

August 2022

WORLDS OF *Possibility*



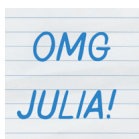
STORIES AND ART BY
MARC A. CRILEY * MEGAN BAFFOE
DIE BOOTH * KEYAN BOWES * LENA NG
LESIA KOROL * ANDREW TUROK
JULIA KIM * ANA NIKI

EDITED BY
JULIA RIOS

WORLDS OF POSSIBILITY

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“Bidaai ki Chicken Curry” copyright 2022 by Keyan Bowes

“Water and Glass” copyright 2022 by Megan Baffoe

“A Saturday Out” copyright 2022 by Lena Ng

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the August 2022 issue of *Worlds of Possibility*. This ebook version is only available to paid subscribers, but all the contents inside will be released free to the public on <https://www.juliarios.com/> bit by bit. If you enjoy what I do with this project, please tell others. Subscriptions make it possible for me to continue paying creators for new work.

This issue highlights art by Ukrainian artists. Ukraine is a country at war, yet people who live there must still find ways to work and continue with their lives. For the four artists in this issue, this means continuing to create beautiful art. They want the world to know what is happening there, and to help stop it. Please do check out their other work by following the links in their bios, and if you have the ability to donate to the organization suggested by Lesia Korol, please do that, too!

A note specifically about Lesia Korol's piece: I generally try to include works that leave me feeling hopeful in this project, and I know that in some ways a piece specifically about war may seem to run counter to that intention. In this case, I feel that acknowledging this war and boosting the voices and

desires of people directly affected by it is where the hope comes in. Also, Lesia makes beautiful art, and beauty is, in itself, a balm.

The stories in this issue offer themes of transformation, healing, and acceptance. Marc A. Criley told me in his original submission's cover letter that his 100 word drabble, "Fencepost" made him let out a big sigh. I agreed and asked him to write a companion drabble from the tree's perspective. Andrew Turok created two small sketches to go with these, and they are lovely, though only the very tip of what he can do artistically, as you will see if you visit his portfolio. Megan Baffoe's story also features transformation and trees, but in quite a different way. I fell in love with the lushness of her writing style, and I believe Ana Niki's dreamy art compliments that.

Keyan Bowes explores the importance of food and familial love, and the way that sometimes the best chance for healing on a large scale means letting go. Die Booth also gives us a story about healing, though on a smaller and more personal scale. This flash piece about anxiety and self acceptance made me sigh contentedly.

Finally, Lena Ng's story explores accepting and working around one's limitations and accepting one's partner for who they are. That one made me laugh out loud the first time I read it in the open submissions call and still delights me every time I reread it. I knew I had to have art for this one, and I felt Julia Kim's bright and cute style was a perfect fit. Both this story and the artwork for it capture a certain joyfulness I take in editing and selecting content for this project. I hope you'll also find some things to feel joyful about here.

There are content notes at the end of this volume for anyone who is worried about what they may find in the stories. Although my goal for *Worlds of Possibility* is to publish works that soothe, inspire, and delight, I recognize that many subjects

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

are difficult for different readers at different times, and I encourage you to make informed decisions about what you choose to read and when.

All Best,

Julia Rios

WHEAT FIELDS ON FIRE

LESIA KOROL



Traditional Ukrainian art depicting wheat fields on fire, to show that the Russian army is deliberately burning Ukraine's wheat.

ARTIST STATEMENT FROM LESIA KOROL:

I'M AN ILLUSTRATOR FROM UKRAINE, who moved to Poland because of the war. Here I'm trying to build my life anew and tell the whole world about the horrors that are happening in our country. My country is experiencing a genocide. We ask the world to help us and stop it.

THANK you

[HTTP://PRYTULAFUNDATION.ORG](http://prytulafoundation.org) is an organization collecting funds for domestic and military aid in Ukraine. Please donate if you can.

FENCEPOST

MARC A. CRILEY



Art by Andrew Turok

I bore down on the heavyweight bolt cutters, isolating the four rusty, ingrown barbed wire strands piercing the massive oak. “A *tree*,” I muttered, “is *not* a fencepost.”

“How old you think this fence is?” Henry, my nano wrangler, asked.

“Ingrown this bad? Sixty years at least.” Tar-like tears stained the bark where each wire emerged. Henry puttied the

exposed strands with *FerroPhage*TM, then activated the nanos. Soft sizzling accompanied spurting puffs of rust.

I brushed away the powder, gave Henry the okay to start daubing bio-repair paste into the wounds.

Above us, the old oak sighed in the breeze.



MARC A. CRILEY avidly read fantasy and science fiction for over forty years before deciding to try his hand at it. He has since been published in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Martian*, and elsewhere, so rest assured it's never too late to start writing. Marc and his wife “manage” a menagerie of cats in the hills of North Alabama, from where he maintains a blog at marccriley.com and noisily tweets as @That_MarcC.

ANDREW TUROK is an artist from Ukraine. He says, “In this time I can’t find a job and a normal life, but I believe war can’t stop art.” You can find Andrew’s work at <https://www.artstation.com/duleonto>.

BIDAAI KI CHICKEN CURRY

KEYAN BOWES

- *Chop the tomatoes.*

Lots of activity around the space-port today. From my kitchen window, I see vehicles come and go, people like tiny dots moving among them in an intricate dance.

- *Chop the onions.*

WE'RE USED to losing our daughters, back home in India. We get them married, hope they'll be safe and happy and cared-for. The wedding is as huge and wonderful as we can achieve with our savings, and our borrowing capacity, and the jewelry passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter. They walk around the sacred fire, reciting vows. Then they leave, carried off to their new home, the home with a husband in it, and often more of his relatives. There's a lot of weeping at the bidaai, the ceremony of departure. Adjust, we tell our daughters. Learn to fit in. They belong elsewhere now.

The onions make my eyes water.

- *Chop the chicken.*

THAT WAS how it was for my mother, Nani to my darling Sunaina. But I'd left all that behind when I left the land of my birth. My child grew up in a different world, a world where she'd pick her own spouse, make her own home, where she wouldn't be taken from me.

- *Arrange the spices.*

SHE WAS bright-eyed and eager almost from birth. She was an explorer, a risk-taker, which to a mother is both joyous and terrifying.

- *Caramelize the onions as the layer of oil shimmers in the pan.*

PRESCHOOL. Grade school. College. Her inquiring mind was drawn to the sciences. She worked summers at the hydroponic farm, growing foods we couldn't get otherwise. Then her eyes sought wider horizons and larger projects. More college, the Academy, and she joined the terraforming group.

- *Add the coriander powder, the cumin powder, the turmeric, the ginger and the garlic, and sauté until fragrant.*

BIDAAI KI CHICKEN CURRY

SOME PEOPLE BLEND the curry to make it smooth, but that's not how Sunaina likes it. Outside my kitchen window, a rocket takes off with a percussive roar, standing on a massive, sudden column of flame. It's the sacred fire of this new departure.

- *Turn up the flame, add the chicken, stir until it's a little brown. Add the tomatoes, let it go back to a boil, add water and salt. Cover and simmer until the chicken is tender and the oil separates.*

TOMORROW, there'll be another rocket, and Sunaina will be on it. Going back to Earth, a shattered Earth, to start rebuilding. But tonight, I'm making her favorite chicken curry.

- *Mix a little garam masala into a spoonful of the gravy, and stir it into the curry to finish it.*

IT'S simple and tastes of the home we once had, where tomatoes and ginger and garlic weren't carefully bred in hydroponic farms on the surface of other planets. Perhaps someday her grand-daughter will grow a kitchen garden somewhere in India, when Sunaina and her team have terraformed the planet.

And there she is! My eyes are still watering from the damn onions. I wipe them on my scarf, and go open the door.



KEYAN BOWES IS a peripatetic spec-fic author, currently to be found somewhere on the West Coast of the US. She writes when inspiration bites her in the ankle, and organizes various spec-fic

KEYAN BOWES

things – mainly virtual now, due to Covid. Her work can be found online, and on paper in a dozen anthologies and magazines. Clarion graduate, SFWA member. Website: www.Keyan-Bowes.org

WATER AND GLASS

MEGAN BAFFOE

There is nothing that we fear more than reflections. We shut our eyes tightly when the rain begins to fall, descend into showers with eye-guards on and our necks twisted rigid to keep them upright. We hide the Thames behind thick white walls, stone-faced guards baring batons at anyone approaching.

I was not old enough to understand when it happened. I remember it, though; arguments in Parliament, words on the news that sounded meaningless to me, and then the loss of my great-grandmother's antique crystal glasses, so precious I had not yet been allowed to drink from them. Men followed my father into the house and put on gloves and retrieved an old box from a safe that I now think must have contained a real, actual mirror.

And, still London cannot forget the existence of mirrors; although it voted to have them destroyed, although it locked them up in safes. We have done what we can. But still, the fear persists, ticking and tutting like a clock: all last night the rain tapped its fingers impatiently on the wooden windows as if to say *wake up, wake up, we are here*. The sound makes us start; it

reminds us of what could happen if we accidentally caught our own eyes in a drop.

The mirrors scare us so because they have left their people behind.

Walking through the streets, you can see them – the mirror-people – like you can see pink on yellow. There is a woman with fox paws and eyes that are gold with veins in them like cobwebs, and she is tolerated even in the most “us” areas of London because she can always tell you where the accidents are and where the traffic is. She eats sausage rolls at midday, always with a strong-boned man with gleaming hair: he wears it in a braid, one strand bronze, the other silver, and the last gold. When I was younger, Aunt Edith would take me to the bakery they bought from too. The first time I saw him, I was barely four, and so fascinated by his hair that I reached out.

He chuckled and let me clasp hold of it. It was Aunt Edith that took my hand away.

Sometimes, I see him take a pair of shears and cut some strands to work with. The jewellery he makes is beautiful; I find it just as captivating now as I did when I was small.

In the park where I used to play, there are three entwined trees. They have glinting ruby leaves and a woman’s face on each trunk. The faces never talked, but the branches would catch you in place if you tripped, and sometimes I was quite sure that the singing was coming from them and not the birds.



Art by Ana Niki

Our local council wanted to farm the rubies, so they said that the trees were not sentient and it was no different to

picking apples. But we knew they were (how could they look into a mirror, otherwise?) and so we held signs and marched around the park. I still have a copy of the paper, with Aunt Edith looking into the camera, and me looking at her. Her skin is coppery and her hair is blue and her clothes all black, and she does not look as if she has children or family or obligations at all; she looks eternal, timeless, like a goddess or a marble statue. My hair was in frizzy plaits and my smile awkward and I always feel that we have never looked related, but I do like to think that we had a similar gleam in our eye.

When the council agreed to leave the park alone, the third tree-woman gave Aunt Edith a ruby, and Aunt Edith gave it to me. For a while I just kept it in my pocket, because whenever my mother took me to a jeweller to try and have it set, it shied away from tools like a frightened animal. But I had a quiet hunch that the strong-boned man with the metal hair would be able to fit it for me, and I was right.

I wear it all the time now. I have to keep it under my shirt, though, because my parents don't talk to her anymore, and I am expected to follow them.



THEY STOPPED TALKING to Aunt Edith after her most recent photo project. It began at the very same playground; in fact, it must have been a matter of months. The other adults were all looking sideways because there were centaur foals in the swings. The tree women were thrusting their branches back and forth to swing them, and a brave little girl sitting next to them besides.

'Amanda,' her mother hissed, and Amanda went to play on the climbing frame.

I remember feeling immensely proud that Aunt Edith did not hiss or tut or shy away. She walked forward and politely

asked if she might take some photos, please, because she had never met a centaur before and she thought this was a very beautiful scene.

We all gasped in one breath as the tree women graced her with slow, gentle nods. One girl whispered to me, 'is that your mum?'

I laid on the grass instead of answering questions or going on the roundabout, preferring to watch the centaurs. I wish I knew how to take photos like Aunt Edith did. I remember thinking that I had never seen such lovely children. It was not that they were particularly beautiful; they spoke to Aunt Edith like adults, with faces were so bright and intelligent that they seemed far more dazzling than any other children that I had seen.

Eventually, the other children left me alone, except one; a little boy with a head of curled dark hair. He sat on the grass beside me, so enraptured with the centaur foals that he didn't speak until it was time for him to leave. "I'm Tumelo," he blurted out, scrambling to his feet at his mother's insistent gestures. I smiled.

"Hello, Tumelo. My name is Clara."

After that, Aunt Edith and I went to see as many mirror-people as we could find. She took pictures of the jeweller cutting a bronze strand of hair and spinning it into a ring. When the fox-woman arrived, she took photos of them eating sausage rolls for lunch. We visited a beautiful lady who performed on the stage, in her dressing-room as she was putting on her makeup: when she applied her lipstick, she opened her mouth, and I saw that she had a fat pearl for a tongue like a little moon. She winked at me, and blew me a sticky scarlet kiss. After that, we had tea with a quiet old lady with a shaky voice and a mauve cardigan. She gave me orange squash in a china teacup and five pounds of pocket money, and I was half-sure that she wasn't

even a mirror-person until Aunt Edith asked her about her childhood and she began to talk about the Industrial Revolution. She didn't want Aunt Edith to take a picture of whatever physical difference she had, but she did agree to supply us with lots of childhood photographs, as proof that she had spent decades in the mirror-world.

Aunt Edith was good at getting them to talk. She convinced a man to wear shorts for the first time in nine years so that she could photograph his calves, both of which hosted smiling mouths with bronze teeth. He promised that they had never bitten anything but spiders. She even persuaded a man with gills – who maintained that he had never seen a mirror in his life; rather, he had had a great grand-father that no-one talked about but, if you looked closely, had webbed fingers in photographs – to let her take a picture of him filing his taxes. We took a copy of a photo of the great-grandfather too.

And there were more and more of them, all of them bound into a beautiful glossy book. Some people say it is brave; others, despise it. Aunt Edith is known across the country for her activism, now, and my parents have cut ties. So I have not seen her, since it was published; but I have a copy that my friend Leonor smuggled me. I keep it under my bed in a box with a false lid that I bought in a charity shop.



LEONOR DOES NOT KEEP her copy of Aunt Edith's book in a false box underneath her bed. It is right in the middle of the shelf above her desk, and she even has her favourite photograph from the collection printed and stuck on her door. It's of a woman with rainbow-coloured veins, making an obscene gesture in a swimming pool shower. She wears a black bikini

that could be anyone's, and her red hair is plastered to her head and shoulders.

She reminds me of Leonor. It's not just the hair; the attitude is hers all over.

I think about how I, when I was a little girl, looked a bit like my Aunt Edith. I think about the box hidden beneath my bed. I think about complaining – it is the sort of thing Leonor would listen to me complain about – but I don't.

She would advise me to rebel, and I would have to confront that I can't. Won't. I recognise that there is a kind of joy, in the fierceness her rebellion; I think that Leonor knows it very well. There is something sacrilegious about her very movement, about the way she rolls over on the bed, turns to look me in the eye.

It is nowhere near as sacrilegious as what she says next.

'I want to see my reflection.'

I stare at her. Leonor is used to being stared at. She is all eyes and lips, one big mop of curly crimson hair like the woman in the photograph. But it's more than that. She has decided on mirrors; I can see it in her face, a face like Aunt Edith's, and I feel a quiet, shaking rage, like electric jolts along the marrow of my bones, that she receives that closeness that by blood should be mine.

'Don't be *ridiculous*.'

Leonor is beautiful, but she smiles like a gargoyle. And in that moment, she looks like a scary picture from one of Tume-lo's old books; there is something strange and ancient about her face, and in the way she leaves room. I don't even try to stop her, not even when I hear the first jolt of running water.

I feel furious, though. More than I ever have before.

How *dare* she?

The thought resonates, over and over in my head like a

clanging bell, until I feel almost sick. It feels like anxiety has stuck its feet in my lungs.

I know that Leonor's parents haven't had the money to refurbish their bathroom; it's not a drain shower, not a shower even. It's a *bath*. I imagine the water, stretching across the tub like a silvery film, a false face of hers lying across it like curled orange peel. Her meeting her own eyes and vanishing forever to a world that no-one knows; she will be without me, without anyone or anything that she knows.

It is silent in the bathroom.

Thanks to people like Aunt Edith, there *are* emerging accounts of what the mirror-world is like; but they are destroyed almost as quickly as they are published, and so much of the information is false that nothing is really verifiable. Nobody understands what makes the mirror-people as different as they are; we have no knowledge of their laws or customs, or how people find their way back. To look at your reflection is to cast your fate to the wind.

What *will* her mother say? Her mother makes my mother sniff, but surely even she will mourn this; this cold, miserable half-drowning, this lonely and self-inflicted entrance into an undetermined and unspecified afterlife. The families of those taken by the mirrors can never mourn, only waste away with hope that their loved one will return in time.

I am so caught up in Leonor's supposed death that it barely occurs to me to check on her.

And then I hear her laughing, laughing like a witch, and I throw open the bathroom door.

She is wearing her eye-guard. Fury and relief crash into me like some hypothetical wave.

'I *hate* you.'

She tilts her head; when she speaks, her voice is odd.

‘Weren’t you proud of me, though? Or jealous. When you thought I had gone.’

I say nothing. She pushes. ‘Why did you open the door? Were you going to follow me?’

‘No,’ I say, and the anger has made my voice raspy. ‘I was getting ready to *grieve* for you.’

She says nothing.

‘How could you ever think that I would follow you?’ I ask, tears of frustration beginning to prick my eyes. Suddenly, I don’t know who I’m reprimanding.

Again, she does not answer me.



IT IS months before she brings up the mirrors again. In fact, it is Tumelo that mentions them first. I wonder later if she has spoken to him.

His house is warm and comfortable and his parents always seem to have something cooking. We hug in greeting – all his family hug – and he takes the opportunity to murmur low, so neither of his parents hear.

‘I’ve got a new one.’

I nod. I make small talk with his parents, first – about mine, about how my mum’s doing at her new job, about my parents’ remodelled kitchen. But it’s *how’s school*, that they ask the most, *how are you doing in your lessons*. Tumelo’s parents were not born in London; it is a place of opportunity, his father says, and you cannot waste it.

Tumelo says that people are not so afraid of reflections where he comes from. You mourn, of course; you mourn the cook who stares too long at the metal pot, the little girl who waded too far into the river. But it is the loss you mourn, not the person; he says there is a song, back home, that says the

unhappy go, but the happy will come back. His voice always catches on a phantom tune, when he says it; Leonor has taken to humming it – has even broached, on some occasions, learning his language. Tumelo says she should ask his parents; he doesn't know how to speak it.

I'm not surprised, when he finally asks me.

'We should be able to see the Thames,' he says, 'shouldn't we?'

And – because he's right, because I do not envy him like I do Leonor – I cannot swallow my treason down.

'Yes,' I say. 'Yes, I want to see the Thames.'



AS SOON AS IT ESCAPES, I know I shouldn't have said it. There is nothing we fear more than reflections.



TUMELO AND LEONOR argue about glass and water for months. He rambles on about how water might look until his eyes are glassy; she says she wants a *real* mirror, the sharpest knife in the ribs of all. He argues back – correctly – that his way would be easier. We could leave London, he says – find some lake, some brook, where the guards are less well-trained, the walls less high. We could leap. One plunge would do it. But Leonor likes her plunges to be as deep as humanly possible.

'I don't want to jump into some paltry little lake,' she says now, stubbornly. 'If we're doing it in water, it should at *least* be the Thames.'

'We can't get into the Thames,' I say distantly, and she huffs, and they start arguing again.

The easiest way, I think, is right next door. We could leave

for the bathroom, like she did all those months ago. Neglect our eye-guards, put in the plug and stand there staring until our own eyes pull us in. But I don't say that, because I think to say it would prove, somehow, that I am lacking: that I have none of Leonor's fierceness, or Tumelo's longing.

I imagine them curling their lips, deciding to do it without me.

Then, I imagine them sighing, huffing, conceding. Tumelo would be the first – he would say *yes, that makes sense*, and then the two of them would run the bath. Taking me with them. I imagine my schoolbooks for next year unused, the whispers, the gossip; one teacher, at least, would mindlessly begin my name on the register. She'd wince at her own thoughtlessness; someone, even though I'm not very close to anyone besides Leonor and Tumelo, would surely cry. I imagine the articles, people taking pictures of our house, the police interviews. I imagine my parents enduring it all – their shame, their anger, their grief.

They'd blame Aunt Edith, I think, and that makes me feel better and worse.



IN THE END, we leave on an evidently doomed compromise – a futile outing, to “scout” the Thames. The only one that had any faith in it at all was Leonor. Eventually, even she has to admit defeat; the walls stretch as high as the Tower of Babylon must have been, blank and staring, and there is a guard every five feet. They stand as straight and still as Beefeaters. There is, as we knew, no chance: but she descends on her own footsteps with the fury of a newly woken giant, hissing under her breath like a tea-kettle.

Her shoes clang against the metal bars of the drains. Combat boots, black. Like the ones Aunt Edith used to wear.

‘We could go shopping,’ Tumelo suggests, although his own voice is pitched low. ‘I’ve heard of another shop,’ he adds. ‘You know, the kind of one I like to get my books from.’

‘I’m tired of books,’ says Leonor, her face all painted in shades of fury. White and red. ‘I’m tired of books about people who can do things that I can’t.’

I would have snapped at her. But Tumelo rarely snaps.

‘We can do what we read,’ he says instead. His tone is mild, although I can tell he is irritated – Tumelo is protective of nothing if not his library. ‘Not the Thames, sure – but we knew that. Lots of the poems talk about specific lakes.’ His eyes have taken on the strange sheen again. ‘I’d like to look at a lake from a poem.’

‘Some of them barely have guards, I know,’ I offer quietly. ‘Me and my parents went on a trip up the coast. Just walls, and a security person up front. We could get in.’

Tumelo looks at her appealingly. Leonor twists her face and tosses back her hair, looking like an angry horse. But she spits out a ‘fine’, and I know the shine behind her eyes won’t keep her away for long.

Tumelo’s shop is hidden away in quiet backstreets as they always are; the type of backstreets which mirror people – particularly the ones more likely to be perceived as dangerous or unnerving – frequent more often. We pass one woman, wrapped thinly in a dingy dressing gown; her skin is rough and textured like a snake’s, and when she spits the dregs of her cigarette on the ground, the liquid curdles and hisses like fire. There is a man with lips that pull forward and grey, leathery skin; a muscular person with feathered hair and three rows of teeth; a woman with red, curved claws and blinking eyes that cover her body like sores.

Each eye blinks twice at the sight of us, and she turns her head ever so slightly.

Her face is pretty.

'It's dangerous for you here,' she says, and I can't tell if it's a warning or a threat.

None of us reply; Leonor tosses her hair again, but thankfully does not say anything. She isn't afraid, though: she walks just as confidently as before, talks just as loudly, exasperatedly takes Tumelo's phone for him when his map app confuses him. I see some of them relax, when their eyes catch onto her: their eyes linger over her covered arms, long trousers.

They think she might be a mirror-person, I realise, and then I want to scream.

I don't, of course. I simply ask where we are. I try to talk as brashly as she does, but it doesn't work.

'I think the shop's near here,' says Tumelo, his dark eyes flitting back. He, at least, looks nervous. I don't think that even he could romanticise being clawed to death in a London back-alley street.

'We'd already be there if you could read a map properly,' Leonor scoffs in reply, and then they are bickering back and forth – at least, as much as two people can without drawing attention to themselves. I simply stare – my mother would have a fit if she knew I was here, surrounded by peeling houses and littered porches and overflowing bins. Two children, to my left, are playing some kind of complicated skipping game. I try and count how many legs they have between them: fifteen, I count the first time, eighteen, the next. A curly-haired woman is taking on a similarly complex knitting pattern on the doorstep, watching them play with fondness. She has tentacles for limbs, which she frequently swills in a bucket she has positioned next to her.

I wonder how much she longs for water. I wonder how

many communities like this there are, how many Tumelo has frequented in his quest for forbidden volumes.

And then, I wonder how he could have missed that books never simply *exist*. Poets write about rivers because they have seen them. The shop's shelves are stacked with volume after volume on reflections; surely, they would have access to at least one?

I swallow the thought down for the walk.



IT DOES NOT STAY DOWN in the shop.

The shopkeeper is small and hunched over, with his thick bones casting imprints against his grey, leathery skin. His eyes are dark and small and rest on me for barely a moment. He is far more attentive with the others; showing Tumelo to a shaky bookshelf, recommending Leonor prints.

I don't feel present. I have none of his longing, none of her fire, and the lack of conviction scalds me.

I find myself next to Leonor. She is flicking through aged transcripts, men arguing about converting the paving to drains. When she looks up at me her eyes are bright, the rage of the morning forgotten.

'This place has *everything*,' she says, casting an envious eye back at the shopkeeper. She flips them back to check the price. 'I wish I could buy more.'

'Everything,' I repeat back at her. And she catches my meaning – of course she would – and I think it's worth it, when her eyes burn like that. Even if they are burning for the prospect of mirrors, and not for me.

It's worth it, to think I can set fires, even if I can't feel them.



THIS PARTICULAR FLAME does not turn out to be hot. The shopkeeper spits and swears and flatly denies owning any mirrors. He forces a civil tone when Leonor asks if she can still buy the transcript, but his eyes remain narrowed and suspicious, and he closes the door behind us with a snap.

Tumelo scowls at us both, put out that I didn't share my revelation with him.

'Sorry,' I offer.

'He had great stuff,' he complains. 'And now we probably can't go there again.'

Leonor huffs. 'It would have been worth it if he *had* had one, don't you think?'

'I bet he did,' I say, and that surprises Tumelo so much that he doesn't argue. 'That's a whole different offence to just books. He can't just tell anyone who comes into the shop first time that he sells mirrors.'

Leonor nods, excited again. She turns to Tumelo. 'And with all of your books – there must be owners that you know, right? Owners that trust you and won't worry that you'll rat them out.'

He grins, and nods, they're both so happy – I've *made* them both so happy – that they don't even fight about how to get there.



WE VISIT four shops before we find an owner that's willing. She's a dark-haired woman with an extremely long, curved neck that makes her look like a bird. She greets Tumelo by name, and nods at Leonor with some form of recognition.

Her eyes gloss over me, and it is that more than anything that quells the rising nausea in my stomach.

When Tumelo makes our request, she is very still and very

quiet, but she jerks her head in assent. She mutters shallow warnings under her breath, but says none of them loud enough for even Leonor to argue. She leads us into another room, opens up a back cupboard.

It has a false bottom.

‘Have you made preparations?’ she asks.

‘Preparations?’ I repeat blankly. She looks at me closely for the first time.

‘Time will pass before you return,’ she says, in the kind of voice that suggests I should know this already. She is tapping her nails on her desk; I realise, with a jolt, that her fingers are bristled, covered all over with short, sparse hairs like some kind of sea creature. ‘Surely you want to say goodbyes?’

‘If we say goodbye, won’t they try and stop us?’ asks Leonor. Her voice is hot. ‘No. I want to go now.’

The woman just smiles. ‘I meant a goodbye in not so many words.’

Tumelo’s eyes are solemn. ‘You said we’ll come back?’

‘It may take a long time.’

‘I don’t ever want to come back,’ Leonor says roughly.

The woman smiles, again.

‘I think the mirror will take *you*, indeed.’

Tumelo swallows. ‘I – I want the mirror to take me too.’ He nods. ‘Fine. Today.’

The bird-woman nods, then turns to look at me.

‘And you? Do you want to go home?’

I think about what *a long time* means.

Nothing, really. It could be years. Years and years and I’d have to turn up at my parents door and explain to them why I left, left without even a goodbye *in so many words*. I think about my classmates taking their exams and going to university and joining the workforce, and me without a qualification to my

name; twenty-something, thirty-something, *forty*-something and having to restart school again.

It could be even longer. I could come back and find that my whole family is dead. I feel a little dizzy. So much can change in a day, and that is beautiful and horrifying at the same time.

In the end, it is the fact that I can find no peace in leaving that drives me to leave.

The bird-woman gives me a strange, assessing look, and I am terrified that she will tell me no. *No*, a voice in my head says, *no, little girl, I don't even know why you're here.*

But she doesn't. She beckons us all forward, and flips open the false bottom. It, itself, is the mirror.

I meet my own eyes, and then there is light shining.



IT FADES. It fades, and then I see Leonor. She, too, is fading; her vibrant hair is curling in on itself, reforming into something soft and supple like falling water.

When she opens her eyes, her eyes are nothing; her sockets, lumps of pure silver.

My stomach lurches. I gasp in shock, step backwards; my eyes hurt, my skin is itchy, my lips are hot. Something curls around my leg.

Someone. Tumelo. He lies flat on the ground, eyes closed; moss is forming from his skin, his fingers are cracking and snapping into twigs, branches, emerald leaves. I remember the women in the park, the ones that could not speak, but always caught me.

I breathe out.

'Look at you,' Leonor breathes, and now her hair really is *water*, soft and supple, catching the light. It streams from her

scalp in an ever-flowing river, her black turtleneck already soaked, but she doesn't seem upset.

The look on her face is something religious. I stare, again, at her empty eyes.

'Can you see me?' I ask, and then wince at my own tactlessness. Leonor has never cared much for tact. She only laughs.

'Yes,' she says, 'it's like I can see clearer than ever.' She smiles, and I think it is less wicked; perhaps, because it is so joyful.

'We're made to be friends, you and I.'

She turns so I can see myself in her hair. The reflection in the water is shaking and distorted, not clear like it was in the mirror, but I can see myself well enough. At first, I don't know what is wrong; then I open my mouth to speak, and I see.

My lips *burn*. It is flame, pure flame, when I speak; when I bend down to touch Tumelo, a shot of fire strikes from my fingertips, so that he jumps indignantly.

'I'm flammable now, you know,' he jokes. I see that his tongue is crawled all over with veins, like the ones you might see on a leaf.

'You were before,' I say, still embarrassed, and Leonor laughs and spins, soaking us both with bright water. When she does that, her new hair catches the sunlight; it looks, for a moment, red again.

'I can remember before so much more clearly,' she says dreamily. 'I felt so strongly, like I'd love it here, like I'd hate to go back.'

'Do you still?'

She slumps on the ground next to Tumelo; he lays a mossy forearm in the pool of water appreciatively.

'I don't know,' she says; when she smiles again, there is something of her old self in it. 'How about you?'

I open my mouth – a flame hisses, and then dies – and then

close it again. I feel oddly free, slightly overwrought – I have it, now, that fire I've desired all my life. I've been given it.

I've *found* it. In my own reflection.

'Clara?'

I look out. The mirror-world's grass is like our own, but a stream runs freely through the meadow. I am living in a new horizon. I can learn to be a new Clara, to the sound of the rustling water.

'I think the mirrors will take us back when we're ready.'



MEGAN BAFFOE IS AN EMERGING freelance writer currently pursuing English Language and Literature at Oxford University. She likes fairytales, fraught family dynamics, and unreliable narration; she does not like Twitter, but is occasionally found @meginageorge. All of her published work is available at <https://meganspublished.tumblr.com>.

ANA NIKI IS an artist from Ukraine. You can find more of her work on Behance at <https://www.behance.net/gveniveriverri/projects> or follow her on Instagram, where she is @ana.niki_art.

A SATURDAY OUT

LENA NG

“Katie,” Jessica, my wife, called out. “Can’t you ride any faster?”

I would have yelled something sassy back if I wasn’t so out of breath. Jessica was the outdoor athlete whereas I was more of a couch athlete, but they say opposites attract. She was tall and fit while I was short and curvy. On our wedding day, she had buzzed her hair in an undercut and worn a tux, while I had kept to the traditional wedding dress with dollops of lace. Today, the weather was beautiful, and she really wanted to go on a bike ride, and since she came with me to the Fellini Film Fest last weekend (which I know she secretly abhorred), I had to do something she wanted to do.

She slowed down, not to be nice, but to start razzing me. “Seriously, anything can ride faster than you. A frog on a bike. A snake on a bike”—

“Like, really? With what limbs?”

—“even a cat on a bike.”

“I object to that,” I said, between huffs. “Cats are lazy and the least likely of the three to be on a bike.”

And of course, what comes riding up from behind us, but a

chunky orange cat on a Schwinn bike, its little legs pumping like second nature. It easily overtook us.

The heck?

Jessica started laughing. "What did I say?" she said.

Right. My legs were burning, but I tried to convert my weight into power and started to pump them faster. The cat took a quick look behind, realized it was now in a race, and hunched over, putting its back into it.

There was no way I was going to let this cat ride faster than me, so I cheated and turned on the bike's secret motor. Soon I whizzed past everyone, the cat and Jessica. "Take that," I crowed.

The cat narrowed its yellow eyes and gave me a look that clearly said, 'So that's the game you want to play.' It reached down to the aluminum frame, flicked something on with its paws, and flames shot out from behind the bike. The cat's bike flew past me, using the road as a runway, and shot off into the atmosphere.



Art by Julia Kim

I had to stop at that. When Jessica caught up, I said, “Stupid cheating cat.”

Jessica reached into her pack and brought out two helmets with oxygen canisters to be worn over the shoulders. “I was meaning to tell you.”

“When did you get this?”

“Last week at the bike show.” That’s what happens when you have separate bank accounts, but I couldn’t say anything since she’s pretty responsible in other ways.

“What about my bike?”

“We’ll come back for it.”

So I slung a leg behind Jessica, and she flicked a switch on her bike, and we went zooming through the atmosphere into the cosmos. Since Jessica had bought the latest model, we easily overtook the cat who shook a furry paw at us. It must have put its helmet on after it broke through the clouds.

Then I said I wanted to have a go, so through some acrobatic moves, we switched places. Jessica is a terrible back-seat driver so she was like, “Look out, we’re flying directly into the sun.”

And I was like, “That’s nonsense, the sun is 1.58×10^{-5} light years away, and why don’t we visit Venus, the planet for women?”

And she said we didn’t have enough fuel for that, but maybe next year we’ll upgrade if I chip in, so we returned to earth. I picked up my bike, and when we got home, we tried to work out a new budget without fighting.



LENA NG LIVES IN TORONTO, Canada. Her short stories have appeared in eighty publications including *Amazing Stories* and *Flame Tree’s Asian Ghost Stories* and *Weird Horror Stories*. Her stories have been performed for podcasts such as *Gallery of Curiosities*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, *Love Letters to Poe*, and *Horri-fying Tales of Wonder*. *Under an Autumn Moon* is her short story collection.

JULIA KIM IS ON instagram as mulanartist. She says, “I’m from Mykolaiv, Ukraine. I love to create cute little designs that help me to donate to charity organisations of Ukraine.”

WHAT IT TAKES TO STAY WILD

DIE BOOTH

One time, I met this old lady at a bus stop. It was raining. The sheets of water turned the glass grey, like a dirty shower curtain, streaming. The bus was late. I sat beside her on the plastic shelter seat and steamed. Each car that sluiced past sent up a little tidal wave and I felt myself sinking, this flailing feeling in my chest as I tried to stay afloat.

The old lady – she had a clear plastic raincoat, and one of those shopping bags on wheels, a tartan one – she smiled at me. Her eyes were faded grey as the rain, but kind. Patting the spot above her heart, she said, “We all have a bird inside. When you feel it flutter, that means it wants to come out – it’s frightened, or it’s happy, or it just wants to fly.” I felt, for a moment, more afraid. Like she could see through me, to my ribs and my heart rattling the bars of its cage. “Watch, my dear,” she said. “This is what it takes to stay wild.” She opened a door in her chest and out it flew: a little darting bird, yellow and brown and blue. It circled the frosty bus shelter dome and chirped. Perched on the Bank Holidays and Sundays timetable. She said, “Now you.”

Her plastic mac glittered, chromed cage bars swung out like

a brooch. I pressed my chin to my chest and opened the door that had always been there, I'd just never known. Out it shot, in a flurry of feathers, a released breath. The lady laughed and clapped her hands, even though it looked scared. It flapped around our heads and bounced off the safety glass roof. It stormed and panicked like the night outside, until, slowing, down it flew, settled, and stilled on my shoulder, trilling.

I was afraid to move. It was so small and bright, red-plumed and singing, tiny throat ruffling. I sat and listened. I'd forgotten to be frayed. Then the bus arrived and its headlights turned the raindrops to molten gold. The old lady stood and said, "This isn't my stop." She closed the door in her chest, her bird tucked safe inside. She said, "Even when it's cold and dark, don't forget to let your bird fly."



DIE BOOTH LIKES wild beaches and exploring dark places. When not writing, he DJs at Last Rites – the best (and only) goth club in Chester, UK. You can read his prize-winning stories in anthologies from Egaeus Press, Flame Tree Press, Neon Hemlock and Prime amongst many others. His collections 'My Glass is Runn', '365 Lies' (profits go to the MNDA) and 'Making Friends (and other fictions)' and novel 'Spirit Houses' are available online, and his cursed new novella 'Cool S' is due out in August 2022. You can find out more about his writing at <http://diebooth.wordpress.com/> or say hi on Twitter @diebooth

TREE

MARC A. CRILEY

C licks and scrapes reverberate within the heartwood-piercing strands. *What new barbarity is this?* Season upon season, ring after ring the open sores have wept black stains.

Snip, snap. Snip, snap.

Snip, snap. Snip, snap.

Again.

Again.

Sizzling. Hissing. The barbed violations, deeply ingrained, abruptly crumble. Pain evaporates – now nought but callused perforations.

What is happening?

A healing touch on rough bark – the warm resin of the sapling. New growth remembered ... the first, tender shoot.

Knots unclench, split rings heal. Leaves unfurl in the warm sun. Transpiration calls, fresh sap ascends through bough and branch.

A sigh of renewal shimmers root to crown.

TREE



Art by Andrew Turok



CONTENT NOTES

“Wheat Fields on Fire” by Lesia Korol discusses the war in Ukraine.

“Fencepost” and “Tree” by Marc A. Criley depict a tree that is injured and distressed.

“Bidaii ki Chicken Curry” by Keyan Bowes alludes to Earth being uninhabitable due to human actions and also to grown children leaving their home and family permanently.

“Water and Glass” by Megan Baffoe discusses and depicts prejudice, specifically around body modification, and also contains a scene where a character believes another character may be committing self harm.

“A Saturday Out” by Lena Ng discusses and depicts exercise and whether or not a person is fit.

“What It Takes to Stay Wild” by Die Booth features anxiety.

