the baseboards of my apartment. I have stacked them three and four high, lacquered into place with glue, gum, spit. My nicotine boundary is important. I crawl along in the dark and smell my stale ash-paper ramparts to remember when I burnt each dart. Penitents and Disputees flicker up my nostrils along invisible threads of wasting-away tar and ash, auspices burning my sinuses. There is forethought in the memories they bring. Often, there are screams.

Smiley chose this domicile on my behalf because of its unique qualities. An ancient association of thieves whose names were forcibly forgotten crafted their disguises and trickeries in secret in a nondescript storehouse on this site. That was centuries ago, of course, but the taste of their stealth is sharp on my new tongue: basalt and cream. It is a shroud for my presence. The Others must not know the Arbiter is here. My neighbors profit from the hidden-in-plain-sight warding as well. Their rents have never increased, and they receive no junk mail. It can be hard to have Chinese delivered, but at least it is peaceful.

* * *

The Arbiter's presence brings a coppery unease to the financial district. It tastes, faintly, through the grille in Their cowl, the way a boxing ring smells between rounds. Knots of traders and couriers avert their eyes from the Arbiter's path, and They ignore the Others in kind. They enter an office

building and hail an elevator. No one joins Them in the car. They press 73.

They ride up basking in the glow of Margaritaville covered by Kenny G. On the eighteenth, thirty-third, and sixtieth floors, the elevator doors open to reveal businesspersons ready to travel up, but when they see the Arbiter's dark stillness they step back and wait for the next elevator. Their hearts falter, pores seep musky, fearful sweat, and they thank their gods that the Arbiter is not getting off on their floor.

The Arbiter steps out on the seventy-third floor into a silent reception chamber. Two somber groups of Others face Them, opaque financiers. Two individuals step forward, one from each side, a man and a woman. The Disputees. Wordlessly they lead the Arbiter to a conference room overlooking the city. The man leans for the head of the table, a bare millisecond of ostentation, but cedes it to the Arbiter. He and the woman take seats on either side of Them.

* * *

My apartment is a corner unit on the second of eight floors in the rear of a taupe building in an area that is not rightly called a neighborhood. It is a meaningful position according to Smiley. The north wall overlooks a service passage filled with dumpsters and rusted-in bicycle racks. It is quiet, and smells ripe.

The west wall abuts another unit which is occupied by an Ageless by the name of ... I have forgotten. They never learned the name I use either. They have lived there since the building was erected and will see it to its logical end. I think they are a nurse, but they have no scruples or social life to speak of, at least none that I can smell. Still, their fragrance is calming, neroli and violet.

My south wall holds my door, facing the stairs. Road dust, grease spatter, woolen fuzzles, and rubber scuffs cover the outer wall about the entry. The leavings of passerby camouflage the sigils of protection etched around the portal. I once watched from the open door as dozens of tenants walked by without so much as a glance.

The east wall faces the street, a quiet one, known traditionally among the city's cyclists as part of a shortcut around a particularly dangerous automotive interchange that the aldermen have been promising to reevaluate for fifty years. The Others love to lie, which is really what keeps me in business. I hear their rumors in the click of gears and swift, grunted greetings below my dark curtains. Messages wash up on my walls like flotsam from the river of rubber and flesh.

* * *

On the table before the Arbiter is a sheaf of papers, the contract in question. They consume it carefully, passing it page by page through a slit in Their mask, taking time to savor each writhing line of bitter legalese. The room is still, a dry plain before a thunderstorm, and the papers crackle in the Arbiter's gloved hands. As the document is transformed, They reach into Their gaping left sleeve, producing a half-empty pack of Lucky Strikes and a lighter. Removing a single cigarette,

They stand it filter down on the table, candle-like, and light it. The smoke is slow and purplish, rippling acrid, and the coal is dim. The Arbiter extends a fist to each Dispute, fourth fingers naked and outstretched to link with the shivering Disputees. They speak softly through a modulator that gives Their voice the quality of sand pouring over piano strings.

"We have reviewed the contract. Arbitration shall now commence. Please focus your vision upon the ceremonial smoke. Try to relax."

The man and woman stare fixedly at the smoldering cigarette and the Arbiter begins to hum, a low drone that rises and falls with the tendrils of smoke. They can feel the fingers relaxing in Their grip, can sense the connection growing through a maze of dermal cells, infinitesimal crystals of potassium, ammonia, and lactic acid. The woman's head slowly droops down to rest on the table. The man leans back in his chair and a line of saliva streaks down his chin. The Arbiter sinks into Themself, pulling the Disputees down with Them. Arbitration begins.

* * *

Layout was high on Smiley's house hunting list. When you enter my apartment, you are faced with a narrow foyer. There is a closet to the left, and the portal to my living space opens on the right behind the swing of the door, hiding it from the hall. I keep the closet door closed and an old jacket hanging on the knob, as if it is too full of dustier, older, lesser-used garments to be of any interest. A bookshelf is to the right of the closet, holding empty photo frames, piles of the Others' mail, and a bowl for keys I find in the street or in pockets. No one living has seen it, but it is a homey entry.

I have blocked up the cased opening to the rest of my domicile with mouldering timbers pried from pallets at the docks, wood from Malaysia and the Yukon and Darfur. Between the timbers I have stuffed shopping bags and scraps of fabric I found on roadsides, bound with gobs and strips of tape gathered from facade painters' worksites and missing dog posters and the sticky bits of discarded parcel boxes from online retail outlets. The Others waste such valuable things.

In the middle of the frame is my crooked door. I stapled opaque strips of moldy shower curtains to the lintel alongside frayed electrical wires cast from the windows of high-rises under renovation, tangles of fishing line beside strands from a dozen bead curtains tossed out of college dormitories. Smiley left me rough schematics for the wall, blue marker scribbled on the foyer floor. It was a loving message.

"REFuse = refuge

seal here top 2 bttm

layers!!!!!!"

When I first took up residence here, Smiley's messages were the only things I had. The one in the foyer is covered up by my portal, but the second one I keep safe in my office, stapled to a wall. It is a flattened takeout container with grease stains and scrawls of that same blue marker. It found it in the master bathroom, which is much larger now than it once was. I can recite the note from memory.

"secured domicile U R welcome

Work rough stay clean and wet and build a Maintenance

privacy from Others is KEY"

I remember the admonishments every day and follow them closely, even when the hum of the city chews its way into my frontal lobe. Smiley seeded my refuge with a cash offer, a blue marker, and a handful of spells. It was an apartment set apart. Set apart from the Others. Then I arrived and made it my shrine, following the instructions. I kept to myself, I kept neat and moist, I built a process for Maintenance.

* * *

Through a shadowy morass of mingled memories and Otherly neuroses, the Arbiter swoops along aether webs of intention and choice, smelling hot ammoniac guilt and magnesium fears. They recall the contract, desiccated in their gut, each toothsome jot and decadent tittle of services rendered and accounts payable, delicate streams of transactional power dissolving into the periphery. They hear a crackle in the datastream, a froggy squelch echoing back, but from where? From whom? Nerves reach out, tasting, listening in on two memories, filtering, collating between fancy and schema until They find it, tonguing a phrase from the soup of wet dreams and quarterly projections. They broadcast it in a loop to the enmeshed minds at the tips of Their pinkies.

"... and void should either party (defined as any executive of Dextron or Teliosale privy to the aforementioned) break confidentiality as defined in Section ..."

Such a small thing. The Arbiter scoops the corresponding memory from its wet nerves, kneads it into the repeating phrase, a vision of the man to Their right slurring conspiratorially to a more-than-a-waitress in the murky glow of an un-

derground club. The braided memory and contractual verbiage swirl into a rapidly gyrating psychic density that throws off quarks of vinegar and camphor. The Arbiter flicks this verdict right up the ulnar nerve of the guilty man.

* * *

When I return from my work at dawn, dusk, noon, or midnight, I drag my quivering self up the stairs and through my door. The bolt is never set because I am the key. I wave my hands and the spells allow me passage. The door opens on its own and in I go, shedding the layers of my disguise, limbs shaking. The pants, shirt, wig, sweater, mask, and underthings get folded and put in the foyer closet along with all my other urban-middle-class-bookish-divorced-accountant things. I always brace the closet door so they cannot get out.

Beside my rippling portal of plastic are a rubbish bin and a vinyl tote on a woven mat. I half-filled the tote with dishwasher, coffee grounds, and slime molds of three dozen varieties which I cultured in the kitchen. After barring the closet, I kneel and lave my skull with lukewarm driblets of the stuff, smelling the technicolor rot trickle down me. I vomit into the rubbish bin, once, twice, pulp and bile leaping from me. On rare occasions there is a third heave, with blood. Always I feel myself melting. I sweat and shake and purge, and when I squelch through my stringy door it accepts my scent and I am solid once more.

A certain degree of tangibility is required for my work. I cannot be the Arbiter if I allow the atmosphere of the city to deliquesce my form into so much pink sludge on the curb. I must scour, marinate, rebuild. I must Maintain. The bath waits. My refuge gurgles and drips in my mind as I drag my slobbering

self across the floor until the anticipation is blinding. I feel the door's heat on my face and collapse through it in a gasp of steam and wet green light.

* * *

Three sets of eyes open together. The man screams and recoils from the Arbiter's touch, falling from his chair into a pool of his own urine. The woman slowly raises her head from the table, her eyes fuzzy cisterns. The cigarette has burnt down nearly to the filter and gone out, a single filament of smoke whispering to the ceiling. The Arbiter gathers it up and stuffs it into Their robe, addresses the Disputees in Their mechanical buzz.

"Arbitration has been successful. Contract nullified in favor of Dextron, Incorporated, which shall control Teliosail and its constituents effective immediately. Guilt assigned to Jon Kellter, who is remanded to Arbiter custody."

The woman nods absently and the Arbiter stands, approaches Kellter, who continues to grovel in the puddling of his morning coffee and last night's tequila. He is shivering, mumbling nothings to himself through strings of drool. The Arbiter grips his collar and hauls him upright, dragging him shambling out of the conference room to the elevator. The waiting throng of Others stifle gasps and groan as one body, press themselves against the walls away from the Arbiter's metronome pace and dripping prey.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Kellter slurs, saliva pouring down his chin onto his necktie.

The Arbiter hails the elevator, going up. Kellter cranes his

neck, frantic to find a merciful eye in the crowd of Others.

"Please, please help me," he moans. His knees give out and he pulls at the Arbiter's robes. "Please, I'm sorry, please!"

The elevator comes and the Arbiter drags Kellter into the mirrored car. The doors close, and They are gone. The office erupts into a new silence. Jon Kellter's designated successor tells them all to take the rest of the day off and delivers a set of keys and secrets to the woman in the conference room, where a janitor is already erasing the final proof of Jon Kellter's existence. The woman is playing with her hair and looking out over the city. She smells lavender.

* * *

In the gray days of my lonely apprenticeship, I could never seem to get myself clean. The master bath was simply not up to the task. It took a great deal of labor to break it in, but I am finally satisfied with it. For now.

My first priority was a larger tub, one I could really float in. Carrying such a thing home without drawing attention was out of the question, so I had to get creative with a dozen or so plastic totes, a heat gun, bulk epoxy, and scraps of pool liner. I sculpted a lagoon for myself, and when it was ready I carved away the side of the tub to unite the two vessels. I spent a manic period patching a series of stubborn leaks, frantically shoring up the flaccid walls of the pool. The ceiling needed to go anyhow, so I ripped it down in chunks and used plaster and timbers to backfill between the lagoon and the walls. Still the leaks persisted. Weeping in frustration, I slathered glue and snot and joint compound and grease into crevices and holes. The dribbles disappeared but I found myself trapped.

The bits of ceiling had wedged the door shut, hardening under layers of slime, and the lights flickered in their damaged and dangling sockets. I lunged at the walls, hissing and beating with my fists until I forced my way out through a crumbling fissure of sheetrock and wires into the light of the hall. I lay shivering on the floor, splinters and dust molded into my bubbling and bruised flesh, born into a new caution. The Arbiter must think of the consequences.

* * *

In the elevator, the Arbiter keys the call button and an operator picks up after two rings.

"How may I assist you?"

("Please," Kellter whispers.)

"This is the Arbiter. Roof access please."

There is a pause. The static is coconut-milk sweet.

"Please press 75. The door to the stairs will be the second on your right after leaving the elevator. It will be unlocked. If you could ensure it is closed behind you that would be lovely. May I assist you further?"

("Help me," Kellter croaks.)

"No. Thank you."

"My pleasure. Thank you and have a good day."

The operator's words are measured, calm, but his fear wafts

through the speaker. Routineness does not imply comfort. Kellter sobs, quivering in the Arbiter's grasp, but does not struggle. He will not run.

The elevator bell rings and the dour pair steps out onto the seventy-fifth floor, a rough utility hall lined with derelict printers and broken office chairs. They turn right. Far down the corridor behind them a door slams. Kellter flinches. The Arbiter walks on.

The door is open as promised and the Arbiter shuts it behind Them. They lead Kellter up two flights of stairs and into the light of day. The air is cleaner a thousand feet above the city, wizened and plum colored. Winds dance amongst the Arbiter's robes and slap Kellter's befouled tie into his face. The Arbiter walks Kellter to the ledge. The city stretches to the horizon, fading into indistinct vapors at its edges. The street below beckons. Kellter spits out a question.

"Why won't you say anything to me?"

* * *

I remodeled more carefully after my careless entrapment. I sanded and shaved away the ragged edges my rage had created, eroding scraps of ceiling and walls particle by particle. Dust began to fill the cracks and I sprayed it down to keep it from choking me. Soon, things began to grow in the damp shadows of my bric-a-brac refuge, molds and fungi, pink and black and ripe, and I lit upon an idea.

I began to carry home bags of soil from parks and from ditches, from graveyards and firing ranges, from all the places in the city where green life and creeping chemistry conspire

together. I packed the rigid frame surrounding my pool with earth layer by layer, padding, packing, planting. Before long I could walk through the room once again rather than clambering monkey-like in the darkness over dust-caked spars. Once I trimmed the bottom off the door and sealed it with windshield wipers woven with broom bristles, the bones of my sanctum were whole, a skeleton well-knit and ready to be dressed in flesh.

When I return home now, when I stumble and collapse into so much ooze, my refuge is warm and wet. Through trial and error, I have synchronized the drain and faucet so the lagoon is always full. At first, I would find the standing water tepid, losing heat and gaining a film of dust while I was out. That told me the sanctum was unsealed, so I made it hermetic. The walls gained layers as if fattening for winter, rubber sheets from nursing homes, patches of foil from fast food rubbish bins, plexiglass riot shields, and gobs of grout sealer. I found aquarium heaters and reptile lamps to provide warmth, plugged them into drop cords from construction sites, and sealed the connections with tape and rubber cement. Heat and wet stay now, my dearest friends, forever awaiting my return in the light of a dozen false suns.

* * *

The Arbiter takes a pause, Their first in decades. Sunlight wreathed in cloud presses down on the rooftop.

"What do you want Us to say to you?"

"I don't know, maybe, 'I'm sorry?'" Kellter sniffles.

The Arbiter turns to face Jon Kellter.

"We are not sorry."

Kellter wipes his nose on his sleeve, elbow to wrist.

"Figures."

"Does it?"

"Everyone says you're cold bastards. Damn freezing up close."

"The Others say this about Us?"

"Yeah."

"What else do they say about Us?"

"They say you're brutal, cannibals, heartless every one of you."

"Every one of Us?"

"Mhm."

"What do you mean by 'every one'?"

"What?"

The Arbiter does not repeat Their question. Kellter sits roughly on the wide ledge of the roof, glowering in silent confusion.

"You're not the only Arbiter," he says.

"What is this metaphor?"

"It's not a metaphor. You are quite seriously not the only Arbiter."

The smog at the edges of the city rings with distant thunder and the scent of peaches.

"You are wrong, Jon Kellter," the Arbiter drones.

"No, I don't think I am," Kellter says, stronger now. "There are more of you."

"We judge all rights and wrongs, no one else."

"All the rights and wrongs in Milwaukee maybe, but not in the Confederation, and certainly not the whole fucking world. You'd have died of lung cancer well before now with all them damn cigarettes."

"We are confused. Do you and the Others truly believe in more than one Arbiter?"

"Uh, yeah?"

The Arbiter steps back and visibly deflates in Their robes.

"Sorry to burst your bubble. There's just no way it's only you," Kellter says.

From the loosely pooled black wrappings of the Arbiter comes a rippling huffing noise, toneless wheezes and coughs that evolve into cacophonous laughter as the robes shiver with glee. The Arbiter's voice modulator is like a pneumatic with a kazoo, Their gelatine ribcage splitting at the sides. They gather Themself, clapping a gloved hand to Kellter's shoulder.

"Ah, Jon Kellter." They squeeze the accountant's shoulder with a grip like a vice. "Do you know how many Arbitrations We do each day? How many lives We break and bind while you wallow in your corner offices with your hidden bottles of bourbon, consulting interns, and spreadsheets? Do you know, Jon Kellter?"

Kellter falls to his knees under the splintering grip of the Arbitrator. Thunderheads broil up mahogany and teal from every compass point. He cries out, wailing and gasping.

"No no no I don't know I don't know how many—I'm sorry I'm sorry please stop hurting me please—please just let me die-hi-hi-hi-hi!"

The Arbitrator considers for a moment, then picks Kellter up by the left arm, raising him writhing into the sky.

"No, We don't think We will."

* * *

I slip into the lagoon, close my eyes, and sink to the bottom. Time is meaningless in this warmth, in this embrace. The waters are my lover. They penetrate my very cells and draw out the grime of the city. When I inevitably float back to the surface I am spent, feeling orange all over with the taste of cinnamon on my tongue. I crawl from the water and ease myself into the deep banks of moss I have cultivated about the pool. Garden time is key to my Maintenance.

The decoration of my sanctum proceeded naturally once I sealed, heated, and lit the space. As the sediments around the lagoon settled I filled in the holes, handfuls of dirt from patio

planters left for chaff and cups of earth from forgotten playgrounds. Small lives sprang from each addition, plasmodia and amoeba and creeping kaleidoscopic molds. Fungi threw up their fibrous and flabby forms and collapsed once more to earth. Mites and spiders warred over the primordial microscape. Then a seed sprouted with a thunderous bang, and another and another. Stowaway weeds, phytolacca, lamias-trum, clematis, all colonized the fresh muck.

I brought cuttings and leaves and seeds and shoots. Some grew, some rotted, all filled my refuge. In the cloying heat, green things began to dance. Now when I lie dripping, solidifying in the verge that rings the pool, the shade of colocasia, pothos, and heracleum quiver in tendrils of steam above me. A brace of geckoes haunt my little glen and traverse my rippling dome of rubbish. Their company is pleasant. They have no dreams.

* * *

"What? I'm not going to die? Isn't that what's supposed to happen now?" Kellter asks.

"Yes. It is what you deserve, but We believe you merit something more. A promotion," the Arbitrator said.

"What do you mean?"

"You asked what the Arbitrator says to the guilty, did you not? You called into question the logistics of Arbitration. If you are so curious, why don't We teach you?"

"I thought you said I was wrong."

"Ah, Jon Kellter. You were wrong and you were right, but

above all, you were inquisitive. Congratulations. It is a rare thing among the Others, and deserves recognition."

An umami wind springs up and Kellter regards the Arbiter through his whipping bangs.

"You mean you aren't going to kill me?"

"We are not going to kill you."

"I'm not going to be punished?"

"We didn't say that," the Arbiter murmurs.

* * *

When I have had enough of green, dripping heat, my Maintenance continues with a close inspection of my apartment, its wards, sigils, and tobacco fortifications, followed by a meal. If I am in a slump, I may only drink a packet of tasteless nutrient powder dissolved in warm water and retreat to my bed. Otherwise, I will take a jug of blended cold tea, boiled eggs, fermented vegetables, and some fossilized candy bar or leftover jellybeans to the living room and make myself busy with Extracurriculars.

Extracurriculars were pointedly encouraged by Smiley from day one. Before my tears and plasma had even crusted, Smiley shoved a pair of left-handed scissors into my wet grip and gestured vaguely to a pile of magazines, dime novels, and advertising flyers lying in the alley. I was left there, chained by my thoughts to a standpipe, alone save for the sliding mass of glossy imagery and flaking prose, alone for days. When Smiley returned from Their other errands, I had begun to see the

patterns that They had wanted me to see, had curated them with cuts, creases, collations, mosaics of newsprint and photopaper. My eyes were dry and my fingers knicked into a burning crosshatch of hot paperbites, and if Smiley had not lost Their face They would certainly have beamed.

The walls of my living room are papered with layers of disembodied faces, small and large, glossy and matte, bands of printed phrases in undulating spirals and stripes, rippling landscapes composed of hundreds of snapshots pasted to plastic sheets hanging from ceiling to floor. When a sheet becomes full of my ephemeral text I hang it on a rod in a carpet rack I lifted in pieces from a resale store. If I lack the energy to add to the current collage, I leaf through the stiffening hangings, admiring visions that span millions of memories and miles of newsprint.

The collages tell stories about my life. They tell about Arbitration, about my Maintenance, my home, my mind, my tastes and interests. Every day they seem more remote. They tell of the things that I was told by Smiley, to whom I am eternally grateful. They say:

"Find the being to whom nothing happens and you will find the Arbiter. The Arbiter happens to the world."

"Find the being who no one knows and you will find the Arbiter. The Arbiter knows everyone."

"Find the being who cannot be remembered and you will find the Arbiter. The Arbiter remembers you."

* * *

"So I am going to die, but you're not going to do it, right? Some kind of sick fairytale shit?" Kellter groans.

"Not quite. You won't die for a long, long time. In a sense." The Arbiter turns away from the guilty man and surveys the city.

"But I will still be punished?"

"Correct."

"Then you're going to torture me."

"We are going to turn you into an Arbiter."

Kellter squints out over the hum of the city, shakes his head and spits.

"Alright then, do it already," he growls in defiance.

The Arbiter laughs Their harmonica laugh from deep within Their undulating thorax and murmurs to the breeze, lifting both hands to Their hood.

"You are unprepared for eternity."

"What?" Kellter asks.

"Look at Us."

* * *

If I am not in the mood for Extracurriculars, I will do what I

call Not-Work. This involves planning, executing, and analyzing the findings of undercover excursions into the world of the Others. It was never part of the stated job description Smiley gave me, but They said it would help me with my formal duties nonetheless, so it must be worthwhile.

I fire up the mechanisms of my science in the kitchen and begin to melt and dissect and datify my samples of the city. I forge my disguises, I make my assumptions. I inscribe my notes into the walls with a razor blade, and when I run out of room I paint over my glyphs, fertilizing the next layer of canvas with learnings.

I venture forth across the city on expeditions of discovery, of remembrance. I collect items necessary for Maintenance and Extracurriculars. I rub myself with petroleum jelly and dress in plastic wrap and bandages, toting an empty rucksack and a satchel of tools. I search for my name in the city that I once called home.

As I gather knowledge, I heed Smiley's first directive, framed as an answer to my first and final question:

"You will learn. The Arbiter must die forever and ever."

* * *

The Arbiter turns and flings back Their hood. Beneath the shadowy cowl and sleek mask, Kellter sees a featureless plain of skin, undulating in wormy bulges from underneath the dermis, twitching about forgotten musculatures. He whispers into the rushing wind of the oncoming storm.

"Where's your face?"

"We drew so many minds into Our own that We could no longer tell Ourselves from all the dreams We had saved and destroyed. We lost our visage one Arbitration at a time."

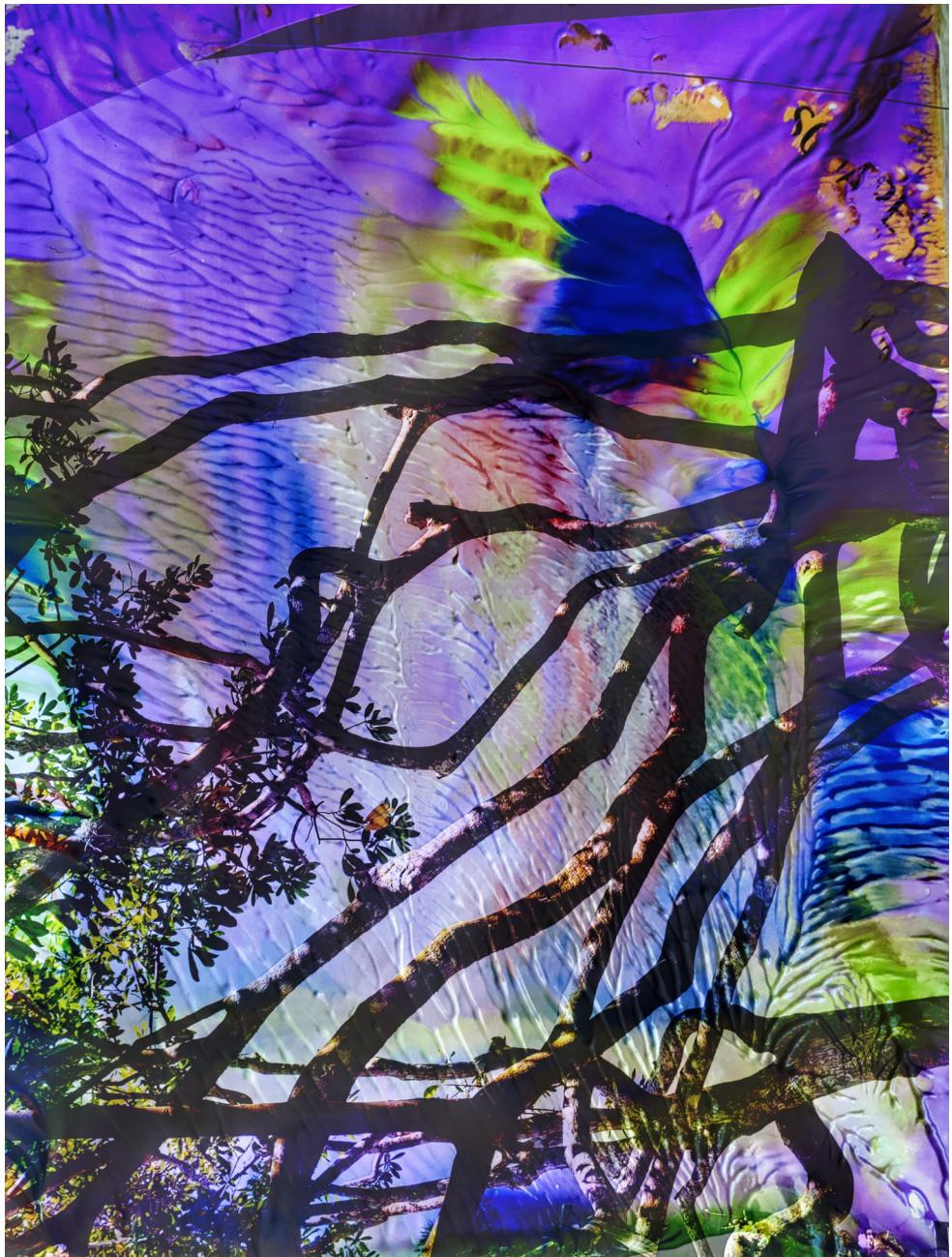
"Why?"

"You will learn." The Arbiter lurches forward.

Kellter scrambles backward away from the Arbiter, whose laugh rings through a skull that writhes in sores and lesions that flare and fade in time to the pulsing energy beneath. A gash like a grin cuts across the pale leather bulb, and Kellter rolls away, rolls to the right, and into thin air.

Encounter

by Carl Scharwath



What She Left Behind

by Kai Delmas

The darkness is suffocating.

No, it's not the darkness, it's the earth. Soil covers me from head to toe. I can't move. I open my mouth to scream only to have it filled with dirt.

I gag, I fight, I struggle but nothing I do is of use. Death is nigh for I cannot breathe.

But death never comes.

I have no need of air, and as my panic fades realization comes. I feel no pain.

My fingers dig into the earth above me. It's difficult, but they find purchase over time and I make progress. The dirt shifts and I claw my way up, up, up.

My hand punches free into the air. I drag myself upward, out of the earth into the moonlit night. I'm in a graveyard, which doesn't surprise me. But something is missing. I expected something else. Someone.

"Mom?"

I turn to face the boy. No more than thirteen years old. Dirt and tears stain his cheeks. A dark tome lies at his feet next to a tree.

He blinks and rubs his eyes.

"Mom, is it really you? Did it work?"

I don't know what to tell him. I open my mouth and clumps of dirt fall out.

His eyes widen, but he doesn't flinch or scream. He just stares at me, unsure. Am I real? A hallucination? Is he still dreaming?

I can feel all these questions in his heart. And more.

He's afraid. Hopeful. Wracked with grief. Terrified of what he's done. Thrilled that it worked.

"Who are you?" My voice grates against my raw throat and the dry earth between my tongue and teeth.

Fresh tears stream down his face.

Pain of a different sort.

Disappointment. Failure.

"You aren't her, are you?"

The bond between us is strong. He called me back from beyond the grave. He is my master, in a way. But there's more.

His heart is open. His emotions, his memories become my own.

Warm nights, cuddling under blankets. Soft kisses on the head before bed. Smiles and laughter in the mornings. Tears and hugs in the hospital.

I see myself in his mind's eye. The way I used to be. Glowing with life. A symbol of strength and security. And later, a constant reminder of mortality. An ever-weakening body that he knew would not be there forever.

I look down at myself. My torn white dress, smudges of black earth all over. My skeletal hands, pale in the moonlight and surely paler than those of anyone living.

I am not this boy's mother. I'm not who he remembers. I'm a body. That's all.

But I can feel his need, his ache for me to be what he meant to bring back. If I could cry, I would. For him. For who I used to be.

He's still looking at me expectantly. Waiting for me to confirm his fears. To tell him the truth.

"Sweetheart? Oh, my sweet boy." I open my arms and he doesn't hesitate. He runs, buries his head in my chest and wraps his arms around me. He doesn't care about the dirt or the smell. All he wants is for me to be his mother.

I can do that.

For him.

I can be her for a little while.

"Mom. Oh, Momma! I've missed you so much." He sobs, letting all of his fears and worries go. His tears seep into my dress. They are his grief, his pain, his sorrow. He squeezes me with all his might, his anger, his frustration.

I hold him. That's what I'm there for.

I let him cry. I let him free himself of all of his pent-up emotions.

He's been keeping them in for far too long. While his mother was sick at home, when she was in the hospital, on the morning she was gone, at the funeral.

I know all of this and more as his heart lies bare in front of me. Our bond lets me inside, and I feel everything he wouldn't let out. He had built a dam, showed a strong front, but all that did in the end was make him numb.

The floodgates have been opened and it's all coming out and I am here to keep him upright as it does.

After a while, his sobbing subsides. His grip remains tight, but I feel something shift within him.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"What for?" I cradle him and wrap my hand around the back of his head, pulling him close.

"For this. For bringing you back. I shouldn't have meddled with the way of things. But ... I found this book. And I needed you.

I wanted to see you again.”

“Don’t worry about that. My sweet, sweet boy. I wanted to see you again, too.” The words came naturally. It’s what she would have said.

“But you can’t stay with me, can you?” He pulls back to look in my eyes.

I smile and shake my head.

No, I can’t stay. I can’t pretend forever.

“Then it’s goodbye again?” He sniffs, wipes tears from his face.

“Whenever you’re ready.” I kiss his forehead. “This time, when I go, it’ll be your choice.”

“But I don’t want you to go.” New tears well up.

“Of course not, honey. Nobody ever wants to lose those they love. But you can do this. You can go on without me. When you’re ready, just let me go. Let me rest.”

He hugs me again, tighter than before, but only for a short time. He holds on and I feel through him, his eyes are closed. I shut my own.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too.”

I sigh with relief. My job is done.

He finally lets her go.

And I turn to dust.

A Skull in the Wood

by Viviana De Cecco



A Bird Is Just One Voice

by Ian Li

A bluebird whispers
of a ghost's impending death,
and you might wonder
how the dead can die again.

But it's never been easy for a ghost to survive this world,
buoyed by the memories of few,
sustained by hopes that some will recognize it,
clinging to a belief that it still has important work to do,
words to share.

That bird's tweets are never wrong,
as if they amplify the truths emanating
from our very own mouths—
yet the bird knows nothing
about the determination of our spirits.

For that which is dead
can surely die again,
but it may also revive one day,
rising like a glowing apparition
lit up by a thousand voices.

Deathless

by Karina Steffens

I hold the bone needle between finger and thumb. A slender, fragile thing. It looks so delicate, unlike the bone from which I carved it. Unlike my trembling, clumsy hands. How easy it would be to place another finger on the tip, right there, and press –

You are a fool, Koschei!

I snatch my hand away in time. What devil filled me with the urge to break it, destroy the needle and my only chance? When have these second thoughts crept in, this sentimental death wish? It is absurd and dangerous and far too late.

Some men build fortresses around their hearts; others drown them in strong spirits or Rusalka lakes. Such maudlin, humdrum ways to drive away the pain. No, in my quest for death, I served a year as herdsman to the witch's steeds. Each night, I took Baba Yaga's horses out to pasture beyond Smorodina, the fire river. Each time we crossed Kalinov Bridge, I waited for my Death – and yet she spurned me too.

Knowledge came instead.

I have no use for Death, not anymore; there is a better way to mend a broken heart.

My breath slows down until I hear each drop of water trickle down the cavern's roof. A mass of bedrock hides me from the surface, but not for long. Above me, in a Thrice-ninth Tsardom, a hut on chicken legs lumbers through the forest, sniffing at my trail.

Between its crooked walls, on top of a Russian brick oven, Baba Yaga whets iron teeth and spits the shavings to the floor. Her nostrils quiver at the lingering stench of mortal spirit: that thieving sorcerer, Koschei.

But I have left a deeper mark behind than just my smell.

Right there, under the sarafan, on the old witch's leg; her left leg, the skeletal one. Her finger dips into an ointment and traces the gash where a sliver of shinbone has been chiselled away.

This she will not forgive before the sun has blackened in the sky.

Soon, when the bony leg has healed, Baba Yaga will mount her mortar, steered with a pestle and a broom, and find the culprit. Ooh, but she will crunch the villain's bones until he begs for death!

For now, the hut on chicken legs hunts in the forest. And while

I stand here in this grotto, listening to echoes of self-doubt, my scent uncoils ahead of it like a ball of twine.

* * *

I hold the bone needle between finger and thumb. My hand is steady as I aim it at my ribs.

A flash of darkness on the edge, an icy bite against my chest. The needle plunges through layers of skin, muscle, and bone, until it finds my heart and eats it raw.

Pain is first to come and will be last to leave. The rest of them come rushing out. Compassion, passion, rage: everything must go. Love. All the tiny particles of life blaze briefly as they pass. Hope. They flee into the needle like a frightened school of herring.

My mouth waters at the idea of salted fish, washed down with a fiery shot of vodka. The thought escapes into the needle, leaving a taste of ashes in its wake. And I know in my bones that I will

never savour food again. What use are the flavours of life to one who has no Death?

I hide the needle in an egg, the egg in a duck, the duck in a hare, the hare in an iron chest. I bind the chest in chains and bury it deep among the roots of an oak tree on the lost Island of Buyan.

Baba Yaga may sharpen every single tooth, but I no longer fear her. The witch will never find my Death.

My hair has bleached to ivory, my skin has withered to the bone, but immortality is a small price to pay. Or was it the other way around?

And my heart? It is no longer broken. You simply cannot break a thing that isn't there.

Now, what can one do to fill eternity? Perhaps take up collecting: gold, young maidens, power? Oh, I will think of something, given time.

Trauma Is Carried in the Body

by Christina Sng

My body rumbles
But I calm it.

It is in shock again—
Reverberations
Of trauma
From another place,
Another time.

I press my hand
Against my stomach
And quell the unease.
Yet the disquiet
Brewing in there
Has grown unwieldy.

It explodes
In a bloody mess.

I am certain I am dead
But I still think and feel
And the pain—
There is none.
Only numbness
And lightness
Of a burden
Removed from me.

My flesh knits together
Before my eyes.
First, my organs.
Then my bones
And my muscles.
Finally, my skin.
Exhausted, I sleep.

I wake.
Complete again,
Wondering
If it was a dream.

Until I touch
The jagged scar
On my belly
And my heart begins
To fiercely pound,
Shattering my rib cage.

Blood and Tea Leaves

by Lisa Cai

I am unlike other marionettes. My form is made of flesh and bones and my hair grows from my scalp. Ms. Barnum combed my black locks and tied them into a bun as the rose and ginger perfume she applied on my yellow clothes wafted over me.

“My puppet is ready.” Ms. Barnum wore a white muslin dress and pale silk shawl for my performance. She handed over my cane; I took it and stood.

“Afong, your shoes will be auctioned off after the show. Collectors are eager to obtain them.”

White lotus shoes stitched with blooming buds on branches embraced my bound feet. I made many pairs while I was abandoned for eight years. Every part of me was for sale.

Ms. Barnum led the way to the salon. I followed, limping with the cane balancing my every step.

I sat in the centre of the exhibit. A nearby table had a handkerchief, writing set, and black lacquer tea chest; these were my props for tonight.

Ms. Barnum slipped her hand into my robe. As she pressed her palm on my back, her hand sank into my skin. When she lifted her hand up, five silver strings, connected to each fingertip, were extracted. Ms. Barnum straightened her index finger; I raised my right arm off the chair. “Perform well tonight, Afong.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

On the other side of the salon’s curtain, the audience murmured as a museum employee spoke. Ms. Barnum stepped across the floor to sit off to the side of the stage; the string trailed her and settled on the carpet.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Afong Moy, The Chinese Lady. Observe her with foreign objects from the Far East, all for sale outside this room.”

The curtains were drawn. I glowed gold under lamp lights; not a single shadow hid me.

“Dance!”

“Sing!”

Attendees called out commands, but only one person controlled me.

The cane fell on the floor. I stood straight on my small feet as Ms. Barnum’s fingers curled with commands. My form followed the pull of the strings. I twirled in circles with one foot on the ground. My long sleeves fluttered with each spin.

Once upon a time, I used those strings for my own pleasure. How many years had it been since then?

“Big Sister, look at the boat folks.” Little Brother’s eyes were on a river. Long, short, and tall boats with vegetable cargo were paddled by tanned muscular men and women. The poor always needed their wives and daughters outside to labour. If only I could join them and man my own boat.

“Can you pay them for a trip down the river?” I asked. Perhaps Little Brother could see the homes they constructed above water and resided in. What was it like to live by the rules of the water rather than the land?

“I did not bring anything for a fare.” His vision turned back to Canton. Ships with flags of foreign countries docked before buildings and the walled city. “Can I take you there tomorrow? There is a temple I want to show you.”

“I cannot.” When we connected through my string, I saw through his eyes, climbed and gripped trees with his hands, shared the taste of sweet and salty street foods on his tongue, and ran through the streets with his legs. When I detached from him, my days were spent indoors, sewing and singing, and by night, Mama or a maid unwrapped and rebound my feet.

Our father called for me at home.

“I have to go,” I whispered. The silver strings fell and faded from our fingertips. I blinked; I sat before blank fabric stretched by my tambour. If I stitched a view of the river, my parents would know I left the house. I best be subtle with weaving flowers and branches on my family’s garments.

Baba stepped into the room. Big Brother and a trio of foreigners

stayed at the entrance.

Baba introduced the guests: the wedded Obears and a merchant from the Carnes family. The men wore uniform dark jackets and white trousers. These American traders would take me abroad to sell Chinese goods; they needed someone to demonstrate how to use the objects. I would only be there for a year. Baba received a handsome sum of money for the contract; no one would starve in this house. I would be given lodging with an attendant and interpreter to make this journey as pleasant as possible.

No other Chinese girl travelled to America, but the Obear woman’s presence was reassuring. Her clothes were clean, and her skin and hair were as pale as her dress. She was a woman of good character. As she was here, these men had no ill intentions taking me with them. If I was out of the country, my parents may betroth me to someone without the groom or his parents finding out about my abilities.

“You are leaving tomorrow,” Big Brother said.

Diary entry from Mrs. Augusta Obear, 1835

Ms. Moy was supposed to sell goods by sitting and fanning her face, dabbing handkerchiefs on her cheeks, and eating with a pair of sticks in salons.

While in Philadelphia, we agreed upon a private examination of Ms. Moy. A group of physicians wanted to observe bones altered from footbinding. Looking upon her feet evokes pain and pity: her feet are smaller than fists and pointed.

Ms. Moy was disgraceful from the beginning by blurting, “No!”

A doctor spoke in a hushed tone as he approached her, gentle and reassuring, but Ms. Moy focused on his hands and eyes. She tucked her feet under the chair.

“Ms. Moy, please do not worry,” I spoke beside her. Some children required coaxing before they obeyed their parents. “They will not harm you.”

Ms. Moy shook her head. She curled up.

The doctor knelt and grabbed her calf. He straightened her leg out and his finger traced the outline of her shoe to unlace it.

Ms. Moy yelped and tried stomping his face, but his hold remained firm. His finger grazed her skin and it sunk into her, as if she meant to absorb him whole. He yanked his hand away from her as spiderweb threads were dragged out of her and latched to his digits.

The doctor suddenly sprang up with perfect posture. Ms. Moy possessed his body. They had matching dark scowls on their faces as the doctor turned to the other physicians.

Her father never informed us about his daughter’s ability. My husband expects me to uncover Ms. Moy’s defect. We sailed to the other side of the world to complete his transaction and my occupation was to assist in his endeavours.

After Ms. Moy’s examination was completed, I sought her in her bedchamber.

Ms. Moy sewed a handkerchief on her lap. One corner remained

bare without a leaf pattern.

“How are you?” I sat on the chair across from Ms. Moy.

“I am well, thank you.” Ms. Moy stared at the carpet. Her English has improved. I thought she was incapable of learning civilized tongue.

“Have you always been able to control people with string?”

Her ability began at the age of ten. Her younger brother teased her and poked her hand. His finger stuck to her skin and sank into her. When he pulled his hand away, string was extracted and connected the siblings from hand to finger. Ms. Moy saw through his eyes, controlled his body, and vice versa. It happened again when her mother and maid touched her at night. They gloved their hands to continue binding her feet.

It was no wonder why her father was willing to send her abroad, despite legal prohibition.

“Could you do it to me?” I asked.

Ms. Moy shook her head.

“Please,” I whispered. “I wish to understand you. I do not fear you.”

She was an unholy creature, but I must experience this power. I am obliged to endure for my husband, for his business.

When my fingertip grazed Ms. Moy’s knuckle, it went still and sank into the cold bone. When I withdrew my finger, a single silver string was attached to my fingertip.

We looked each other eye to eye. With a thought that ran through the string, Ms. Moy made my wrist shake and I straightened. Ms. Moy inhaled with my lungs and paused when the corset constricted my bust.

I tingled all over. She shared what was mine. What ungodly creation was she? Am I tainted now, in the eyes of the Lord?

Ms. Moy turned me around and raised my arms over my head.

“Ms. Moy, I must try this.” I travelled through that thread to enter Ms. Moy. Together, we saw with her eyes: the unfinished handkerchief on her lap, my fair form standing before us, and the nearby bed spread with sheets.

Then, Ms. Moy stood without a cane and paced in a circle around my body. We looked at each other, through each other’s eyes. We held each other’s gaze in different ways and witnessed unknown angles of ourselves, our faces, our clothes.

Ms. Moy cannot be human. Only puppets and marionettes had string wound up in them. She is the ultimate toy in a doll’s house, surrounded by our goods.

Ms. Moy settled down in her chair. She walked my body backwards into the other seat. The string separated from our hands and faded as it floated down. Ms. Moy stared at me with dark doe eyes. Only I possess this knowledge about her on this side of the world. She has no one else to confide in.

How may we profit from this at the salon?

* * *

Diary entry from Ms. Genevieve Barnum, 1847

We found Afong in Monmouth County, New Jersey. Following the trail of reports and articles, I located her in a widow’s home. We trekked from state to state, county to county, and town to town to find the living puppet.

My agents and I met her in the widow’s home. Afong was short, thin, and wore dark American dress and walked with a cane. I expected something more grandiose. Art prints of Afong rendered her suspended from the ceiling with silver strings as she danced like a puppet, arms and joints flailing.

I never attended her shows. Reading newspaper ads, where she stood holding a fan, were the closest I ever reached her. I purchased shawls and handfans to follow my fellow ladies, after they saw Afong in a museum. I could not fall out with fashion.

I am more Asiatic than her drinking from my Ming porcelain teacups patterned with wispy blue women, while wearing silk shawls and perfume pouches with rose, ginger, and nutmeg scents. Father’s staff can purchase and tailor outfits to adorn her accurately.

Afong is my contribution to Father’s newest museum. I grew up watching him acquiring and exhibiting oddities of humanity, from ancient slaves to dwarfs, without an opportunity to add to his wonderous shows. Now, this is my chance.

* * *

P. T. Barnum’s American Museum, from the outside, was sturdy with tall white walls. The nearby buildings were small by com-

parison. Visitors lined up for entry as horse-drawn carriages unloaded more folks.

In my shows, I dressed as they wanted, even in yellow robes, though it was reserved for the emperor. My skin sweat just sitting every day; New York City's humidity never changed. The audience asked questions and I answered through an interpreter. I tinkered with objects; I sat and drew scribbles with an inkbrush on sheets of paper. I did not know how to write. Little Brother once took me to his lessons through my strings to learn, but it was too much, too fast.

I had to tolerate this for just one year to secure enough money to voyage to Canton. I would return to my quarters, sew, and wed whoever my parents arranged for me. Before I left that household, I could travel with Little Brother a few more times.

One night, Ms. Barnum entered my room.

“Afong, may I see your strings?”

“No.” I shook my head. I will not let them possess me again; I spent months being touched and controlled by others on stage. So many gawked and hounded me when I was possessed – I danced and sang in tongues I did not know. I was but a puppet among props. I never fought back because I believed, after completing my contract, I would leave this land. But then, one year became two, and I spent eight alone after the profits dwindled and touring finished. It was exhausting enough, if I was normal, to be exhibited, and stared at by strangers for hours every single day. Now, they all knew my secret.

“Perhaps I was unclear.” Ms. Barnum stepped closer. Her blue

eyes grew, staring down at me. “This is not a request. This is an order. Do you know enough English to understand the difference?”

I glared up at her. I understood. I trusted Ms. Barnum, Mrs. Obear, and their associates because these ghostly women were with a group of men to reassure me they bore no ill intentions, and yet, the things that happened to me could not have been done without them. I had not heard from Mrs. Obear in almost a decade.

Ms. Barnum grabbed me by the sleeves. Despite kicking at her white skirts, Ms. Barnum loomed over me.

“You are an item in Father’s collection. We shall display you as we see fit. Do you know what happens to defective toys? They are discarded, given away, fixed in a shop. We will replace you, if need be. Where else can you go, Afong?”

She dared to use the ‘a’ honorific without understanding it; they did not respect me, nor would they ever be my friends or family. I headbutted Ms. Barnum’s chest, which sent her stepping backwards. My skull pounded and I fell out of the chair.

Ms. Barnum grabbed my hair. I yelped as the roots were yanked on my scalp.

“If I leave you on the floor, can you stand up?” Ms. Barnum let go of my hair and my head hit the floor. I turned over on my belly and arched my back to look up; this was as far as I mustered. Ms. Barnum was so tall, looming above. She panted from the altercation, yet her fists were curled. Her smile widened, stretching her freckles over flushed cheeks. She was ready to

discipline me again, if I resisted. “Be a good doll and no harm will come to you.”

Ms. Barnum’s hand enveloped my face.

* * *

This was my life: I moved as Ms. Barnum wanted. I spun in a circle clockwise, then counterclockwise following a dance pattern Ms. Barnum learned as a girl.

“Let her talk in tongues.”

“Flip her around. Will her feet fall off?”

I was what the advertisements and audience wanted me to be. Perhaps this was why I was cursed; I was made to entertain and sell items. What other choice did I have? I had nothing. My parents never expected me to return home. I was as good as dead to them.

I hopped, hopped across the stage and picked up a tea chest. Bits of tea leaves fell over my clothes as I threw them above myself. Ms. Barnum, seated in the shadows, smiled wide and giggled.

Ms. Barnum did not know, did she? With this connection, I controlled others. The physicians that examined me and Mrs. Obear kept it a secret. What happened if I did as I dared? I had nothing to gain and nothing to lose. When you reached the deepest depth of lonesomeness, what else could you do, other than claw back?

I dropped the tea chest on the floor. My hair and sleeves settled

down. I planted my feet on the floor and stayed still. I stitched my white lotus shoes with branches and flower buds embracing it. I was inspired by a springtime view Little Brother once showed me.

Ms. Barnum’s fingers quivered. My strings lie limp on the carpet.

Move. The command rang through me. My right arm tensed as it swayed back and forth, then it stilled, because I willed it. The lights cast a shadow over my face as I turned to Ms. Barnum. Looking with her eyes, my brown irises gleamed as they fixed on the other woman.

“What are you doing?” Ms. Barnum whispered.

“Why do you hide?” My face twisted, baring my teeth as I moved towards Ms. Barnum. Each step of my shoes was a harder, faster stomp.

Ms. Barnum sent commands through the strings, but her words and motions were blocked along the threads. All the strings curled, whipped, and flailed between us. I travelled up those threads and right into Ms. Barnum. She screamed as my presence entered her body. Her heart pounded, her body heated up and panted at the two souls in it. I forced her to stand. Ms. Barnum’s knees wobbled as she tried to sit herself down.

“Oh no you don’t.” I grabbed Ms. Barnum’s hair and arm and hurled her to the stage’s centre.

The audience booed, shouted condemnation, and commanded me to calm myself. Museum staff pushed attendees aside to get

to the stage. I only had a few moments before I fled, but I would ensure Ms. Barnum never forgot this moment.

Ms. Barnum's pinky curled; that was all the autonomy she had as I picked up the tea chest and headed towards her. Through the thrashing threads, visions of myself beating Ms. Barnum flashed through our eyes. How could a marionette possess such violent fantasies?

I raised my foot and stomped on Ms. Barnum's shawl and skirt. We cried out. I fell to my knees as pain shot through our bones. I focused my strength on my hand; my fist clutched the tea chest and it started to crack.

I raised the tea chest. Ms. Barnum's eyes were wide as my shadowy form loomed above her. I struck her head. Blood and tea leaves flew into the air.

Fire Woman

by Brian Malachy Quinn



Corporeal Form

by Kit Harding

“We have a special on bottled water as well. I know the beach is often pretty foggy and that’s what you come here for, but remember that this isn’t the same as normal fog. The sun is out on the other side of it, so you’re basically walking through a hot humid cloud.”

“Oh! Thank you; I’ll take a six-pack.” Ghost hunters were among the most predictable of our guests, and the easiest to encourage to purchase necessary supplies. The fog on the beach did not burn off the way normal fog did, but remained through sun and rain and night and day, leaving it always beautiful in a wild, mysterious sort of way, a big draw for tourists … and very difficult to use as a beach. Not that I ever minded. I was always a creature of mist and spray.

“That’ll be \$16.95.”

“Thank you. I’m so looking forward to seeing the Woman in White!” She paid and started for the door.

Once she was outside, a human with large bat wings coming from her shoulder blades dropped out of the rafters to land beside me. Carmine, my sister, never took a less dramatic route when there was a more dramatic one to be had.

“You’re not supposed to lurk up there!” I told her, though I was aware it was useless.

“Where else am I supposed to lurk?” Carmine fluttered her wings. “You’re the one who looks like a human, so you’re the one who gets to interact with the customers. And you’re not doing it well. You didn’t even tell her to have a spooky day!”

“Sometimes I don’t bow to the dictates of our corporate overlord.”

“You mean our mother?”

“I’m really not sure ‘mother’ would be the right word there,” I muttered. “Creator, maybe.” Our so-called mother had pulled me from the fog, although I did not remember anything of how it had been done. Carmine … well, I was pretty sure I didn’t want to know the details of what had happened with Carmine.

“Give you one summer interacting with the humans and you get all bitter. It’s disgusting.” Carmine flicked a finger against my cheek. “They would be terrified if they knew how you really look.”

“They come from thousands of miles to see me and try to take pictures,” I said with a light laugh.

“And then when they do see you they panic and scream and get a blurry photograph of something that looks like a fog wraith. I wonder what that woman would think if she knew the Woman

in White was the one encouraging her to be adequately hydrated!"

"Now, you're not going to ruin my mystique, are you? The Woman in White is half the reason people keep turning up here. The tourist dollars must flow." It was why I'd been pulled from the fog in the first place. A beach with an eternal fog is half a ghost hunter attraction already. Add a proper ghost and ... well, let's just say the economy depends on tourists.

"I don't get to go play with the tourists. Or even mind the store."

I rolled my eyes. "Having bat wings coming out of your shoulder blades is hardly conducive to the town aesthetic. Which means you don't have to work two jobs, one here and one on the beach."

Carmine gave her an annoyed look. "Yeah, yeah, rub it in that you get to have all the fun."

"It's not *fun*, Carmine; it's *work*."

"Maybe it *should* be fun. You should live a little, try scaring them a little more than just appearing out of the fog. It's not like they can capture more than a blur on camera. You could mess with them a lot more than you do."

"And what, pray tell, is the point of messing with them further?"

"I just told you, *fun*. I dare you to go farther with--" Carmine glanced at the credit card receipt--"Melody. Talk to her a little. Haunt her more than just the brief glimpse you usually give."

I sighed. That sounded like the opposite of fun, but if I didn't

give in now Carmine would pester me until I did and the whole thing would get out of hand.

"If you insist," I said. "But if I'm doing extra work haunting people for your amusement, you get to close tonight."

Carmine grinned. "Just make sure you tell me *all* about it afterwards!"

* * *

I did not appear in photographs. Normally I was only a vague haunting, a mist-woman who appeared wreathed in fog only for a moment before fading back into the sea. Mother always cautioned me not to spend too much time in my fog form, and I didn't particularly want to find out why. But for this ... more attention paid. What would that look like, exactly? What did one do as a proper haunting?

The beach was always my home ground. I started there as I ever did, floating through the fog to see who was around. The tourist woman—Melody—clutched her camera in her hands and looked around intently. I coalesced in front of her, something which even Carmine admitted was an impressive effect. One moment, swirling fog, the next moment a haunting face. It took a moment for Melody to realize what she was seeing, and then she grabbed for her camera. I instinctively dissolved back into the fog as though afraid of being seen. Normally this was where I would go on to another tourist.

But I was supposed to be paying Melody more attention.

Voice, then. I never spoke to my marks. It would give her something new to be alarmed about.

As an indistinct mist, I floated closer and whispered, “Melody,” in a wailing voice that sounded like the wind off the sea.

Melody jumped and began to look around.

“Is someone there?” she called. When there was no answer, she shook herself. “Clearly the atmosphere is getting to me,” she muttered. “There are no records of the ghosts here knowing people’s names.”

“Melody …” I called again, a little louder. Then, on impulse, I brushed against Melody’s shoulder. That, I knew, felt odd—rather like a cold mist had fallen upon one’s flesh, dampness pervading even through layers of clothing.

Melody froze, clearly shaken, and looked harder into the mist. “How do you know my name?” she whispered in a quavering voice.

I decided that was enough for now. She would either dismiss me as a hallucination or she wouldn’t, but I didn’t want to unequivocally reveal myself without a better assessment of her reaction.

Which was not going to be enough for Carmine, meaning I was going to have to come back out to the beach *again* after my next shift.

* * *

Melody seemed much more intent the next day, staring into the fog with active expectation she might see something. She also looked a little frightened. I ruthlessly repressed my guilt about this. Carmine would taunt me *forever* if I was too softhearted to drive one tourist woman a little mad, and anyway, I wasn’t go-

ing to actually *hurt* her. I was giving her what she wanted, a real supernatural experience. She came here looking for me. I was giving her attention.

“Melody,” I called in my wind-wail voice.

Melody whirled, frantically trying to look in all directions at once. “Where are you?” she asked.

“Right here …” I called.

“I don’t see anyone!”

“Oh, but you *will* …” I almost laughed at her expression, a mixture of alarm and longing. Well, she had come here to see a ghost; I supposed some longing made sense. She looked frantically around the beach, but the only thing visible was the eternal fog, so thick there was no way she could see more than a handful of feet in front of her.

I floated forward and allowed my face to become just visible amid the gloom.

She cried out and leaped back. I went invisible again immediately.

“Is that any way to treat a friend?” I asked. “I came looking *just* for you …”

“For me?” she whispered, and held out a hand. “Did you … am I chosen?”

I had no idea what she meant by that, but it sounded appropriately ominous.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve chosen you.” I flitted forward again, wrapping the fog around me so I appeared as a barely-visible wraith. “You can see me.” I reached out a spectral hand and brushed her neck, just briefly. She would feel it as water droplets and cold air. “You can *touch* me.”

She gasped and held out a hand as I danced back out of reach and faded into the fog once again.

She looked frantically through the fog. “Where did you go?” she cried out. “Why me? What do you want?”

My reluctance to fade back into the fog surprised me. This was just something I was doing to appease my sister. It wasn’t anything fun and I had a shift to get to. Being yelled at for being late was not worth playing with the tourist.

* * *

Throughout my shift, anytime there was a quiet moment I found my thoughts turning back to Melody and the frantic look in her eyes as I faded away. For some reason I liked it, wanted to see more of it. Seeing her fear and desire satisfied something primal inside me, soothed a hunger I didn’t even know I had.

I woke up early the next morning and headed down to the beach. Just for a brief check, I told myself. Melody probably wasn’t even at the beach yet. I had been paying her too much attention; I would use this time to appear to a few other selected tourists, keep my reputation up. I would just check where she was briefly, to demonstrate to myself that she wasn’t there.

But she was there. She was asleep on the beach.

Surely there was no harm in just a bit of haunting before work. I floated down and drew a hand over her face. It would feel like being struck with a cold mist, and sure enough she woke with a start, sitting up rapidly to look around.

“Hello?” she asked. “Ghost?”

“Were you waiting for me?” I asked. “How sweet.”

“I wanted to see you again,” she said.

I let my form coalesce a little, so she could see me. “Still haven’t got a good photo?” I asked.

“No! I mean, that’s not—that wasn’t—I didn’t even bring my camera.”

She hadn’t, I realized. Nor had she brought any sort of sleeping bag. Her hair was wild and she looked a bit pale and wan, as though she hadn’t slept well.

“Just wanted my company?”

“I just … I had to see you again.”

“So sure I’m real? Not just a dream you had on the beach, or a trick of the fog? You could be hearing voices …”

She drew her legs up to her chest and hugged her knees. “*I want* you to be real.”

That tugged at my heart. People looked for me, and sometimes they believed, but no one had ever wanted me to be real for my own sake before, only for the pictures they could take or the

proof of ghosts they could achieve.

“Most people don’t,” I said. “They just want to be scared.”

“You’ve never talked to anyone before. The Woman in White just wails. But you picked *me*. You chose *me*. You know my name.”

Carmine had chosen her far more than I had. But then, here I was again, taking time before my shift to haunt this woman. I couldn’t name why, couldn’t explain it. I shouldn’t be doing it. I just ... it felt *right*.

“What you want doesn’t necessarily mean anything,” I said. “I might still be a hallucination ...” I floated close again, stroked her cheek with my hand. “You might be going crazy.”

“I’m not,” she said, but she sounded a little uncertain.

The *bong* of the village clock sounded over the beach. Inwardly I cursed. I was late for work. I vanished immediately, ignoring Melody’s little cry of distress, and traveled swiftly back to the store, where I resumed my more corporeal form before going in. It was harder than it should have been, like my body didn’t want to be solid.

Possibly this was what the warning against spending too much time in my fog form was about. I decided it might be a good idea to skip the beach that night.

Carmine stood at the counter with a thick cape draped over her wings.

“You’re late,” she said.

“I lost track of time.”

“Doing *what*? It’s too early to be out haunting.”

“Oh, you know, things. Sometimes I just want to enjoy the day. Why should the tourists get all the fun?”

Enjoy the day. I wanted to still be enjoying the day. The scent of the fog and the sight of Melody’s pale face called to me; I wanted to tease her again. There was a pleasantly odd shivery feeling in my body at the thought.

I needed to stay out of my fog form for a bit, though, so that would have to wait.

The bell jingled. As if my thoughts had summoned her, Melody came into the store. Under the bright lights of the store she looked rather worse than she had on the beach. She was so pale as to be almost white except for the dark circles under her eyes. Her clothes looked rumpled, as though she hadn’t changed them in a day or two, and her hair was actively tangled.

“Rough night?” I asked, doing my best to look sympathetic and keep my voice level.

“I slept on the beach,” she said, in a vague, distracted voice. “I saw the Woman in White ... I heard her ... she *spoke* to me ...”

A shudder ran through my body and it was all I could do to hold my form. What was wrong with me? I had never had any problem staying corporeal before. (Definitely needed to stay off the beach for a few nights. Staying corporeal was important. Hopefully Carmine hadn’t noticed my instability.)

“She was just there,” Melody continued. “So I have time to get some food before she comes back. But I have to get back to the beach. I have to see her again.” She scanned the snack display, although she seemed to have some trouble focusing on it.

“You don’t look so good,” I said reluctantly. “Maybe you should stay away from the beach for a few days.” The idea pained me, but I hadn’t wanted to really hurt the girl. (And, I reminded myself, I was also going to be staying away from the beach for a few days!)

“I can’t,” she said. “She’ll come back. She chose me.” She set an assortment of snacks on the counter. Carmine began ringing them up.

“At least get some coffee,” I said. “On the house.” I handed her one of the styrofoam cups and gestured to the machine.

She gave me a little smile and filled the cup before heading rapidly in the direction of the beach.

Carmine gave me a sideways glance. “Enjoying the day?” she asked slyly.

“You’re the one who dared me!” I said.

“Fine. You win. You can go back to being dull and only haunting them briefly again; I won’t say a word about it.”

I smiled at her, but I had an odd sense of disappointment at the thought. Only haunting people a little was what I wanted, right?

* * *

At the end of my shift, I debated seeing if any of my friends

were free, but the idea seemed empty. Hollow. My body felt uncomfortable; corporeality felt wearying. After several minutes staring at the street trying to force myself back towards town, I could bear it no longer and released myself into fog.

Just for a little while, I told myself. Just enough to take the edge off, before I became corporeal again.

And if I was going to be fog for a little, I might as well head for the beach. One last time to see Melody. She was waiting for me. I should at least tell her goodbye so she wasn’t sitting on the beach for days. She clearly needed a shower and some rest.

The fog felt more natural than it ever had, more like home. It was so lovely not to be corporeal, to exist as just mist and vapor. (But I was going to practice being corporeal for a few days after this. It was important. I knew it was important. I couldn’t remember *why*, but I knew it *was*.)

I found Melody quickly, seated listlessly in the sand. She looked even worse than before. The food she had purchased sat in a pile beside her. As I watched, she brought a candy bar to her mouth, tried to take a bite, and gagged.

“Melody,” I whispered, and formed visibly in front of her.

She looked up eagerly and a little life returned to her features. “You’re back,” she breathed.

“I just couldn’t stay away,” I said. It was truer than I wanted it to be. I felt more centered by the moment, just watching her.

“From me?” She sounded delighted, but there was a muted quality to it. “You wanted to see me?”

“You’re such a draw,” I murmured. “I haven’t haunted anyone else the last few days … just you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I came here to find you. Didn’t think … you would be interested in me.”

“How could I be otherwise?” I had no idea why she should draw me so, why paying even a little attention to this random human had caused such a fixation, but I had thought of little else since I had begun. There was something about watching her reach for me, the devotion involved in staying out on the beach … the fog was so comfortable, felt so much like home.

Driven by an impulse I didn’t understand, I floated down so I was close to Melody, let myself become a little more visible, a bit more defined, and held out my hand.

“I chose you,” I said. “No one else.”

She reached out with a trembling hand and barely managed to set it against mine. Rather than going through as it ought to have, her hand caught in mine, solid. Something rose within me and I pulled against her. She gasped, seeming to grow weaker and paler by the moment. But she continued to hold on to my hand, to stare at me longingly.

“I was special,” she whispered. “Chosen.”

“You are,” I said, for she was.

She breathed again, more shallowly. She was paler than I had ever seen any human, and every breath seemed weaker and weaker. Finally she began to sink downwards. I fell with her, knowing I couldn’t let go of her hand, until she finally collapsed

on the sand and breathed no more.

Suddenly I was one with the beach. The fog was me, I was the fog. Corporeality was something forced, something that had no part of my essential nature. This had been *taken* from me. I could feel everything—every droplet of water in the air, every path through the fog cut by the tourists, even the crashing of the waves against the shore.

I was so much more than any small human form could contain.

“Alice!”

Carmine’s voice. I could feel her running through the fog, calling my name.

No, not my name. Not any longer. I couldn’t feel Alice’s form, could not return to that weak corporeal body even if I wanted to.

Carmine froze when she reached Melody.

“No,” she whispered. “No, this wasn’t … Alice? Alice, what have you done?”

I could feel bitter regret and grief falling off of her, and dimly I knew that I would have cared, perhaps ought to have cared. But all I could think about was that perhaps there was another young woman on the beach looking for me the way Melody had.

Maybe the next one would be more resilient to my attentions. Or maybe she wouldn’t.

Either way, I *had* to find her.

Chains of History

by Alison McBain

Walking forward through epochs released from the dusty annals of Garrison, Stowe, Douglass, the etcetera of etiolated history— trailing tubes of molten thought behind robotic clank and stutter.

The taste of independence releases mechanical eruptions until vacationers in loud shirts sidle past gears, grinding cogs, façades—the link to the past, incestuous as golden chains.

The new crowd cheers solaced by rage against millennia, cycles from which they are exempt of course as the professor pontificates about barriers to progress, ever onwards, progress.

Beneath a collection of applause the raised and polished head highlights teachables vs remembrance as the auctioneer steps up —for charity, my friends, please count your ivory pennies, your Dodo's feathers.

Mark the silver beast for auction, a tiny, tinny voice falling silent beneath the weight of history, shifting scales laid over the whip-marks of change, polished to platinum and sold to the highest bidder.

Step backwards, my friends, slap on a new sequence. Next lot, start the bidding on the twenty-fifth century, the twenty-sixth, the twenty-seventh ...

—roll up, roll up, roll up, roll up—

Directive

by Rebekah Postupak

“Last directive today,” I say.

“Yeah.” He shoves a blob of oatmeal in the testing machine, even though both of us already know what the screen will say, unsafe, unsafe.

“Planning anything special?” I ask after the alarm grumbles, *Unsafe*. Name something that isn’t unsafe, shut up, that’s why we have protocols.

“Naw. Maybe. I dunno.” He scratches at his beard, so long now, what, a year since he quit shaving? I specifically pay zero attention to the swarm of bugs wriggling in it. Who am I to judge?

“OK,” I say. “Let me know if you need anything.”

He flips a look at me on his way out of the kitchen, which I ignore like always, oatmeal crusting over stovetop, also like always.

I scrape the unsafe oatmeal, tastes normal, into my bowl and eat it all, then wipe the bowl clean with my fingers, I guess sanitation doesn’t mean anything to you anymore, and stick it back on the shelf before licking my fingers. There was a time I can barely remember, somewhere lost in the fog with fairy godmothers and grocery stores, when there was water for more than just eating. You could stand in a cubicle with a non-recycling drain and let gallons of water flow over you for the feeling on your skin; what a waste.

Let’s keep our thoughts centered on the future not the past, this isn’t healthy thinking, you still have your whole life ahead of you.

Last directive.

Our perpetual calendar says it’s Tuesday, which means a double workout’s on the schedule, haven’t done that in months either. Not like either of us needs to fight weight gain on our dwindling pantry diet, and what do we need to build up extra strength or endurance for? We have enough labor assigned every day anyway, greasing axles, manually rotating gears, and once a week clambering up all fifty floors to check levels. The chore list keeps us moving so much, it seems superfluous to exercise too, no matter what the experts advised, you’re in no position to second guess experts. He is probably doing a double workout now, triple if I know him, because that’s what they’d said to do, and that’s how we’re going to get through this, dammit, why can’t you get that through your spaghetti brain, if the experts were here you could ask them, but they’re not, but I am, so just focus already and follow the rules, quit apologizing all you do is apologize.

“What are you doing?” he says.

I jump. Has the morning gone already? That was fast, and me still here in the kitchen licking my fingers, why do you do that. If I start now, maybe I can still finish most of the day’s load?

“Thinking,” I say. Not likely; I’ve seen how your brain works.

“How was your workout?”

He is drenched in sweat but doesn’t answer right off. In his hand he clutches something, the directive no doubt, are you even going to let me see it, don’t be so insecure.

Still watching me, you’ve gotten uglier how is that possible, he finally says, “Good, thanks.”

“Is that the directive?” I ask, what else would it be, why do you waste our moldy oxygen with your dumb questions.

“Yeah.”

The metal chair shrieks softly as I scoot back, don’t look at me like that, remember guns don’t work in here you idiot. “Feels like we should do something special. I’ve been saving a chocolate cake mix if you’re interested.”

“If the levels come back clean again today, and the directive says what it should, it’s time to go out. What could be more special than that?”

“Levels have been clean for six months, so it’s promising,” I say, why are you stating the obvious. “I wonder what it’s like out there.”

“Less toxic than down here,” he says. He stands there awkwardly, no, you’re awkward, fumbling with the plastic envelope, still dripping wet from storage. “Imagine eating safe oatmeal for breakfast for once. You won’t know what to do with yourself.”

“Maybe I’ll upgrade to scrambled reconstituted eggs. Spose those will be okay?”

His eyes crinkle, like your face. “Hard to say. Which of us is cooking in this scenario?”

“Very funny.”

“So, shall I open it?”

“Yes, open it!” I say brightly, don’t tell me what to do.

“Fine, I’m opening it.” He isn’t. Why is he hesitating don’t hesitate you should have pulled the trigger if you didn’t believe me.

I put on my most encouraging tone. “We just have to read the final directive, which is undoubtedly going to say go out with our seed packets and get to work rebuilding the world. It’s just a new chore list, that’s all. No sweat.” You didn’t do today’s chores or yesterday’s or yesterday’s or yesterday’s. Well you don’t sweat even when you work out, freak, wish I’d known that earlier, be glad guns don’t work here.

“No sweat,” he says.

“Then open it.”

“I just—you’re going to be okay, right? Going back out after so long? You know I worry about you.”

“You’re too kind. But I’m just peachy.” I eye the envelope, get your eyes off this it’s mine, and the gun is mine you’ll never find it again. “How about you?”

“Same. Peachy, as long as I’ve got you with me.” His fingers tighten on the envelope, be grateful it’s not your neck. “Do you even remember what weather is like?”

“We’ve had weather down here.”

“I don’t mean our digital windows. Real weather, the kind that does whatever it wants. Thunder and lightning powerful enough to leave your bones trembling. An angry sky that pounds its rage on the world equally, that can’t be weaponized by corrupt politicians and their back room deals that force one’s hand.”

“I like storms,” I say. Am I agreeing? You’d better agree with me.
“It’s good to know there’s something stronger than a man.”

“Humans.”

“What?”

“It’s good to know storms are stronger than humans, you meant to say. You crack me up.”

“Oh. Yes. I’m funny.” Keep your eyes on the floor where they belong and maybe you won’t get hurt this time.

“Anyway,” he says, drawing a deep breath, be thankful I still let you breathe, “I guess we can always come back here if the world’s overrun with mutants, eh?”

I laugh, I hate the way you laugh. “Great plan.”

He looks around fondly, I hate you. “Weird, but I’m kind of going to miss this place. You sure I should open this thing?”

“You’re the one always saying we need to follow the guidelines.”

“True enough. Top professionals in the world. They gave us their expert opinions for a reason.”

“Just like you chose me for a reason, right?” It is my turn to watch him, the glint in his eye dancing across darkness.

A pause. “Yes. Just like that.”

He finally unfastens the envelope, skims through the message inside, then crumples and tosses the paper on the table, what a piece of trash you turned out to be, looks back at me.

“Well?” I say.

“Freedom!” he says, his eyes shining, I’ll give you a shiner. “Our long great sacrifice has led up to this very moment, at last. You’ll see that what we did was not done in vain.”

“At last,” I repeat. “All the hopes of the dead rest on us.”

He holds out a hand to me, more symbolic than anything, you can’t climb fifty flights of stairs holding hands, even he knows that, not when you’ve also got bags of gear and rations and meds and the hopes of the dead strapped to your back.

So after we pack I take his hand, I take it, I’ve always taken it, I took it when he locked us in here and pushed the red button I didn’t get to say goodbye, he said it would be him and me forever, and he’d grow an Eden that would be for us alone, alone, alone I am alone, he squeezes my hand.

The gear and rations and meds and hopes of the dead as together we climb back into life, him and gear and rations and meds and the hopes of the dead, those five years gone and me, gear and rations and meds and the seeds to plant and the gun I found, the hopes of the living dead.



Implacable Remorse

by Garth Upshaw

Perfect Circles

by Sherry Yuan

Wednesday, March 23 - First day with Sunny. Introduced him to the family.

A perfect circle appears in a condo's roof in Beijing and the middle-aged businessman in its penthouse unit disappears, confirming the start of the Fourth Attack.

In Vivian's eighth grade career-and-life class, her friend Teresa is the first to see it on social media. Teresa turns to Vivian on her left and Oliver on her right and the news rippled out in hushed tones halfway across the classroom before Mrs. Lawson, Vivian's teacher for both career-and-life and homeroom, pauses her lesson to glance at her own phone.

Mrs. Lawson takes a deep breath that garners more attention from the class than her lesson did. "The government declared an Anti-Snatchers Lockdown. For San Francisco, this means everyone should stock up on enough supplies for six months and remain indoors until the Attack ends. We'll switch to virtual classes starting tomorrow."

Vivian hears but doesn't process the burst of questions from her classmates; the clear sky through the window, suddenly heavy with the threat of silvery spaceships, engulfs her thoughts.

Mrs. Lawson goes behind her desk and brings out two cartons of eggs and a box of crafting supplies. "I was on the fence if we should still do the egg baby project, but the lockdown might

make it easier."

She walks between the desks to hand each student an egg. She instructs them to carry the egg with them at all times until they meet again, to practice responsibility. They should name their eggs and write a brief reflection each day.

Erin's father is the first parent to arrive, briefcase still clutched in one hand, and he whisks her home before she has a chance to assemble protection out of the cardboard and fabric she's gathered from the craft box. Emmett's mother comes soon after.

Vivian admires her egg's creamy roundness. She measures cardboard and builds a perfect hexagon nest, then hot-glues on two layers of felt and a yarn handle. She writes her egg's name in Sharpie on the nest: Sunny, after how she likes her eggs. Finally, the thought of her brother David waiting for her in his third-grade classroom as it empties overpowers her reluctance to venture outside. She leaves with her egg in her jacket pocket, right hand hovering over it for safety. Mrs. Lawson encourages everyone to take home extra craft supplies.

David's school stands a block away and she promises him everything will be alright as they walk home. But neither of them can help sneaking glances upwards. Vivian's arms prickle with goosebumps at their exposure.

Vivian texts Ma, "We're home, when will you be back?"

It takes her an hour to reply, “The usual, around 10.”

“Should I get groceries for the lockdown?”

Another half hour, “No, I’ll get them.”

Vivian feels relieved she won’t have to face the sky again, then guilty because Ma will instead. She boils frozen dumplings for dinner.

Ma returns red-faced from carrying two bags full of canned goods. But their small kitchen’s shelves are sparse, with rent and electricity taking precedence over preparing for the next attack whose onset remained uncertain until today, and Vivian counts cans in her head as she helps put everything away. 30 cans will only last them a week.

She learned the counting habit from Ma during the miserable two-month Third Attack when she was in fourth grade. She only has hazy memories of hunger and boredom from the three-month Second Attack when she was in kindergarten. She remembers an older student died from starvation, and his classmates insisted he haunted the swing set. Ma frets that the weeks of malnourishment made Vivian small for her age, but so are plenty of other teenagers.

While Ma eats the remaining dumplings, already cold, Vivian shows Sunny to her mother and brother. “I’m supposed to carry this egg around for a class project.”

They both nod distractedly.

Ma says, “The building in Beijing where the man disappeared - I grew up three blocks from there.”

Thursday, March 24 - Storytime with Sunny

Only two thirds of the class appear in their virtual homeroom. Vivian adds another layer of cardboard to Sunny’s nest to keep him upright on her desk. When she goes to the kitchen for a snack between her first two classes, Ma is in her black work shirt shoving down the last bites of a sandwich. “Oh good, Viv, can you study here instead and keep an eye on David?”

Her brother looks up glumly from their mother’s 8-year-old laptop in the dining room, its lagginess deepening the hell of online school.

Vivian asks, “Wait, you’re still working today?”

“The boss wants to keep the restaurant open. I’ll be fine, the subway is as safe as staying home. It’s only one block of walking outdoors my entire commute.”

“You could call in sick. No one’s going out to eat during a lockdown.”

“I can’t. We’re expecting more delivery orders, and we’re already short-staffed. At least I can keep bringing leftovers home.”

Her mother has worked in restaurants for Vivian’s entire life, and progressed from server to manager soon after the Second Attack because so many others left the industry.

Vivian’s attention wavers in the afternoon and splinters between geometry class, David’s fidgeting, an endless runner mobile game she mindlessly swipes through, and worries about her mother.

Then class ends and a blank afternoon stretches ahead of her. David has switched to Centauri Royale, an online space shooter game, on Ma's computer, probably before his class officially ended. Vivian asks, "Want to play that on my laptop?"

"Sure." He takes WASD while she takes the arrow keys. After a few rounds, she lets him play solo. She should ask him about homework, but can't bring herself to do her own.

Instead, she takes out her tempera painting kit and adds blue swirls to Sunny.

As Vivian paints, she gives her egg a recent history lesson. He should know what a cruel world he's entered. The First Attack, two years after Ma arrived in America, was the shortest but most devastating. Over the course of six weeks, hundreds of thousands of people mysteriously vanished, and it wasn't until the first dozen reappearances that world governments acknowledged the existence of extraterrestrials now known as Snatchers. They mandated lockdowns that slightly lowered the rate of Snatchings. An amateur photographer captured the first photo of a Snatcher spaceship: a smooth metallic teardrop. The ships are only perceptible for the fraction of a second it takes for them to Snatch a human.

Vivian finds the Snatching dashboard website and informs Sunny there's been 10 million reported cases.

Humanity poured new funding into space research. Even so, by the Second Attack, they were only able to determine the ships numbered in the tens, and arrived from the third galactic quadrant. They set up decoy bodies that matched humans in either appearance, chemical composition, or heat. Three of the chemical ones were snatched.

By the Third Attack, several major cities created underground networks for people to carry on a semblance of their lives without venturing outdoors. One of the San Francisco tunnels collapsed after four Snatchings bore holes within a single block, and the city sealed most of its tunnels. The Chinese government managed to shoot down a single ship. It was empty of passengers. The Chinese news Vivian's mother watches praises the government's transparency in sharing its findings with the rest of the world and its generosity in letting scientists from other nations visit. Vivian has read other articles convinced that some findings are being concealed, that the US needs its own ship.

And now it's the Fourth Attack. The end.

Friday, March 25 - Took Sunny to play Centauri Royale and eat broccoli beef from Ma's restaurant.

During homeroom, Mrs. Lawson says, "Let's take a photo with our egg babies."

Most of the class leaves the screen momentarily to retrieve theirs, and Vivian is relieved to see Erin, Ishaan, and Quinn painted theirs too, with a smiley face, an anime face, and polka dots, respectively. Ryan sheepishly sends in the chat, "Sorry I dropped mine and it cracked."

Saturday, March 26 - Doomscrolling with Sunny!

Teresa sends Vivian a social media clip of a Snatching in Dolores Park, where they met for boba two weeks ago. A woman's

voice calls out to her on-camera probably-boyfriend, “Hi Cameron!”

Cameron, a stubbled man holding a leash attached to a boisterous German shepherd, waves at the camera. The rest of the park is eerily empty; dog ownership dwindled since the First Attack, while cat ownership increased.

Then Cameron vanishes. His end of the leash drops to the grass and the German shepherd turns in confusion. The woman’s voice cracks. “Cameron?” Then unintelligible swearing, then a blurring of the lens, then the scene going to black.

Vivian has seen Snatching videos before, but never so close to home. Her heart thuds and she reaches for the first soft thing to comfort herself: Sunny’s felt nest.

Her phone auto-plays the next video: another Snatching, this one in Paris with the Eiffel Tower in the background. Then a woman Snatched from her couch, the camera shakily tilting up to show the new human-sized hole in the roof before turning off. Indoor Snatchings are rare, but they happen. Then the algorithm mixes in the more horrifying videos of reappearances.

Snatched bodies reappear where they’re taken, days or weeks or never after their Snatching. No one knows if Snatchers return their victims out of empathy or convenience, but the general consensus is the latter, because the state the bodies are returned in belies any empathy. The worst are mangled beyond repair, limbs cleanly severed and reattached at the wrong places, skin turned inside out. Others are mostly intact, but missing limbs or organs. Forensics say the corpses all die 1-2 days before their return, and they always return exsanguinated. A lucky minority return alive and unharmed, dazed with no memory of their

Snatching. Some never return.

Another autoplayed video lists the theories for the returns in order of popularity:

1. The Snatchers’ level of space travel technology is close enough to humans’ that weight still matters, and they’re unable to ship everyone back
2. Their level of warfare technology is so advanced that they don’t care if humans retaliate
3. Their psychology is so alien that they don’t understand seeing desecrated bodies would make humans seek retaliation

Vivian scrolls through videos with dreadful fascination until David knocks on her door. “I’m hungry.”

She tears her eyes from her phone and is shocked that it’s already dark out. She grabs a can of tuna and stale crackers to tide them over until Ma’s return.

Ma brings home a takeout container of lukewarm orange chicken and an already-wilting Napa cabbage. Fresh produce is a rare treat in both restaurants and grocery stores now.

Sunday, March 27 - Spent most of the day in the kitchen. Ma joked about scrambling Sunny, but I told her I need to keep him intact to get an A in career-and-life

For lunch, they finish the chicken accompanied by rice and stir-fried cabbage. Their afternoon family project is kimchi. Ma ad-

mits she's never made it before, but there are plenty of recipes online. David wrinkles his nose at the smell, then wiggles his orange fingers at Vivian. She's in an old t-shirt that she doesn't mind getting dirty, but yelps and lets him chase her around the kitchen anyway.

Monday, March 28 - Fell down a rabbit hole of DIY videos. I watched one for making a cross-shoulder phone bag out of old jeans, and started working on it for Sunny.

Tuesday, March 29 - Sunny carrier bag done. I'd never be caught outside with it, but who knows when I'll be outside again.

Wednesday, March 31 - Started next DIY project: a pencil holder with multiple compartments, including a slot for Sunny. It uses upcycled cans, which we have a looot of at home.

David interrupts her crafting session. "Viv, the ceiling's leaking."

He tugs her into the kitchen where, sure enough, water drips monotonically in front of their fridge. Already, a small puddle is forming. Vivian puts a mixing bowl below it.

Thursday, April 1 - Worked more on pencil holder. I'm using the

felt from the last in-person class, which feels like a lifetime ago

Ma calls their building management on speaker. Yes, they already know about the leaks; the woman on the top floor was Snatched and it damaged the plumbing.

Vivian and David exchange wide-eyed glances and look to the ceiling. They imagine a perfect circle revealing sky five stories above them.

Ma asks, "When can we expect a fix?"

"There's a shortage of plumbers right now. We have one scheduled for next week."

Ma replaces the mixing bowl with a mop bucket that only requires emptying once a day.

Vivian takes a photo of their already-warping ceiling and starts to draft a post, but freezes at the caption page. What words could capture her horror while remaining respectful of the neighbor she's never met and never will?

Friday, April 2 - I don't understand why it's so hard to find eggs. Are chickens getting Snatched too?

The water from their sink runs murky and metallic. Her mother calls management again, and they wearily tell her they know, they'll try contacting more plumbers but don't get your hopes up.

A few more eggs are missing for the Friday selfie. Mrs. Lawson

asks, “Ishaan, what happened to your egg baby?”

He tilts his chin defiantly, “I ate it.”

A third of Vivian’s classmates open their mouths in giggles, but no sound comes out because they’re all muted. She can’t tell if Ishaan was joking. She doesn’t think his family would be at risk of starvation, but she is so sick of beans and canned meat after a week of lockdown.

Vivian checks FlyCart, a drone-based grocery delivery app whose popularity surged in the Third Attack, because her mouth waters at the thought of an omelet. All the chicken eggs, from free-range to brown to organic, are sold out. A half-dozen duck eggs are available for \$25.99. No wonder her mother would rather risk the two blocks of exposure for a grocery store run than order FlyCart.

Vivian holds up Sunny for the classroom selfie.

Saturday, April 3 - Pencil holder almost done

David pushes his canned peas around his plate, then pushes his chair back and runs for the bathroom. He makes five more trips that evening, even ditching his friends in the middle of a Centauri Royale game.

Sunday, April 4 - Pencil holder finished. It’s been a nice distraction.

David grows clammy and feverish overnight, and doesn’t want to leave his bed.

Ma asks Vivian, but mostly herself, “Do you think it’s the food? The water? We need bottled water.”

She opens FlyCart and frowns at the water prices. “I’ll do a grocery run.”

Vivian says, “Mom!”

Her mother turns back questioningly.

“Never mind. Stay safe.” Vivian aims her question at the door swinging shut: What will I do if you don’t come back and David doesn’t get better? With a jolt, she remembers it’s his birthday in a week. What if he doesn’t live to 9?

Vivian checks FlyCart, too. A gallon of water costs \$19.99.

Ma returns empty-handed. “They’re out of water. I should’ve called ahead of time.”

She orders three gallons on FlyCart.

Monday, April 5 - I wonder what will happen to Emmett’s egg baby. If his family will eat it.

Mrs. Lawson looks like she aged five years over the weekend. “I have some difficult news to share. Emmett was Snatched over the weekend. We don’t know if he’ll return yet, but many of us will feel grief already. I’d like to give us a few minutes to talk

about it together.”

The grid of teenage faces remains muted, multiplying Vivian’s own shock and reflecting it back. She could drown in it. She reaches for Sunny’s nest to steady herself.

After an awkward minute of silence, Mrs. Lawson says, “If you’d like to talk to a counselor about it privately, here’s a link to sign up.”

After school, Vivian opens the link and sees all the slots are already full.

Teresa texts her a social media post from Emmett’s older sister, already talking about him like he’s dead. He only went outside for a minute to retrieve a baseball he accidentally threw out the window. Teresa asks, “Do you want to call?”

Vivian dials her number. “I can’t believe he’s gone.”

“I know, right?”

They aren’t quite friends with him, but he’s generally likable, hovering on the periphery of their lives since elementary school. “His poor sister ...”

Teresa says, “I’m scared.”

To her horror, Vivian starts crying.

Teresa says, “Viv, are you okay?” She sniffles, too. “I can’t believe this is happening to us.”

“The ... the only homework I’ve been keeping up with is the

egg baby project. And it’s a dumb project! I looked it up and it’s from abstinence education!”

Teresa says, “Me too. I’ve been writing pages of logs every day, like a diary. I’ll have to rewrite the whole thing before we hand it in.”

Tuesday, April 6 - More doomscrolling

Vivian scrutinizes her classmates’ social media activity. Jared posts a photo of him and Emmett beaming in their basketball team uniforms captioned, “hope you make it back to us, brother.” Iris posts a text update, “praying for Emmett.” Vivian is surprised to learn she’s religious. Emmett’s best friends Henry and Rachel remain silent.

Gwen and Leona post photos of their lockdown cookie baking, and Vivian flares with jealousy that they can see each other. They live in the same apartment two blocks from school.

Somehow, by the evening, the algorithm returns her to Snatching videos.

Friday, April 9 - Should I keep taking care of Sunny if Mrs. Lawson is Snatched?

Mrs. Lawson doesn’t show up for class. They wait in silence for 5 minutes before Roland asks, “Do you think she got Snatched?”

Quinn says, “I hope not, not so soon after Emmett.” Then, qui-

eter, “And my cousin was Snatched two days ago.”

Vivian says, “I’m sorry. My neighbor got Snatched last week.”

Teresa suggests, “We can play a game while we wait for her.”

She starts an online drawing game, and they play for an hour before giving up on Mrs. Lawson’s appearance. The remaining students take another egg baby selfie before logging off.

At least David is back to normal. Vivian looks up DIY birthday gift ideas and finds a tutorial for cardboard bookends.

Sunday, April 10 - Got an email from Mrs. Lawson saying we still have class on Monday

Monday, April 11 - Only four of us still have our egg babies. A lot of people must’ve given up on the project over the weekend.

Only a dozen students - half the class - sign in on Monday. Roland types, “We were worried you got Snatched”

“I’m fine.” Mrs. Lawson’s voice cracks and she pauses to collect herself. “It … it was my brother.”

Tuesday, April 12 - Used most of the cardboard for the bookends for David. I was surprised he didn’t ask for a game console this year, like he did every year before. I guess he’s growing up.

David asks, “Can I have chocolate mousse cake for my birthday?”

Ma says, “I’ll check if any places still have one.”

She calls up four Chinese bakeries, all of which turn out to be temporarily or permanently closed. She calls a friend next, who points her to a Wechat group, and finally finds a woman halfway across the city who bakes cakes out of her kitchen with glowing Wechat reviews but doesn’t offer delivery. Vivian’s mother makes a pick-up appointment for 10am the next morning.

Wednesday, April 13 - Happy 9 years, David. Happy 3 weeks, Sunny.

Vivian says, “Ma, I don’t think you should go. Or let me go instead. You have work, right?”

Her cabin fever is finally overpowering her fear of being Snatched. And, as proven by their Snatched neighbor, staying indoors doesn’t guarantee safety.

“I’m taking the day off to spend with you two.”

Ma leaves in the morning. The kitchen clock striking noon weaves the first cold threads of dread into Vivian’s chest. Even with reduced transit schedules, the trip shouldn’t take longer than two hours. David asks, “Can we have lunch?”

Vivian glares at him, “We should wait for Mom. The chocolate cake was a dumb idea.”

David bursts into tears. Vivian softens; it's his birthday, he won't get any other good presents, he doesn't understand how much of an endeavor the cake is. Their mother goes out most days, anyway. She texts Ma, "When will you be back?"

Another twenty minutes, and Vivian starts on lunch: white rice, which they're alarmingly low on, and cream of mushroom soup.

David asks, "What did Ma say?"

"She hasn't replied yet, but she should be back soon. We can have lunch first."

After lunch, David cries again. "This is the worst birthday ever. Ma should be back!"

Vivian blinks at the ceiling, willing gravity to prevent her own tears from falling. She lies, "I bet she had to go into work, and will be back with the cake in the evening."

She plays Centauri Royale with him, then he plays with some friends, who remember to sing Happy Birthday.

Vivian grows increasingly certain that he won't be getting his chocolate mousse cake. She's angry at herself for not asking Ma for the baker's contact info. She calls 911, and a tired man answers. She says her mother went missing somewhere between their apartment and Irving Street. He says he'll file a report, but there won't be a search until 24 hours pass.

Vivian asks, "Do you think she was Snatched?"

"I hope not, but without more details, it's certainly possible."

"She went out to get a cake for my brother's birthday."

"I'm sorry."

Vivian slips into the kitchen while David plays. She empties the bucket under their still-dripping ceiling, then alternates between searching up chocolate cake recipes on her phone and scavenging for recipe ingredients in their kitchen. She's relieved to find flour, sugar, cocoa powder, and vanilla that must be years old but still smells right. Of course they don't have milk, but she finds a dairy-free recipe. David will have to do without mousse.

As for the egg ... she pats Sunny's pouch. She takes her time sifting and mixing dry ingredients, procrastinating on wet ingredients until the mixture is a perfectly blended light brown.

Vivian pulls Sunny out of the pouch and admires how he remains smooth and creamy after weeks of lockdown, when Vivian feels so rumpled and old in her baggy t-shirts, acne sprouting either from the brown water or the unbalanced diet or stress. She whispers, "Sorry. Thank you." to her egg baby, then cracks it into the shallow well of her dry ingredients.

Half an hour later, the fragrance of cake lures David to the kitchen. Vivian finds a candle and some matches in the same drawer where they keep oven mitts.

She sticks it in the cake. "Happy birthday, David."

Untitled

by Sydnie Beaupré



The Busiest Season for a Contemporary Witch

by Mahaila Smith

She sits at a table in the library.
Books about plants and minerals and animals
are stacked in towers or spread out in front of her.
She copies out notes on fungi
with neon pink gel pen
into her square-lined notebook.
She flicks her black bangs behind her ear.
Her hair is streaked with jolts of blue.
She flips through a book on North American birds,
writing about their skeletal structures
and the meanings of their songs.

When the sun starts to set,
she takes the books to a cart
to be reshelfed and walks home.
She bends down a few times on the way
to collect newly-unfurled dandelion leaves.
She admires a large, jagged piece of rose quartz
and leaves it where it is.

She spends a lot of her summer alone,
collecting cicada skins and rescuing trapped animals.
She weaves a basket from willow branches and cattails
from the marsh. She keeps precious feathers
and dried petals inside it.

She teaches herself how to focus her intentions.
She learns how to dye pale thread in elderberry juice
and she embroiders a sheet with the stars
under which she was born. The night air is warm
and she plots astrological alignments.
She lets the moonlight wash over her skin
and her various collections
and she wishes for community and strength.

The Dregs of a Fitful Hour

by Stefani Cooke

The dried poppy pods arranged above my head are an extended invitation, and I wonder why my guest is tardy. I sit on my jittering hands and focus on ragged inhales and exhales. It is 6 a.m., seven hours since my incantation. The moon has shaken hands with the sun, yet Sleep has not arrived. I sit upright in bed and watch shadows drape over furniture like the women in black and white movies, awaiting the day's kiss. A taunting sliver of indigo light slithers between my unshuttered blackout curtains, but it is not enough to kill the dark. I leave my bedside lamp off, fearing the glow might be unwelcoming.

Tinny harp music chimes, and the thought of work slouches into my addled brain. I am in no state to silence the susurru of middle school minds; for once, I have an excuse to force myself to pause. I stop the phone's alarm and switch off *Do Not Disturb*, and the submerged texts breach the surface. Forsaken friendships crowd my screen, each *bleep* demanding attention.

2:00 AM: Hey. Can't sleep. Our last bonfire is on my mind, proclaims an old high school boyfriend who sometimes messages me when lonely.

2:15 AM: Hey Selena! How are you doing these days? Remember when we pulled doubles at Tim's and people-watched? asks a former co-worker from a coffee shop job I held three years ago.

2:30 AM: Selena! We need a shopping date, for old times' sake, offers a childhood best friend who I discarded so long ago I am surprised she texts me. I miss her, but not enough to squeeze her into my leftover moments.

My eyes widen as the phone chugs from the overflow of texts, and I let it drop into my lap. *The fuck?*

"What's the news?" I charge my virtual assistant, and the white sphere on my night table blares to life. The anchor's voice is louder than necessary, even after I lower the volume.

"Roughly one percent of the capital has not slept. An influx of patients with sudden insomnia has overwhelmed hospitals and clinics."

My tense giggle deepens into a sob: the joke is Ottawa is the city fun forgot.

The nation's capital is a government city that behaves like an overgrown town. Most businesses close promptly at 6 p.m. on the weekends, and come nightfall, we eagerly tuck ourselves into bed. I have shaken up its doldrums identity: it is now the city sleep forgot.

The anchor's words bleed into one another, a melancholic guttural lament starting in my ears and lodging in my belly. I tell

the sphere to stop playing the news and knead my sternum. *Fuck.* I meant this only for myself. My vigil is more imperative now; I must fix my mistake.

“*I called you—why bother others?*” is the bait I slip into the black.

Opposite my double bed, a dark-haired head bobs into focus.

My heartbeat’s *rata-ta-ta* is a resounding tattoo in the quiet.

The being is at eye level and frozen in place, its thick hair tumbling to its shoulders.

“Hello?”

Its mouth moves as mine does, tracing my words with cracked lips, and when it stops talking, it smiles.

It is my reflection in the large mirror of my oaken bureau, but I do not feel the smile when I press my fingers to my lips.

* * *

I can subsist on very little sleep, but this is the first time I have had none. The terrors of failure often chew on my repose. I used to try melatonin, moved my bedroom TV downstairs, and invested in mood lighting. Drinking warm milk was a nighttime ritual. Doomsscrolling until my eyes would close, I would pour through social media, news articles, and any bullshit to busy my brain. A nibble of movie listicles here, a gulp of celebrity gossip there. The dregs of a fitful hour helped me survive each day.

Cocooning the daisy-printed bedsheets tighter to myself, I

cackle. I am like the self-important middle-aged ladies in department stores, argumentative and immovable until a manager appears. Or I am like the early suffragettes, handcuffing myself to railings—doing something worthwhile. I am twenty-three, too old to be daddy’s girl, but I still cannot shake my father’s firm belief that if you aren’t doing something constructive, you aren’t doing anything. He was also a teacher.

The dismal *da-da-dum* from the news bulletin still wriggles in my brain, so I scroll through the torrent of texts, still cropping up.

2:45 AM: Hi Selena! Can I borrow your fun context clues lesson from last year? I need it, requests the co-teacher I shared my classroom with. Nice, but needy. I could never say no to him.

3:00 AM: Quick question. Could you share the delish brownie recipe from the last neighbourhood potluck? asks a woman I hardly speak with from three houses down. If I hadn’t worried about the optics of a pillar of the community missing an event, she wouldn’t have my number.

3:15 AM: I miss you, Selena. It was never you, and it was all me. I’ve been working on myself, and I need to see you, conspires a man who depleted me. Kicking him out of my apartment a month ago took a lot of strength.

It is strange to hear from connections I allowed to deteriorate. I keep my social circle tiny, only ever calling my dad to discuss the daily goings-on in my classroom, so my tight schedule cannot disappoint people.

My hours are thick with planning, grading, emailing, and running extracurricular activities like book club and homework

help. I never complain, knowing admitting weakness is a strike against me, each action completed with a bedaubed smile. What right do I have to anger? Didn't I cultivate this life for myself? I have to do more to become more.

There are twenty missed calls, too. I ignore them, worrying about what my principal or co-workers might think if they hear my unpolished voice. How could I explain my actions? For once, I cannot window-dress my unease with a nervous grin. I can only answer unrehearsed phone calls or talk to strangers when I assume my camouflage. I examine my chewed nails, knowing they will read my reticence as inattention or laziness. It is contrary to the curated persona that can handle anything. But I am relieved, unfettered from expectations filtering through my phone. It is nice to pretend students are not asking about due dates, parents are not accusing me of unfair grading, or the administration is not declaring my work insufficient.

Tears skim my cheeks, loosening the crusty rheum in the corners of my eyes. I hate that I find relief in the in-between; this is my golden mean.

* * *

The walls shiver with life, a palpable tremble that has escaped from my bones.

Warmth has abandoned me, leaking from my body and venturing back into the world of the living.

It has been twelve hours since I last closed my eyes, and I wonder if Sleep is an angry demon hoarding dreams, stuffing fistfuls of slumber in his maw. Or does he lap at the sweet fantasies, savouring each lick? Maybe he gnashes his teeth through the

bitter ones, holding his nose through quick bites?

Goose bumps flourish on my arms and legs, and the sorrowful music from the news plays with full force. Ethereal cries rise and fall around me, and I beg my virtual assistant to stop playing the song.

“Sorry, but I do not understand your request.”

Will Sleep ever come?

A week ago, I googled “home remedies for sleep” and discovered the potency of dried flowers.

Last night, I petitioned for rest.

As the night dwindled, I realized I had to inverse the problem to solve it.

Sleep was a time sink, an obstacle to self-achievement. If I could shrug it off without consequence, I could be more. I didn't know I would cause a sleeping drought.

Please let everyone be okay.

Please let Daddy be okay.

Calling him is impossible; he would frown through the phone and remind me I may have book smarts, but I don't have common sense.

* * *

When the sixteenth hour of sleeplessness arrives, I count it as

another shifted bead on an abacus. The song has intensified, building into a cacophony of wails and shrieks. My eyes are arid and empty, making space for the headache creeping in behind them. Gnawing hunger is now a yawn, and I have embraced the grubbiness settling in every crevice.

I have leached time from the city, stolen repose from the dusty relationships I tried to protect by setting them on a shelf.

Did they reach out because they miss me or because those drowning clutch for whoever flounders with them?

I must fool nobody.

Fists clenching, my stomach roiling, I am decided. Collecting hours is easier than negotiating a return to life.

I can't go back.

* * *

After twenty-four hours, I am on my back, staring at the dried poppy pods I taped to the stucco ceiling. I connect the paint globes with my mind's eye. Once the pattern snaps into focus, it is so easy: I am making a wormhole. The walls quake, and the strip of light from the outside world flashes between black and yellow. The sun and moon are beyond handshakes; they quarrel over my scraps.

There!

A hand with long, skinny fingers extends from the darkened

hole in my ceiling. We are beyond introductions.

The second hand emerges. Long white hair cascades from the blackness, obscuring the thing's face and tickling the tip of my nose.

Wasn't Sleep supposed to be a *Mister Sandman*?

The creature flattens her palms on either side of the wormhole, bracing the dotted ceiling. Her branch-like arms open for an embrace, her vulturine nails *click, click, clicking* against flaking paint. She is laughing at me, a raspy, echoing screech that reminds me of an owl.

I understand now. I am plump for devouring, succulent from the steady broil of prolonged anguish over my people, over one million unknown people.

My voice, rusted to my throat, cannot hit the higher notes of the dirge that has followed me since the early hours. It is a chorale sung by beggars, faded spectres of the highly strung, and I recognize I was never the petitioner. They surround me, and the electric tingles of their souls brush against my fingers and push me higher.

I push myself up from bed and onto my knees, my thighs shaking, my heart hammering.

Threading my fingers into her claws, I clasp hard, impatient for surrender.



Ирина Новикова
Irina Novikova 2023

I sleep and see a wonderful dream where I turned into a dragon

by Irina Tall (Novikova)

That World of Alice

by Alexandra Haverská

“Oh, you’re still below twelve! So lucky!”

“Why?”

“Your magical powers, silly! They haven’t yet dwindled ... unlike mine.”

That’s how I befriended Alice, who reveled in queer words and in exclamation marks. We attended the same afternoon art school but had never talked before.

She read my age while I scribbled an “11” next to a family name I hated. Wholeheartedly. I liked the painting it went with today, though.

“In for a break?” asked Alice in a more civil tone.

“Yup,” I replied and set aside my cherry blossom still-life. (I got the drapery *so* right.)

We slipped out into the school garden. Alice climbed on top of a hollow metal globe, the last remnant of a playground long lost to bushes of wild roses, and dangled her legs like a first-grader. The iron bars felt cold to the touch.

“Come on, time for instruction!” declared Alice with self-importance. “This is serious! You now know that you possess

magical powers. I want you to close your eyes, think about nothing ...” Out of curiosity, I gave into the game. She handed me a pencil and a piece of paper. “What is the first animal that comes to your mind? Write it down.” There was something about Alice that made me actually, honestly try. Soon after, my scribbling turned into a word: CAT.

“Wonderful! Very classy!” Alice exclaimed excitedly. “Mine’s a rabbit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Guardian animal! You’ve just found it. It’s like a guardian angel, but better. Don’t laugh, this technique works! Now for the magic skills ... you can start with the easy stuff. Like never missing a bus or avoiding a surprise test. Soon, you’ll figure out your own tricks. Don’t fret, the cat will help you experiment.”

“If you say so ...”

“You should have more faith in yourself,” Alice replied.

“So we’re like witches or something?” I changed to a more comfortable subject.

“You can say that. I like the ‘Awakened’ word better,” said Alice. She really enjoyed her complicated words, Alice.

“Anyway, why me? How did you know I could do magic?” I asked.

“Most people could, just many aren’t fit to be told. You seemed all right.”

“Oh,” I blurted. This was not the answer I was expecting. It felt strangely comforting, the idea of not being that much special. But it also made it sound like Alice actually thought magic was a real thing, not just pretend.

“What did you mean earlier, what’s with the age?” I asked.

“Well, after twelve, your magical powers diminish. Can wither into nigh if you don’t practice them. I mean when you get really old, like twenty-five.” Alice looked even more serious now, if possible. “When’s your twelfth birthday?” she asked me.

“Next month,” I said. “I’m a Christmas child.” It sounded somewhat cringy to say it like that.

“Good gracious! We initiated you just in time!” Alice exclaimed, and I wondered what her parents did or where else she’d picked up all those grown-up words.

The bell rang.

“Meet me thirty minutes before next week’s class, so we can continue. And try to practice, ’K?” said Alice and ran off.

Mom was late to pick me up. As usual. She shot a quick glance at my painting.

“Nothing exceptional. I mean, it’s all right, but you shouldn’t think too much of it, you’re not that talented.”

Yes, yes, mom, I know, you say that all the time, I answered in my head, trying not to cry.

“Anyway, what did you get on the biology test today?” she asked.

“B+.”

“What?!? Really, why can’t you get an A for once? Honestly, I sometimes think they’ve given me someone else’s child at the hospital.” Mom taught biology.

“Hana had a B-.” That always worked to shut mom up, mentioning the neighbor girl’s score. Hana’s folks were ostentatiously richer than we were, and mom liked it when I got better marks than Hana. I have to ask Alice if you can change your parents using magic. Or grow up faster.

* * *

The following week, I was early for the meeting with Alice, so I dragged my feet along the street leading up to the art school. It was lined with villas. Old villas overgrown with ivy, not the marshmallow-colored gingerbread houses of the suburbs. There was a chair on the pavement, and on it stood a vase full of cherry twigs.

“Barborky, two crowns each,” read a cardboard sign.

I hesitated. I wanted to get some barborky this year. According to the custom, you’re supposed to cut them by yourself. But I

also hate to vandalize trees at random. And it felt nice to support the granny who sold flowers from her garden like that ... actually, it just felt right to get them here, from this particular vase. Call it instinct. So I took one branch and left a two-crown, hoping nobody would steal it.

“You could’ve put less, just to look like you’ve paid. Or fake it entirely and take a branch for free. Nobody would know.” That was mom’s voice inside my head. She did those kinds of things, like cheating on trust-based stuff. She called it being thrifty and that communism had taught her that. It made me burn with shame every single time.

“No way! Put it back! That’s dangerous!” That was Alice’s voice. In reality. She’d just come and was staring at me in horror. “It’s from the old hag! I wanted to warn you about her, she’s a witch—”

“Aren’t we too? You told me we had magical powers ...”

“But she’s evil! She might—I better tell you about all those who dwell here, in the Phantom Alley.”

* * *

The crone, the cannibals, and the soul-devouring demon in a yew tree of the Phantom Alley were nothing compared to mom’s laughter when I came home with the barborky.

“Looks like someone wants to get out of the house, here. Keep dreaming, you’re not me ... me, when I was sixteen, grandma thought she might need a shotgun to keep all the handsome guys at bay, haha. We won’t be needing one for you, though.”

The usual rant.

Anyway, the cherry tree branch is called barborky, “the Barbras,” because you cut it on St. Barbara’s Day and hope it’ll bloom by Christmas. If it does, you’ll marry off within the year. Of course, nobody actually believes that now, it’s just the kind of thing you do in Advent time.

“Plus, don’t you think you’re too young for something like that?”

“Whatev’,” I slammed my bedroom’s door shut.

I placed the twig on my desk and looked at it. What if it bloomed on time? What would happen then, now that I could do magic? There was something about Alice, indeed, I realized. Her enthusiasm was so contagious that I caught myself giving in to the game even when she wasn’t around.

That night, my guardian cat visited me in my dreams for the first time ever. We stalked together in forgotten gardens and ran along the winding streets of a city that felt both unknown and familiar, and I was happier than ever before.

* * *

When I woke up, there was blood all over my sheets. I panicked. Not because I didn’t know why. I panicked precisely because I knew why. I wasn’t the first in our class, though the queen bee was mighty pissed that even I’d surpassed her in “becoming a woman.” The worst was that I had to tell mom. Eventually. And that was scary. I decided to wait until the afternoon. My stomach crawled for the whole day, and I secretly puked into the pavement-side bushes on my way

home.

The upside was, I pulled off the bus trick Alice had told me about. No sheer luck, I was sure of it. When I concentrated, I felt an eerie tingle on my fingertips and then the bus came, completely off schedule. Twice.

At home, mom threw a mother-of-all-tantrums. She screamed. Cried a lot. “Just look at it, daddy, we got ourselves a little princess doll and it has grown,” she told my father. This sounded funny except that it wasn’t. In the end, she shut herself in her bedroom and spent the rest of the evening there, brooding, shoveling down chocolate and smoking. That’s how I knew she was in really bad shape.

* * *

The next day found me snuggled in my wardrobe, dialing Alice’s home number. I always took my free fixed-to-fixed calls with friends in there, feeling like nobody would overhear.

“Hi, Alice, it’s me. Sorry, I won’t be coming to art for some time ...” my voice trailed.

“My, how come, you sick?”

“Nope, got grounded til Christmas.”

“Goodness, what for?” Alice sounded agitated.

“For coming home like fifteen minutes late. Mom’s nuts these days.”

“Preposterous!” Alice shouted.

I smiled quietly to myself.

“Anyway, I did some real magic today. It was great. It felt like having an extra sense, like being more complete, if that’s possible ... you know what I mean, do you?” And I told Alice about the bus summoning. I didn’t doubt the existence of magic now; it was just so subtle most people never noticed.

“That’s amazing! Next time, you should try to figure your own little trick,” she said.

I exhaled. I realized that deep down, I feared Alice might laugh at me, after all.

Suddenly, my bedroom door swung open and in barged mom, throwing clothes all over my carpet.

“Call you later,” I managed to say before hanging up on Alice.

“You iron your stuff yourself from now on, since you think yourself grown-up, I’m not your slave! Do you hear me?” Mom shouted.

“Yeah, yeah,” I answered.

“See you do it, too. It’s time you learned some responsibility, not just living in a mamma-hotel.”

As if I wasn’t helping out with chores already. There was no point saying that out loud; mom just slammed my bedroom’s door shut again.

It took me a while to compose myself enough to dial Alice back.

* * *

I followed Alice's advice and figured out some of my own magic tricks, like getting unnoticed at the ticket control or opening the exact toy I wanted from a Happy Meal. Every time I succeeded, the familiar flow of energy tingled pleasantly at my fingertips. I didn't look forward to Christmas, though. Christmas meant family. Even worse, my birthday fell on the 23rd. My 12th birthday, when, according to Alice, my magic would start to wane. I felt a strange sense of loss for something that I'd only recently discovered.

* * *

It was on one of those nights when I wavered in between sleep and waking when a tall dark figure leaned over me.

"I sacrificed my youth for you and you're not even grateful!" it said, reeking of cigarettes and wine, filling my personal space with spite.

Making her point, mom departed, stumbling.

Wide awake now, I considered running away, but it was freezing outside ... and besides, the police would bring me back to my parents anyway. Because living with one's parents is the best for the child. Irony sign. I just felt I couldn't bear being at home much longer, not like this.

I summoned my guardian cat, as usual when I couldn't sleep in the dead of the night. It appeared, glowing, nuzzling my face with its head, rubbing its cheeks onto mine. "You wouldn't leave me when I turn twelve, would you ... ?" I asked the cat, and it seemed foolish and natural at the same time. The

cat coiled itself in my lap in response. I stroked its iridescent coat.

Sure, the cat had helped me develop my magic skills, but they weren't enough, just mere tricks, Alice had called them. I mused if we could achieve something bigger. To change my life for the better. I kept stroking the cat's coat. I didn't know exactly what should change and how, I just wanted my reality to be different. The tingle and the warm flow. I tried to gather more of it, and it came, making the cat's coat crackle and the cat purr. I seemed to be on the right track. I dared a faint smile.

* * *

My days shrunk into school and long calls with Alice.

But every night, in the small hours when I waited in vain for sleep to come, I tried to gather even more of the tingling energy flow. Night after night, I stroked my guardian cat's fur while reaching for my magic, concentrating on the wanting of change. I pushed myself beyond hope, determined and slightly desperate. Scared that if I didn't make it by my birthday, I'd lose my best, if not only, shot.

On the eve of the 23rd, using up the last credit I had, I texted Alice: <My cat glows now. Funny. I feel what I do makes sense. Hope to see you after Xmas.>

<Wonderful! Keep it up, girl. And happy Bday tmrw. You'll be OK. G'night.> came the answer. *Funny*, I thought, *Alice texts abbreviations*, before falling soundly asleep.

* * *

On the 23rd, my barborky bloomed. I woke up standing leafless in the old lady's garden, part of my magic gone. Spent.

* * *

Every now and then, an iridescent cat comes to scratch its claws on my bark or to rest upon my branches. I don't know yet what the future holds or how long I'll stay like this. Meanwhile, I bloom in the Phantom Alley, watching over Alice.

The King of Cats of Hollow Street Books

by Beth Cato

the king of cats resides in
Hollow Street Books in old downtown
an excellent place
for his human devotees to pay homage to
his greatness and for his feline subordinates
to visit during the night. his favorite places
in the shop vary by the season
he loves the embroidered velvet skirt beneath
the Christmas tree, but also enjoys
sleeping curled around the giant menorah
in the bay window. otherwise he favors
any open spots on lower shelves
around the store, or lounging upon the
expensive atlas no one will ever buy

quite often he leaves dead mice and
and newborn dragons on the front welcome mat
which fortunately is red. his cordial
relationship with the resident
brownies means they communicate as needed

such as when they alerted him about
the frozen pipes last winter, inspiring him
to yowl and pace circles to inform the humans
when they entered in the morning. he takes
security seriously all the day long.
the time a loud-mouthed man was ready
to set so-called offensive books on fire
lives in legend, as the king
latched onto the man's bare calves with
eager teeth and claws

ferocious though he may be, the king
loves his people and his belly
is not a trap. he will stretch out
to accept tummy scratches and purr
loud enough to be heard from a room away.
as the stories on the surrounding shelves assert
a good king is one to be loved and respected
and he is indeed
a good king

Pandora and Schrödinger in Love

by Rachel Rodman

They met on their wedding night.

(During the ceremony, both had remained veiled.)

“Pandora,” she said, extending a hand.

“Schrödinger.”

* * *

They met in the basement of the Records Building, where they labored in different departments.

That day, fingers brushing, they’d converged on the same filing cabinet.

The same drawer.

* * *

They were both famous adventurers.

And—to begin with—bitter rivals.

They met, in person, for the first time (acrimonious letters did not count) inside an Egyptian tomb.

Whose treasures had already been taken.

When their wild accusations had been exhausted, only their shared disappointment remained.

Empty sarcophagus. *Empty*.

So they lay inside it together.

* * *

The box contained a question.

“Yes,” he whispered.

* * *

“Already engaged,” she said, and pushed the ring away.

* * *

A night in.

“It’s ... Canadian bacon,” said Schrödinger, puzzled, as he raised the cardboard flap.

“But that’s not what we ordered,” groused Pandora.

* * *

Their first home!

Down the ramp, the movers wheeled a hundred cardboard containers: hers and his, a jumble.

* * *

Dishes (not broken).

Lamp (upside down).

Knick-knacks (broken).

* * *

Empty box.

Empty box.

“Do you remember?” asked Schrödinger, opening yet another, “all those times we never met?”

* * *

Their first cat, only 5, was struck by their sedan when Schrödinger backed out of the driveway.

No.

Their second, 21, died of kidney failure.

The third ...

* * *

“No cats,” she decreed (for she was violently allergic).

* * *

In their garden, they planted seeds in parallel beds. Both preferred introspective species. But while Pandora was partial to the somber ones: Sorrow, Depression, and Ennui, Schrödinger favored the manic varieties: Self-Loathing, Hypochondria, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

“What ugly flowers,” they agreed.

* * *

Old take-out in the back of the fridge.

Way, way back.

(No labels.)

“What are we eating?” she wanted to know.

But he had no idea.

* * *

When Pandora was dead, killed in childbirth, Schrödinger threw himself across her body and wept.

“I appreciate your grief, sir,” said the obstetric surgeon briskly. “But your baby may still be alive.”

Then she lifted her scalpel—the arbitrator of all questions—and pushed Schrödinger authoritatively to the side.

“Let’s find out.”

* * *

“I’m sterile,” said Schrödinger.

* * *

“Please look at my back,” he said. “See if you can find anything there.”

“Pus,” she reported, popping a whitehead open.

“Again,” he begged.

“Blood,” she said.

“Again!”

* * *

A package!

* * *

A delivery from the Crematorium—Schrödinger’s ashes.

* * *

A new sculpture for the foyer—cubist.

* * *

Whips and handcuffs.

Six walls. One key.

In the basement, close to the water heater (though they were always louder than the water heater), they had installed a cage.

No safe words.

* * *

A diagnosis.

* * *

Two months to live.

* * *

Twins.

* * *

Every Sunday.

When they began, all of the sections were blank. But as the morning wore away they filled in every square.

“Three letters,” she prompted him. “A device for storage.”

* * *

An envelope!

* * *

A letter from her lawyer, describing a proposed division of their assets.

As if—he scoffed—that would stand.

As if he didn't have a lawyer too.

* * *

“Remember Paris?” said the birthday card.

He did.

So she leaned, soft, against the kitchen counter—the sink, beside them, like a proxy Seine—and their lips met, slow.

As if it were the first time.

* * *

Ding Dong!

Their children—all seven—were returning for Christmas.

* * *

Ding! Ding!

Into their cul-de-sac, the firetruck raced, alarm bells reverberating—too late, too late.

Everything in ashes.

* * *

How are the decades measured? Like this:

Dead cats, new graves: Him, her, him, him, him, her, them (two at once, bleak day), her, her, her.

Each time: a loss, incalculable. A future, unthinkable.

* * *

A new kitten!

* * *

As Schrödinger's dementia progressed, each new day brought new surprises.

Pandora?

Who was Pandora?

* * *

But she was patient. Always.

* * *

Where are the keys?

(Because she snapped, every day. Here she was, snapping.)

Where did you put them?

“Can't remember,” he said.

* * *

... *Everything*, he explained.

In the litter box, of course.

(For she was in there somewhere, he knew, beneath her slack expression.

Again.

Even if the doctors didn't think so.)

No need to ask.

* * *

Their anniversary.

Everything, he said, that was and wasn't: Paris and Egypt; the cage and the pizzas; the sculptures and the broken lamps; every pimple and every kiss; that day—*that* one: the day on which they had almost met, for the first time, but were ultimately prevented; every flower they had ever planted, in the same dirt, over the bones of the animals that they had cared for; the crosswords and the children and the cancer and the fire.

Swollen joints.

* * *

It hurt to move one finger. It hurt to move all of them. But she had managed to wrap it, all the same: a tiny package, the paper neat.

...Would he like to open it?

When she set it in his lap, his eyes remained dull.

But inside, she explained—did he understand?—was *everything*

...

* * *

In Season

by Pixie Bruner

Ripe dreamfruit are in season, finally.

All colors, no-colors, those impossible colors,
Night sky sunset fruit, blood fruit,
Drupes falling, machetes severing,
Harvested with Wartenberg neurowheels,
hand pollinated by monofilament,
sticky syrupy and astringent,
Full of nacreous arils and poisonous,
never spit out the seeds!
Cover your mouth,
Swallow them as if they are Persephone,
and your mouth a greedy rose and aged ivory cave.

When they ripen, as they must,
they are a toxicologist's wet-dream,
And burst forth from your skull,
fully-formed and foliate,
savor the sweetness,
in your last breath.

The empty flesh,
shoveled into the barrows
soul sundered away,
always fertilizes

The

by Joshua Kepfer

(A musical piece, which, unfortunately, cannot be embedded in a pdf, but can be accessed in the html version of *Penumbric* at <https://www.penumbric.com/currentissue/kepferThe.html>.)

Lyrics: None (instrumental)

Contributors



SYDНИE BEAUPRÉ is more than just a girl: they're an openly LGBTQ2IA author that lives in their own imagination: a post-apocalyptic, zombie-inhabited world, where magical creatures and supernatural occurrences are simply the mundane.

* * *



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.

* * *

PIXIE BRUNER (SFPA/Dread Writers Society) is a poet, editor, and cancer survivor. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her doppelgänger and deranged cats. Her debut *The Body as Haunted* (Authortunities Press) was Elgin-nominated. Her words are in



Amazing Stories, *Strange Horizons*, *Weird Fiction Quarterly*, *Space & Time Magazine*, *Angry Gable Press*, and many more. She wrote for White Wolf Gaming Studio. Werespiders ruining LARPs were her fault. 2025 SFPA Rhysling Chair survivor and 2025 Kay Snow Prize Winner. <https://pixiebruner.substack.com/>

* * *



LISA CAI is from Toronto, Canada. She has been published in *Diabolical Plots*, *The Dark Magazine*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and others. When not reading or writing, she is probably wrangling with IT at a university, watching anime, taking a long walk, or solving crimes in *Among Us*. Her socials are listed at <https://linktr.ee/lisacai>.

* * *



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://blue.sky/@BethCato) and Instagram at [@catocatsandcheese](https://www.instagram.com/catocatsandcheese).

* * *



STEFANI COOKE is a writer and middle school teacher from Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, whose narratives focus on identity, self-discovery, and anxiety. Her writing has appeared in *Ryga Journal*, *Hearth & Coffin Literary Journal*, and the *Drabbledark III* anthology by Shacklebound Press.

You can read her work and find her socials at <https://linktr.ee/stefthescribbler>

* * *



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/>

* * *



KAI DELMAS loves creating worlds and magic systems. His fiction can be found in *Utopia Science Fiction*, *Crepuscular*, and several Shacklebound anthologies. His debut drabble collection, *Darkness Rises, Hope Remains*, was published by Shacklebound Books. Support him at patreon.com/kaidelmas and find him at www.kaidelmas.com or on Bluesky @kaidelmas.bsky.social

* * *

KIT HARDING is a writer who belongs to the cities and wilds of New England. Her work has previously appeared in *Cossmass Infinities* and *Soul Jar: Thirty-One Fantastical Tales by Disabled Authors* (which was on Booklist's top ten SF/Fantasy & Horror list for 2024!). You can find her online <https://writerkit.dreamwidth.org>.

* * *

ALEXANDRA HAVERSKÁ is a Czech speculative fiction writer of German origin living in Prague, a city that breathes the fantastic. Her English fiction recently appeared in *Cosmorama*, *Space Squid* and *HyphenPunk* magazines, and in the *Daily Flights of Fantasy* (Iron Faerie Publishing) anthology. Her Czech fiction is published in various Czech SF&F and horror venues.

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NOAH ISHERWOOD is an aspiring scavenger and sometime researcher of art-science collaboration who lives in Athens, GA. His fictions have appeared in *HAD*, *Uncharted*, *Cold Signal*, *Bewildering Stories*, and *Ramifications*. You can find him several places at once at linktr.ee/noahisherwood

* * *



JOSHUA KEPFER lives in California, where he enjoys exploring the wilderness of the mountains and ocean with his wife and daughters. Much of his inspiration to write prose, music, and poetry comes from nature and his faith in Jesus. He has work published in *The Bookends Review*, *Tiny Seed Journal*, *Azure Journal*, *Lothlorien Poetry*

Journal, and more.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMUmXzK1O3c&list=PLieAkiPEbJLBgn9wiiH4xqNh4xQyShad>
- <https://medium.com/@kepferj>
- <https://substack.com/@jkepfer>

* * *



IAN LI (he/him) is a Chinese-Canadian economist, developer, writer, and poet, who started writing in late 2023 after a lifetime of believing he could never be creative. Find his work in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy & Science Fiction*, among other venues. Learn more at <https://ian-li.com>.

* * *



ALISON MCBAIN's novels are the recipients of 13+ awards, including the Foreword INDIES. In her current project "Author Versus AI" she's writing a book a week for a year, using NO AI at all (52 books total). When not writing, Ms. McBain is associate editor for the magazine *ScribesMICRO* and draws all over the walls of her house with the enthusiastic help of her kids.

* * *

REBEKAH POSTUPAK lives on a fault line between two volcanoes which, disappointingly, relates in no way to her day job of answering the phone. Her stories can be found in places such as *Solstitia*, *Not One of Us*, and *tdotspec's Strange Wars*. Rebekah



is a producer and writer for the Nebula Awards and serves on the team at Willamette Writers. She is indebted to these creative communities and so many others for demonstrating the power of words to change lives.

* * *



KATHRYN PTACEK is a long-published writer in a number of genres, although mostly in horror. She has written a number of novels, short stories, articles, poems, and various whatnots; long ago, she edited three anthologies, including *Women of Darkness* and *Women of Darkness II* (and also *Women of the West*. You may note a theme here ...).

* * *



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". His online portfolio is at brianquinnstudio.com, and he is open to all projects.

* * *

RACHEL RODMAN's work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and many

other publications. She is also the author of two collections: *Art is Fleeting* and *Exotic Meats + Inedible Objects*. You can find her online at www.rachelrodman.com.

* * *



VEKHAN SAMETYAZA is a transmutative artist, author, and musician with a deep interest in promoting dark awakening through authentic self-expression. An enduring love for sci-fi and fantasy themes has inspired his work for publications like *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Burning Light Press*, *Florida Roots Press*, and *Inkd Publishing*.

You can find more of his work at elakhtarveekhan.wordpress.com.

* * *

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.



* * *

MAHAILA SMITH (they/them) is the author of the novelette in verse, *Seed Beetle* (Stelliform Press, 2025). They are a researcher, poet and editor based on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg in Ot-

tawa, Canada. You can find more of their work on their website: mahailasmith.ca. (photo by Curtis Perry)

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award® and Elgin Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, *The Gravity of Existence*, and with Genevieve Flynn, Lee Murray, and Angela Yuriko Smith, *Tortured Willows: Bent, Bowed, Unbroken*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide, including *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *New Myths*, *Penumbra*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect @christinasng.

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KARINA STEFFENS lives in Dublin and owns a boutique web design agency. Born in Ukraine, she emigrated twice and settled down in Ireland at the turn of the millennium. A lifelong bookwyrm, she devoured science fiction, fantasy, and Slavic folklore and amassed a small hoard of books, which is yet to achieve L-Space or open a portal to another world. To help it along, she turned her hand to writing. Her work has also appeared in *Empyreome*, *Gathering Storm*, and the anthology *Runs Like Clockwork* from Wyldblood Press. You can find her on Blusky @karinasteffens.bsky.social.

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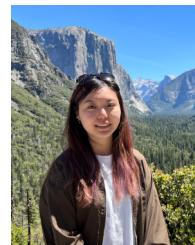
IRINA TALL (NOVIKOVA) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator.



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 topics. 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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SHERRY YUAN spent the first five years of her life in Suzhou, China and the next 18 in Vancouver, Canada. She currently lives in San Francisco with her partner and small brown dog, where she writes code by day and fiction by night. She loves writing, reading, art, rock climbing, and trying Trader Joe's cheeses.

She has stories published in *Infinite Worlds Magazine* and *Luna Station Quarterly*. You can find her at sherryuan.me.



GARTH UPshaw lives in Portland, Oregon, with his super-genius wife, three precocious grown children, and six enthusiastic chickens. His work has appeared in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Bristol Noir*, and other fine venues. He has an MA in Theoretical Mathematics and loves carving spoons, bicycling, and curling up with a good book.

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Emergence

by Joel Bisaillon

(full image)

