



WORLDS OF POSSIBILITY

VOLUME 2

EDITED BY JULIA RIOS

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this volume of hopeful, soothing, and uplifting science fiction and fantasy stories. I started *Worlds of Possibility* at a time when I really needed to read hopeful things. Over the past few years, it's been a joy to read and edit so many lovely pieces, and to commission original artwork for some of them.

The cover art for this volume is by one of the most frequent artistic contributors to this project, Julia Kim. I first commissioned her in 2022 to make an illustration of a cat riding a rocket bike. This was an illustration for Lena Ng's story "A Saturday Out" in the August 2022 issue of the magazine — the very first full issue. That illustration became the cover art for the issue, and it was also the most popular sticker in the first *Worlds of Possibility* Kickstarter reward selection. I love it, and to this day, I have a little rocket bike cat on my water bottle!

I originally found Julia Kim by searching for Ukrainian creators because I wanted to support them as much as I could

in the early days of the war. Over the past few years, my pool has broadened to include artists from all over the world, but I also continue to commission Ukrainian artists, and I keep coming back to commission more work from Julia Kim because she has such a fun and cute style. In this volume, you'll find two more stories by Lena Ng, both featuring the same characters, including Philip, the orange cat. Of course I had to have Julia Kim illustrate them, too! She's also done illustrations of full scenes for "Inherited Shadows" by Wen Wen Yang (this was also the cover for the October 2023 issue of the magazine), and "Happiness Is _____" by Rodrigo Culagovski. It seemed just right to ask her to create cover art for this volume as well.

The other two books in this series, *Worlds of Possibility* and *Worlds of Possibility —Poetry*, have cover art by two wonderful artists, Grace P. Fong and Grace Chadwick. Both of them chose to represent the idea of *Worlds of Possibility* by having a human(ish) figure reaching out toward different possible worlds or ideas. For this volume, I asked Julia Kim to take that same theme and change the possibilities a little. Instead of bubbles or planets, I asked for three things that come up multiple times in this volume: a dragon, a rocket, and a cat. I love how this one came out, and I hope you will find it, and the volume it illustrates, as delightful as I do.

In this book, you will find short stories at a variety of lengths from very short flash and 100 word drabbles to longer shorts that you might settle into for a little bit. They represent twelve issues of the magazine, from August 2023 to June of 2025. I have sorted the stories into loosely themed groups, as I've done for the other volumes in this series. You can read them in order, or dip in and out according to your whims! All the art that was commissioned for these stories is credited at the end of each individual story. If you see uncredited art, it is

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

stock art that I personally curated and/or used to create a design. I am a big fan of human creativity, and to the best of my knowledge I do not use AI.

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 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

PART ONE
HOME

CHILD AND THE BOCWYRM

JOSHUA GAGE

Short story: 3,400 words

For Rowan

The child stared up at the cloudy golden eyes, bowed respectfully, and recited the speech they had practiced over and over while traveling. “Greetings, Oh Bocwurm, Speaker of Languages, Keeper of Knowledge, Namer of Objects Known and Unknown, from Mistress Elderave, Servantsmith of Oceangrove. I beg a boon from you. I was gifted this text, but can neither read nor name it. In exchange for your translation, I offer the services of this child, who is well-skilled in all domestic arts and has shown a particular aptitude for languages. We shall consider this accord sealed upon completion of the task in the usual agreements between our peoples.”

The child held the ancient codex aloft. It was a heavy text, almost the length of their arm, bound in a thick bumpy leather, and sealed with a silver lock adorned with turquoise stones.

Beyond that, there was no indication of the tome's title or contents.

The Bocwurm slithered forth, its serpentine body towering twice as tall as Child, and its tail nearly twice that twisting back through the mammoth doors of the library. It plucked the book out of the child's hands and inspected it closely. Its talons glistened razor-black in the afternoon sun, but it handled the book with great care and tenderness, inspecting it almost like a parent inspecting a fallen toddler for any cuts or bruises after a fall. It held out one moon-white, scaled hand and said, "Key."

Child bowed politely again and recited, "Oh Bocwurm, Speaker of Languages, Keeper of Knowledge, Namer of Objects Known and Unknown, the book came with no key. Mistress Elderave instructed me to tell you that no metalsmith of Oceangrove could fashion a key to open the lock, nor could the spellsmiths determine how the silver was spelled shut. I have been sent with this tome to serve you in the hopes that you can name and translate this book."

The Bocwurm stroked the strands of its wispy white beard and said, "Servantsmith Elderave. Servantsmith means that you are parentless?"

The child nodded.

"And you know your way around a kitchen and cleaning cupboard, I'm sure. Elderave would send no less. But languages ... tell me, what languages do you speak?"

The child began twisting their fingers one around another, knotting and unknotting their knuckles against each other in nervousness. They responded in a rote monotone, "Oh Bocwurm, Speaker of Languages, Keeper of Knowledge, Namer of Objects Known and Unknown, I can read and write both the Universal tongue and most known special variants, as well as Draconic and Lupinic, and am conversational in Avianic."



“And what is your name?” the Bocwyrn asked absently, still focused on the book in their hands.

The child faltered and began to glance around in a panic. Their fingers twitched and fidgeted while they stammered

through a spontaneous response. “Please, Oh Bocwyrn, Speaker of Languages, Keeper of Knowledge, Namer of Objects Known and Unknown, I have no name. I am called Child. That is what I am.”

“And my name is unpronounceable by human tongues, but I can not have you rattling off my full titles every time we speak, so you may refer to me as Hierde, for that is what I am. I accept this accord in the usual agreements between our people. Follow me.” With that, The Bocwyrn snaked its body in a tight circle around child and slithered back through the ancient oak doors of the library.

The hallway was tall enough for them to move side by side with feet of room on all sides, and lined with heavy wooden doors marked with brass plates. Glass skylights lit the hallway, so that the whole atmosphere was one of ancient coziness. Child tried hard to focus on what Hierde was saying as they were led through the great library, but the glint of light off the brass plates and the promise of countless books behind the doors was almost too distracting to concentrate. Child bounced and shuffled excitedly, eyes darting back and forth between Hierde’s face and the doors.

Hierde sighed and said, “I see that we could be surrounded by unspeakable horrors with slathering fangs and tentacles, and you wouldn’t be aware of the impending doom until you’ve seen them. Very well. There are fifty-two doors in this hallway. You may choose one to sate your curiosity, and then we will explore your rooms and the kitchens where you’ll be working.”

Hierde gestured meticulously with a bemused smirk on their face, and Child immediately scampered further down the hallway, eyes scanning the letters on the doorplates, only to point at a specific door and say, “This one, please.”

With a magical gesture, Hierde unlocked the door and

pulled it open. The room was a chaos of books and shelves, scrolls and statues. Child wandered through, eyes wide in awe, fingers tracing along the shelves. They seemed to be overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the space, drifting aimlessly through the stacks and shelves of books, but then they stopped suddenly, stood on their tiptoes to reach a small green volume, and flipped to the last few pages. They sat cross legged on the floor, eagerly devouring the words, until they were finished. Then they stood up, slid the book back into place, and bowed to Hierde.

“Thank you.”

“That is all?”

“Yes, Hierde. There was a copy of that story at the convent. Not in the Draconic, but the Universal translation. The last few pages and the back cover had been burned in a grease fire when the cook was roasting a suckling pig and had used it to prop up a pan of turnips. I just wanted a chance to see how it ended before my work began. Thank you.” Child’s speech was fast and choppy, and they struggled to make eye contact, but there was no lie in their words, and Hierde knew it.

“Well, I’m glad you were able to read the story. Please make sure to return it to its proper place next time, though. I do like my things in order.”

Child went to say something, stammered, shuffled their feet nervously, and simply nodded, almost embarrassed, and painfully put the book back in its original place. They followed Hierde back towards the door, constantly looking anxiously over their shoulder at the book until Hierde turned and growled a puff of smoke out their nostrils.

“You have seen part of The Great Northern Bochord, child. You have read a book of your choosing. Yet still you linger. What more could possibly distract you?”

Child stammered out a reply in what Hierde had deter-

mined was simply their standard rhythmic monotone, "I am not trying to be rude, nor would I presume to tell you what to do with your own library, of course, only the book was misshelved due to the use of the secondary article in the Draconic which, unfortunately, gets dropped in the Universal translation." They knotted and unknotted their fingers, glancing back and forth between the floor and the ceiling.

Hierde exhaled deeply, sending another small puff of smoke out their nostrils, and said, "Come with me." They then slithered back to the shelf where Child had plucked the book originally. When Child caught up with them, they pointed at the shelf, cocking one frosty eyebrow, and said, "Show me how you would organize this shelf."

Child pursed their lips and quickly rearranged the books, pulling them out and shuffling them back into place, all while humming softly under their breath. It was a matter of minutes for them to put the books into an order that they felt comfortable with, and once they finished, they turned and bobbed at Hierde. "That's how it would be in the Draconic. That's how I would do it."

Before Hierde could say anything, Child began pulling out the books and rearranging them again, taking half the time, only to say, "That's how they were. Because Universal only has two articles, and Draconic the six."

"I want to make sure I understand exactly what I just observed, so please be absolutely honest. You remembered a damaged book from some kitchen in Oceangrove so well that you knew exactly where in the Great Northern Bochord to locate it and finish reading it. Then you arranged the books on the shelf by Draconic, as would befit a Bocwyrms' library, and then rearrange them based on the Universal translations of the Draconic in which they had originally been shelved. Is this correct?"

“Yes. I’m sorry. Did I do something wrong?”

Hierde chuckled and held up the nameless book. “I believe I understand now why Mistress Elderave chose you to bear this particular bounty. Let us not waste your particular talents in a kitchen. This room was that of your choosing. Let us get you settled and comfortable into servant’s quarters, and then your task will be to arrange The Great Northern Bochord by Draconic.”

“Really?” gasped Child excitedly, bouncing back and forth on their feet.

“Arranging books pleases you?”

“Oh yes. I like it when things are in order. It helps things feel more quiet.”

“Well, what place is more befitting quiet than a library? Come. Let us find your room and then, once you’ve settled in, we’ll have you help the books stay quiet.”

The next morning, Child went to work arranging the books while Hierde tucked themselves away in a corner somewhere, researching spells and magical solutions to solve the mystery of the nameless book of Mistress Elderave. What started as a plan of common sense and necessity soon grew into a pattern of comfort and routine. Child would arrange books throughout the day while Hierde read and studied. Over supper, they would discuss what room Child was arranging currently and what books Hierde recommended in that room. In the evenings, they would drink tea and read together in front of a fire in one of the many cozy studies hidden throughout the library.

Occasionally, Child would take a day off to explore the environs around the library. There was a small dock that led out to a private lighthouse where the library would occasionally receive deliveries, and often Child would sit there, reading in the salty breeze until sunset. Other days, they would wander

the wild fields and the edge of the forest that separated the library from not only Oceangrove but the rest of the northern citadels. Here they would gather frail herbs and small flowers, which they would tend in ceramic pots in the windowsills of the library until each one was flush and verdant.

By the end of the year, Child had arranged the entirety of the library, and Hierde had arranged a small party to celebrate with Lupinic sweets and Avianic summer berry cordial. It was an evening of thick luxury that swaddled both of them into heavy dreams. In the morning, however, Hierde was stern, almost panicked, and frantically slithering back and forth outside the door as soon as Child awoke.

“Follow me,” they said, spiraling Child protectively before slinking away. With Child close behind, they twisted along the dark stone labyrinth of the library beneath the glow of dawn slicing from the skylights. They burst through a doorway tucked behind a giant decorative pillar, up a worn flight of stairs, and into wide, sunlit room strewn sloppily with ancient books and codices, scrolls and statues.

The Bocwurm spread its arms wide and said, “Welcome, Child, to the Room of Things Unnamed. It is here I have spent all of last year painfully working to discover what tome Mistress Elderave sent me. I have not finished my research, but I cannot ask you to rearrange that which you have already magnificently arranged, so now I task you with helping me to expand the library. These books come to us on boats to the lighthouse port, as you know, and many I have read and named. Some texts which once were thought lost have been discovered here, and some texts which exist only in the Great Northern Bochord were found in this way. If I am going to continue to puzzle over this mystery of Mistress Elderave, I will certainly be getting more use out of her child.”

“You think me worthy to help in naming the tales unnamed?”

“Child, you are fluent in thirteen dialects of Universal, seven of Draconic, four of Avian, and all four of Lupinic. You translate almost instantaneously between them. Three of those languages are no longer spoken, and one exists only in this library, so I know for a fact that you learned it simply by reading books and shelving them. Yes, Child, I judge you to be worthy of reading the tales unnamed and giving them titles. Choose a text, read it, find its place in the hoard, and give it a name if it doesn’t already have one.”

That was all that needed to be said. Child, without question, idly grabbed the nearest book, found a comfortable spot on the floor, and began to read. Hierde smirked, gathered a few tomes in their arms, and slithered off. When they returned with a tray of tea and assorted biscuits, there were multiple stacks of books in various piles surrounding Child, who began speaking without lifting their eye from the page.

“I’ve sorted these books into various rooms in the library, but most of them we have. I was able to find a small volume of Lupinic poetry that I had never read before, and will have to investigate that further with some cross referencing, but beyond that, most of these are books we already own, and they just had their cover replaced or similar. There’s nothing extremely rare or valuable here.”

“We do not serve profits, merely the accumulation of knowledge. Our library is a place where we house all wisdom and history, known and unknown. Therefore, any book, known and unknown, will find a name and a place among our Bochord or be given a home elsewhere. Study that text, but in the meantime, give me your hand.”

Child held out their hand and Hierde took it and placed it on the first stack of books, the stack that Child identified as

known. Hierde whispered a short spell under their breath, and Child felt a tingle bubble warmly through their arm and into the books. When they opened their eyes, all the books had been titled, with neat letters gilded into the rich leather of covers.

“Enjoy your tea, but be sure to get back to work,” they said, then slinked off, leaving Child to stare at their hand and the powerful magic that had bubbled beneath their skin. They continued to stare, feeling the magic soften across and beneath their skin, almost like they were floating in a cozy bubble bath.

By the time Hierde returned in the evening, there were at least a dozen stacks of books, all with gilt letters, including one small stack of books that had obviously been set aside with purpose. Before they could say anything, Child pointed, indicating the various piles accordingly. “Those we already have and should give away to spread knowledge or, perhaps, in exchange for knowledge we do not already own. Those over here we have a version of, but these are alternate translations or versions, and would serve as cross reference. These are brand new. Some I didn’t know the name of, and I hadn’t even heard about or read about, but the magic seemed to know the name, bubbling up within me almost as soon as I read the words.”

The Bocwyrn slipped forward and examined the piles carefully, nodding their approval. “The magic works like that, sometimes. There are times when the titles come with reading, or with speaking aloud, or even when they’re translated correctly. There are many ways the magic works, but it is working, and that is the main thing. I’ll leave you to your own devices here while I work on other projects.”

With that, Hierde slipped off and Child read, translated, and named the books. Within weeks, the magic seemed to flow through them, and the books seemed to read and title them-

selves. By the time summer rolled around, the magic was as instinctual and a part of Child as though it were another layer of skin with which to buoy themselves safely through the world. As soon as the days fell into a rhythm, and Child began reading the books, naming them and shelving them faster than they were arriving in the dock shipments, what space was left by the books was quickly filled with pots of plants, wildflowers, and herbs. By the end of the next year, the Room of Things Unnamed was over flowering with the greenness of warm days, despite the snow tumbling outside. Again, summer treats and sweet cordial rocked Child to sleep, and as had happened the previous year, Hierde seemed uneasy in the morning.

"I have need of your skills," they said and slithered off, Child scurrying in their wake. The two of them meandered through the library, this way and that, into a bare room tucked away in a far corner. On a stone lectern in small patch of sunlight sat the bumpy, silver locked tome which Child had been sent with two years ago.

Hierde pointed at the book and said, "Two years. I have spent two years working on this project for Mistress Elderave, and I have done all that I can. It is now up to you to name this book because I cannot."

Child stepped forward, almost in awe of the book they had carried in their hands all the way to the The Great Northern Bochord on foot two years ago. The book seemed smaller, less heavy, but it was still locked. Instinctually, Child reached out with the magic, popping the lock open with ease. They began flipping through the pages of the tome, then looked up into the kind, patient eyes of Hierde and said, "I don't understand."

"The book needs a name. I have given you all the skills you need."

"But there's nothing in the book," shouted Child, "The pages are blank. How can I title a book with blank pages?"

“This book doesn’t have a title yet. It’s a blank book meant for new words. You cannot title this book without knowing its tale, and you cannot know its tale until you fill it with words.”

Child looked panicked and confused, and began rocking back and forth, shuffling nervously. “I don’t understand,” they said, over and over, until Hierde wrapped them up completely, squeezing them tightly enough to calm them down. With one great clawed hand, they cradled Child’s head until the two of them were eye to eye.

“Mistress Elderave didn’t send the book for me to name. She sent you. You are the object unknown, Child, not this book. You see, some people come with names and stories written for them. They know who they are and what they want to do and how they’re supposed to be. They have titles and texts and we can sort them how we will. Then there are some people who have a story, but no name. Those are the children whom servantsmiths place easily, children with a knack for a skill and story half written, and all they need is a name to go with it. Mistress Elderave gives them a name and good spit and polish and most of her minions find ways to survive and thrive in this world.”

Here, Hierde slid their face close to Child’s, so close that child could feel their warm, spicy breath across their cheeks. “Then there are children who have no name and cannot have a name because they have no story. They have to write their stories, discover who and what they are, and then give themselves the name that they know to be true.”

Through tears, Child looked up, and said, “I’m scared.”

“Of course you are. But I will be here to help you tell your story and I will be here to shout your true name when you discover what it is. For know this: no matter who or what you become, I will always honor you, for you will always be a child of Bocwyrms.”



JOSHUA GAGE is an ornery curmudgeon from Cleveland. He is a graduate of the Low Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing at Naropa University. He has a penchant for Pendleton shirts, Ethiopian coffee, and any poem strong enough to yank the breath out of his lungs.

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PLEASE MIND THE POLTERGEIST

TEHNUKA

Short story: 1,000 words

The first sign of haunting was the door relocking itself. “Is it broken?” asked Appa on attempt six. “Should you call Miriam?”

Such an ordinary door for a haunted house — peeling green paint, taped-over bell button.

“She’s on her flight. I’ve got it.” Vani wedged a foot between door and frame and squinted along the corridor. A decorative vase lay on its side beneath an empty picture-hook.

“I’ll unpack, you rest.”

“No, Appa. I’ll do it.” Convincing her parents she’d manage alone was hard enough without mentioning the ghost. No reason to tell them on moving day.

He returned to the car for the cooler. She leaned against the door, uncertain she had the strength to hold it open.

Appa hated night-driving. When she switched on the porch light, he lost enthusiasm for unpacking. She promised to

invite her parents over once she was settled, waved goodbye, and sat on the cooler. A clanging arose from the kitchen.

Her first night alone in a year — except she wasn't alone.

She shouldn't have agreed.

But after so long in her parents' spare bedroom, free accommodation elsewhere was a miracle, even when Miriam explained it was more ghost-sitting than house-sitting.

The metallic noises stopped. A gust rattled the doors.

Miriam knew she'd hated moving back to her parents'. Miriam was also about start the fieldwork that had been allotted to Vani, roaming the mountains, sleeping in a tent.... Her gratitude conflicted with envy.

"You'd just be monitoring breakages," Miriam had said on the phone. It was the first they'd spoken since Vani's farewell party, a year earlier. "Sort any urgent repairs, so it's livable when I return."

"Does it break much?"

"The mischief mostly happens when I'm out. I don't think it needs me, specifically. It's probably frustrated, being tied to the house. Having someone who's home more might help."

The hallway light flickered out.

"Oh, come on!"

She needed to eat, unpack her pyjamas, and find her room. She couldn't exhaust herself — crying could wait until she was in bed.

She pushed the cooler towards the sound of water. The kitchen glowed yellow in lights she hadn't turned on. She found dinner in a lunchbox in the cooler, along with vegetables for a week. Appa had included a napkin-wrapped fork.

When she opened the lunchbox, the lid whipped out of her hand and splashed into the rapidly-filling sink.

"Please don't." She gripped the box, eyes filling. Her fingers

ached. “Throw Miriam’s stuff. She said you would. I’m too tired for this.”

The lid returned, spinning like a frisbee, and landed beside her elbow.



NEXT MORNING, she re-fastened the bathroom window she hadn't opened, gathered plate-fragments around the house, then had a nice, hot shower to ease her muscles.

She should have known better. There wasn't even time to rinse out Miriam's shampoo before, vision fading, she crawled onto the floor and flopped on her back. The floral stink in her hair made her nose itch.

So much steam. Shouldn't have closed that window.

A clatter.

She pushed herself up to see spaces in the condensation on the mirror.

They read: *RU OK*

“Uh ... yeah. Low blood pressure.”

Her toothbrush floated up, scraping against the mirror.

“You really don't have to use my toothbrush.”

III?

Her trousers — her phone in the pocket — flopped onto her lap.

“No, no ambulance. I'm lightheaded. I'm not dying or — sorry. Dying might be fine for, some — I'm fine. Thanks. It's kind of you.”

The toothbrush dropped into the sink. She pulled a towel over herself.

“Also, do you mind not coming in when I'm showering, please? I know being incorporeal, you mightn't have ... vision, but I'd rather be dressed around company.”



AFTER THAT THE poltergeist stuck to breakages, clogging the sinks with a grey-green slime Vani hoped was just ectoplasm, and moving furniture. She sat on the floor if the sofa was upside-down, scooped ectoplasm into a bucket to feed the compost when she could — letting dishes pile up when she couldn't—and wrote down what was broken.



FOR SOLITUDE, Vani sat on the garden bench, thinking this also gave the poltergeist solitude to express its feelings.

The first time, she got locked out. After that, she always went inside once the doorbell shrilled.



WHEN HER PARENTS RANG, Vani took her phone outside. “You can visit soon,” she said. “I want to cook something nice, but I’m having a flare-up. No, don’t bring food. Being independent, remember?”

The summer weather was glorious — could she just host them outside?



VANI FOUND the missing corridor picture face-down under her bed while hunting a sock: a glacial valley, sharp-peaked, green-forested, scree-sloped; braided river winding through, crossed by a swing-bridge.

Her chest ached.

“I climbed mountains,” she told the poltergeist. “Hard seeing something you’ll never get back.”

She slid it under the bed again.



THE GHOST BROKE every plate and dented every piece of cutlery, except Vani’s. She ate from her lunchbox with her hands, or the fork Appa packed.



WHEN SHE WASN’T UP by noon, a mug of water appeared at her bedside. Hadn’t the ghost broken all the cups? She didn’t ask.



THE GHOST RAN out of things it wanted to break.

Vani woke to hot cocoa in the last remaining mug.

“Thanks,” she said. The lights blinked.

“You’re a lovely housemate,” she said, and felt the slightest tickle on her palm. “I hope you’ll write to me again.”



PLEASE MIND THE POLTERGEIST

THE GHOST DID WRITE to her again.



WHEN SHE COULD THINK, she read aloud, or they played Scrabble. When she was too tired, the ghost brought meals in bed, packed in her lunchbox, a gust of wind sliding it onto her duvet.



THEY CHOSE new crockery together online.



“I DON’T MIND if you want to hang out in the bathroom. You could write on the shower wall.”



WHEN SHE LAY on the bench in stale summer heat, a breeze blew out the open door, cooling her skin. Nothing else moved.



“WANT TO MEET MY PARENTS?” she asked.

The ghost squeezed her hand.



TEHNUKA (WWW.TEHNUKA.DREAMHOSTERS.COM) is a writer from Aotearoa New Zealand who calls on all of us to use our

wonderful, unique minds and/or bodies in whatever ways we can to refuse and resist the genocide of Palestinian people and the colonisation of Palestine. Resist with every breath and deed until Palestine is free—until we are all free.

THE FLIGHTLESS FINCH

MEGAN BAFFOE

Short story: 1,675 words

A bottle of bluebells sat on the kitchen table. Finch could hear a pot of berries murmuring on the stove — they'd have jam for breakfast tomorrow — and a pitch to the wind that suggested it would soon rain.

The washing would need taken in.

Ida returned, clutching a handful of fresh mint, and announced, 'it's going to rain.'

Finch smiled. 'I know.'

The two of them turned to the first window, which obligingly drew its own curtains. You could always see their laundry from the first window. Equally prioritised was Ida's cat, Gwen-doline — dozing peacefully by a flower-bed — and the sunset, which was shedding red and gold and warmth in solidarity with the autumn.

Just out of habit, Finch turned to check the second window. This peered out at Foxgrove Path, a treacherous arm of the forest that stretched out from their home to the nearest

town. The only person walking it was Joseph, which was no surprise. Nobody outside of their community had walked Foxgrove for years — perhaps because, between the birds' nests and the brambles, it barely looked like a path at all. Still, Finch — although they no longer stared out of it obsessively — liked to keep an eye. They knew how easily one's daily view could change.

The day they first met Ida, a future like this had seemed impossible. Finch had always defied easy categorisation: their chin jutted, twigs got stuck in their curls, and their limbs seemed just a little too long for their body. People saw them and thought witch. For their own survival, they had developed a habit of leaving a new place before the pitchforks could rise.

Over time, it had become part of their charm. Finch had never quite fooled themselves into believing that instability was what they wanted, but they knew how they looked to others: not just a wanderer but wild, like a leaf or flower or bird. A bubble of the earth, floating without need of a home or companion.

It had, as such, been a welcome surprise when Ida asked if she could travel with them.

'Finch?'

Ida was smiling, with an edge to it that suggested they had been daydreaming too long. Finch got up, hastily, to help with the washing.



THREE THUMPS AT THE DOOR. Ida jumped, then pretended she hadn't; Finch pretended with her. It was a blessing from heaven that neither Ida nor Finch had been burnt at the stake or drowned in a pond, but many of their near-misses had begun with a heavy-handed knock just like that.

Ida poured more tea to compose herself. Finch answered the door.

It was Joseph, which Finch had known. Nobody but their neighbours could be knocking at the door, and he was the only one strong enough to knock like that. A gentle giant, Joseph would never scare Ida on purpose; in fact, he hated the idea that he scared people at all. He was tall and strong as an ox, with a birthmark on his face for which he'd been maligned since childhood. He'd spent so much time taking solace in the trees as a child that he had developed a strange ability to hear them.

Ida smiled. Only Finch would have noticed that it was a little tight. 'Joseph. Would you like tea?'

'No, but thank you.' Joseph's voice, as always, was very quiet. 'I only came to tell you that there's a girl walking the forest. The trees are worried about her; they think we should take her in.'

Finch paled. This was not the first time that this had happened: Joseph had found Foxgrove through the whispers of the forest, stories of a safe haven where he might be accepted. And so he had been; his connection with the trees had proved him an even better look-out than the windows. But he had not been the last. The forest would often whisper that a person in need was walking its paths, and Joseph — who had never heard a lie from a tree — would go in search.

It wasn't that Finch didn't sympathise. Of course they did. But every new person was a risk, and desperation could drive people to savage action. They knew that very well. Even when Ida had first asked to travel with them, Finch — although flattered — had initially refused.

They couldn't even remember how many towns ago that had been, but Ida doubtlessly did. Ida remembered everything. She could tell you the names of different insects, the uses of

different plants, even which foals were likely to survive the winter. People had thought that she was a witch too. She'd seen her storm coming just as she foresaw all the others; Finch's timely arrival had at least meant that she wouldn't need to run alone.

The haven in Foxgrove had been her idea, but it hadn't really taken shape until they had the means — or, rather, the books.

Those had been the silver lining of a particularly unfortunate episode in which Finch and Ida had narrowly escaped being burnt alongside some heretical literature. Ida had grabbed a smouldering tome off the pile to take with them. 'If we're going to be driven out as witches, we might as well try some actual magic,' she had said.

Finch couldn't argue. They both knew that their time was running out; they needed to protect themselves somehow.

Most of the words in the book they couldn't quite decipher, but the page that most attracted them both was an illustration — an inked picture, depicting a cottage with legs. From what Finch could see, the witch that owned it did most of the burning and chasing and threatening, as opposed to the other way around.

They could see the appeal.

Isolating themselves in winter would have been silly, so it was the beginnings of spring when they finally settled on a suitably lonely place to try and build their little house. Finch had carved four wooden legs to the best of their ability — but without the magic, they wouldn't stand up, just hang limply from the house's base like a doll's. The two of them read and read from the magic book, but the crocuses had been out for weeks before their home could jump and run, and peer properly out of its three glass eyes.

They didn't want to test their wonky spellwork on a long

journey, so they settled on Foxgrove; pretty, quiet and desolate, and — most importantly — nearby. Their house had journeyed alongside them through the darkest heart of the forest, in the blackest hours of the night, and nobody had come chasing after them.



‘THE STOVE’S TOO HOT,’ Ida said, interrupting their thoughts. Finch, nodding, attended to the soup, ignoring the heat of her gaze on their back. They knew they wouldn’t rest easy until Joseph had returned; and even then, it would be some months before they could completely relax around their new neighbour.

Her name was Amina. She was a pretty young woman with warm skin like a chestnut. She’d arrived in England with her father, a merchant from a faraway land. After he’d passed away suddenly, having contracted a sudden illness, she’d been left wandering desperately from place to place until she’d stumbled upon Foxgrove.

‘You’ll be nice to her, won’t you?’ Ida had said.

Finch would be nice. Of course, they would be nice. But they would also watch, as they’d watched all of their neighbours initially. Foxgrove was what Finch had always wanted it to be: safe.

The first addition to their partnership had been Willa, a thief who’d resigned herself to a life among the shadows of the forest. She’d seen their house marching through to the clearing, and at first, she hadn’t believed her eyes. But she’d followed, and observed, and eventually approached to ask if she might join them. Finch had been reluctant, but hopeful; Ida had been open, but cautious.

They were both glad that they’d said “yes” now.

It wasn't a large group, but they were almost entirely self-sufficient. For a while, it had just been them and Willa – but then came Joseph, and after that, Meredith. Meredith, an actual witch, had improved Finch and Ida's clumsy spellwork magnificently. The only survivor from her old coven, she was grateful for new neighbours and new students alike.

New neighbours had trickled in since then, but only two had stayed: an elderly woman named Maureen, who had been accused of witchcraft when her town's crop failed; and a clever young boy called Thomas, whose parents had thought he was a changeling. Finch was always reluctant to let people leave — partly because they did eventually become attached to the newcomers, whatever Ida said, and partly because they always worried that they'd let it slip, and risk exposing their home. But Ida insisted that they offered temporary help, if they could.

They could see Maureen through the window, now; her house had walked on so that she could water her primroses from the front step. The houses often moved around, like grazing cows — so you could call out to a friend, ask for some sugar, position your chair in the last patch of sunlight. They were very attentive creatures; that was the most crucial aspect of their design. If anyone dangerous dared venture into Foxgrove, every cottage would rise on spindly legs and sprint into the night, far away from anyone that might hunt them.

'Finch. Finch!'

It was Willa, and Ida — and Amina. They were beckoning Finch forward. The trees trusted this new woman. Why were they so caught in the past?

Finch forced herself to breathe, believing that the air would not taste of smoke, and that eventually — years from now — the gentleness of the place would settle into their spirit.

Ida would return soon. They'd eat together. The sun would

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sink even further into the soft gold clouds, and then the rain would come in against the windows, a gentle pattering that would melt into the quiet.

Finch started peeling the vegetables.



MEGAN BAFFOE studied English Literature and then Creative Writing at Oxford. She enjoys writing fairytales, fraught family dynamics and unreliable narrators. Her work has been published in venues such as *Baffling Magazine*, *midnight & indigo* and *The Mud Season Review*.

WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE MONEY, HAVE PEOPLE, EVEN IF THEY'RE DEAD

WEN WEN YANG

Short story: 1,650 words

I stalked the apartment sites for months before I finally found a place closer to work. Just one mile from the office! The rent was less than a quarter of my entry level pay, for a one bedroom with new flooring and appliances. I submitted my application without even seeing it.

My mom brought her boyfriend and his sons to help me move. After we unloaded the van, I took them to the all you can eat buffet up the road. Teenage boys eat by the pound and the restaurant was happy to see us leave.

The next day, I was unloading the last of my boxes from my car when I felt a cold wetness against my leg. I yelped and dropped the box, spilling books onto the sidewalk.

"Sorry!" My neighbor, a 20-something white woman, ran up to me and grabbed the hound dog by the collar. "Damn it, Copper. Sorry. She snuck out the door. She's friendly!"

I crouched down and held out my hand. The hound placed

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her head under my fingers and looked up at me expectantly. I scratched her head.

"I'm Nicole," my neighbor said. "She's Copper."

"Grace." I started picking up the *Goosebumps* and *Enchanted Forest Chronicles*.

Nicole dragged Copper back upstairs into the apartment across the hallway then returned to help me collect the paperbacks.

"Wow, I loved these books. You should meet my friends, we have a nerds Friendsgiving at my place every year." She followed me back to the apartment. "They gave you all vinyl floors! Good, that carpet was trashed." Her lips went tight.

I urged her on with an encouraging nod.

"Are you superstitious?" She asked, eying the snake skeleton in my box.

I shrugged. Mom prayed to the Buddha and the Virgin Mary for good grades, just to cover all bases.

"An older lady lived here quietly for a while, then her grandson moved in. I could hear them fighting from my apartment. How he should get a job, how he should stop smoking, how he never cleaned up after himself. On and on. He tried to take me out on a date, but I told him I was seeing someone." Nicole rolled her eyes.

"Then on the Fourth of July, there was a huge fight. He was throwing things through the new energy efficient windows that maintenance had just installed. A bunch of neighbors called the cops." Nicole made a sour face. "The cops arrested the grandson and called an ambulance for the grandma. She kept saying she was dizzy and couldn't catch her breath. Let me find the—" She pulled out her phone and tapped. "Here."

I read the local news article. The grandmother passed away in hospital, the grandson was in jail for property damage. I handed back her phone.

“Is that why I don’t have cabinets above the sink?”

“Probably. I can help you put up some floating shelves. I just did it to make more room for succulents.” She looked sheepish. “I hope I didn’t scare you.”

I shrugged. “I was afraid it was cheap because of bugs.”

“We have termites too. At least, we don’t own the place.”



THE NEXT DAY, I arrived home to a neat pile of dust in the middle of the living room. *Had I missed this pile when I swept yesterday?* I took off my bicycle helmet and gathered the broom and dustpan to clean up.

I went to the dish rack to grab a glass but found it empty. The glasses were in the cabinets. *I must have put them away this morning.* I drank some water before showering.

After I was freshly lotioned, I went to start dinner. My lunchbag was on the counter with my tupperware soaking in the sink. I stared at the bento box, then saw my water glass already upside down in the dish rack. The double locks on the door were still upright.

“Good job, Past Me,” I said aloud to reassure myself.

The next day, I arrived home just as my dryer started its long “I’m done working” song. I ran to open the dryer. My laundry was warm. I searched on my phone for “dryer starting on its own”. But how had they gotten from the washer into the dryer? I remembered deciding earlier that morning that I would wait to do the laundry until after tomorrow’s corporate challenge softball game.

“Arggh!” I tossed my phone onto the bed then did the same to the clean clothes. I stuffed all my black socks into one black sock then started hanging my shirts in the closet. As I worked

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through the pile, I considered moving out of this clearly haunted apartment.

And go where, back to Mom and her well-meaning but constant need for capital A Activity?

This place was within biking distance to work. By my calculations, I could buy gas just four times a year.

And the haunting seemed helpful rather than scary.

I shut the closet door and saw all ten pairs of black socks back on the bed in a pile.

"Okay," I said to the room. "I know it's weird to not roll them up or fold them with their partners, but it's easier this way." I restuffed one sock with all the other stocks. "I just have to grab my one big sock and pull out the two I need. They're all the same. They're not exclusive, monogamous socks!"

I threw the stuffed sock into a drawer and kicked it closed.

Lecturing a ghost on sock organization, go me!

After dinner, I searched the internet for dog pictures, then "best dogs for apartment living", then the animal shelter near me. My phone abruptly restarted. I switched to my laptop. The browser crashed. I tried a different animal shelter downtown. Crash.

I sent a text to Nicole, asking if the grandmother who lived here liked Copper.

"She never petted Copper. And Copper *tried*! Why?"

I wrote "I think she's haunting my apartment" but changed it to "just wondering."

Afterwards, I started speaking out loud to her. When I was cooking my whole steamed garlic fish, the exhaust fan started on high.

"Thank you," I shouted above the whirring.

In October, I applied for a promotion and practiced my interview answers. I paced around the apartment and recited the three stories about how hard I would work for the

company and how little they could pay me. The lights flickered until I practiced asking for more money.

Worst case, they'd laugh at me and I would continue living with Ghost Grandma.



I ACED THE INTERVIEW. Nicole decided her mid-November Friendsgiving would double as my celebration and to invite my small team of four coworkers. I crossed the hallway with fried dumplings that Copper desperately wanted to sample. Pumpkins crowded next to stuffing and cut fruit.

After mingling with Nicole's friends, my coworkers finally asked to see my apartment.

"It's the mirror of Nicole's," I said as I carried the empty platter back to my apartment.

Paper ghosts and bats still hung on my windows. Skeletons sat in corners, sulking.

Bruce, the new guy on the team, startled. I decided not to leave him off the invite, but his first question to me had been "Where are you from?" and "Irving" wasn't a satisfactory answer. I was a little proud the skeleton had gotten a reaction.

He set his pumpkin spice drink on the counter. No one else noticed that his drink suddenly was sitting on skull-and-cross-bones coasters.

Dana and Marcus were too engrossed by my bookshelf and suggested new horror titles. They also laughed at my milkcrate coffee table.

"I've got a couple bar stools in my garage, if you want them?" Marcus offered, leaning against my kitchen counter. "I love them, but Pete says it's mid-century and he's going for rustic."

"I don't know what those words mean," I confessed.

WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE MONEY, HAVE PEOPLE, EVEN IF T...

"Neither do I," Marcus said. "That's why my bar stools are in the garage."

"I have a great set of pots and pans." Dana eyed my mismatching lid and pan. "They're good, but we just got a new set from the wedding registry. I'll bring them by next weekend."

I accepted all their hand-me-downs.

Marcus headed out to the gym. Bruce lagged behind.

I tried to make eye contact with Dana, but she had to pick up her daughter from soccer practice.

"I'll call," she whispered as she slipped out the door.

"Let me help you clean up," Bruce offered and slid behind the counter with the empty platter.

"It's fine, I have a dishwasher." Maybe if I took out the vacuum cleaner—

"Ah!" The kitchen faucet was spraying Bruce in the face. The cold and hot water controls did not respond to his attempts to turn it off.

I covered my mouth to stop from laughing. Eventually, Bruce ducked down and the faucet stopped.

When he stood up, the faucet shot him again. He frog-crawled around the counter and left without another word. I just finished mopping the wet trail he left behind when my phone pinged with a text from Dana.

"Hey. Driving right now. Do you need a boring phone conversation to clear the apartment? How does the rest of the year's budget numbers look? I can also let my daughter give you the play by play from her game. We won!"

I giggled, assuming the last words were from her daughter, and texted back, "All clear!"

Someone knocked on the door and Nicole popped her head in. "Hey, what's with the water outside your door? I hope that's water. Copper licked it."

That night, I set a small altar for Grandma Ghost. I laid out sweet-salty rice crackers, white rabbit candy, and dried plums.

“These probably aren’t your favorite snacks,” I said. “But thank you.”

Despite the promotion, I stayed.



WEN WEN YANG is a Chinese American from the Bronx, New York. She graduated from Barnard College of Columbia University with a degree in English and creative writing. You can find her short fiction in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Apex*, *Cast of Wonders* and more. An up-to-date bibliography is on WenWenWrites.com.

IVY AND EUCALYPTUS

E. M. LINDEN

Short Story: 2300 words

The seeds, which should not exist, are everywhere. Skittering underfoot across acres of polished floors. Scattered through papers, dropped into coffee-cups, and tucked into the Giant's whorls and nooks. The laboratory is a treasure-hunt of seeds. Some are already sprouting. I crane my neck: high above, green tendrils unfurl over the shining glass.

Lianas, according to Miguel.

The seeds are both mysterious and pointless. True, the Giant is generating a city. But the city is only for our minds. Feeding-tubes will sustain our bodies. We'll curl up in air-purified, fire-safe bunkers. The cheap version of interstellar pods, for all those millions who can't afford to leave Earth. We'll live out our lives in the virtual infrastructure the Giant creates, and escape the burning wasteland outside.

Oblivious to anything that grows.

It's most efficient, in this resource-starved world, if everyone just lies very quietly in dark rooms. But it's also a surrender. We're ceding Earth, and our responsibilities towards it.

Everyone working on the project gets guaranteed pod-space for themselves and their families, whether they're involved with the virtual city or the infrastructure that sustains the pods. So everyone applies. The world's best neuroscientists, computer experts, theoreticians, engineers, architects and town planners work in the lab.

But no botanists.

Not until the seeds start showing up.



"Look." Miguel shows me something cradled in his hand. Tiny wooden bells.

I prod them. They give off a faint scent, slightly lemony, like the teas my grandmother used to brew for me when I had colds. She used dusty, long-expired tea bags; it was already hard to find real lemons when I was a child.

"Cool," I say.

"Eucalyptus." Miguel's expression tells me I've missed the point. "You know, gum trees?"

I think about what he expects me to ask. What another botanist might ask. "But how did they get here?" I say, eventually. He opens his mouth and then it clicks. I laugh. "Oh, no. Surely you don't believe this crackpot theory, too? That the Giant is dreaming seeds?"

He grins. "Crackpot? But Alex, there's no other explanation."

"It's impossible." I'm exaggerating. Very little is impossible

for the Giant. They can extract elements from raw materials and shuffle them into new configurations. What is life, after all, but carbon, hydrogen, traces of various elements? The Giant can weave molecules into any pattern they choose, like strands of dyed wool. That's how the Giant is dreaming the city into existence, melding and braiding the virtual and physical worlds to house our minds and bodies.

But the Giant hasn't been programmed to make seeds, and they can't disobey their programming. Seeds are a waste of resources. They're contrary to the Giant's instructions. I open my mouth to explain this all to Miguel again. He cuts me off and points upwards, to the cinema-sized screen hanging from the lab's roof.



THE SCREEN CONNECTS to the Giant's prefrontal cortex. It displays what the Giant thinks they see. The Giant is more intricate than any organic mind. Synapses like lightning. Neurons like fairy-lights. A universe-mapping cerebellum.

The glass glows blue, like glaciers' hearts once did. The brainstem plunges through the lab floor.

The average human brain is only three pounds, yet it can do so much: remember, mourn, rationalise, crave. The Giant is three storeys. Exponentially more wonderful.

But the Giant doesn't know they're the most impressive supercomputer ever created by humanity. They think they're a Giant building a city. On screen, they're embodied. They look like us, with strong arms and skilled hands.

Today they've dreamed themselves as an older, tattooed white woman in a wheelchair, muscled shoulders, seventy feet tall; but the details fluctuate depending on the Giant's mood.

What doesn't change is that they think they're satisfied with their work. That they like to build.

To build, and to garden.

On screen, epiphytes cling to virtual residential blocks. (Miguel taught me that word, *epiphyte*.) Herbs crown rooftops. Cherries and oaks grace the utilitarian avenues. Roses tangle. Wildflowers riot. The light is cool and green.

The Giant dreams trees.



TREES AREN'T NECESSARY. Beauty isn't necessary. For those who'll inhabit the city, survival is enough. This is a waste of resources. A distraction. We should shut it down.

And yet.

Part of me urges the Giant on.



THERE WERE two pathways we could take: fix the Earth, or abandon it.

Some, not many, argued that we should save what we could. The work would be heart-breaking, back-breaking, dangerous, uncertain. It would take generations. We could only ever make a start; we wouldn't see the benefits in our lifetimes. But if we really poured everything into it, we could make a difference. Nature is resilient. Instead of a generation-ship, a garden for our grandchildren.

I'm a realist. Like most, I chose the second pathway. What's the point of trying, if nobody else is? Better to be safe. Better to cut our losses.



WE LEAVE the seeds where they fall. I stop debating their provenance. Now it's my theories that sound far-fetched. The seeds clearly aren't the result of pranks or sabotage. They're not a collective hallucination. I'm a scientist; I can accept the evidence of my own eyes. Miguel's right. The Giant is dreaming seeds.



MIGUEL CALLS IT A MIRACLE. He tells me about other miracles. His favourites are the pyrophytes. Fire-plants. Redberry and longleaf pine and eucalyptus. These are the plants that survive fire. Some even rely on it. These are the seeds that sprout after wildfires burn everything else to ash.

Miguel's eyes shine when he tells me this, but I can't smile. So much of the world is ash, already. That's why we need the Giant in the first place; that's why we need the pods. That's why this lab is buried in a bunker deep below the poisoned earth. There's no hope, outside.

But more seeds sprout. Under the lab's solar lamps, the Giant's surface gleams. Rainbows glint over their surface, and cerulean light washes over us.

The Giant is happy.

It's ridiculous, projecting moods onto the Giant, but we all do it. Interns, cleaners, mechanics, professors. Even cynical neuroscientists with purple hair, like me. We unironically say things like, *the Giant's pleased about the new conductors; or do you think they'll be lonely?* There's a reason we play Mozart and reggaetón in the lab; why we say *they* and not *it*.



THE GIANT CAN CREATE, but only within narrow limits. *Find us a way to live. Give us what we need to survive.* That's what we programmed them to do. How did they get from there to seeds? Those are their only instructions.

Miguel's eyes crinkle when he smiles. "Exactly."



THOUGHTS NOSE their way upwards from the Giant's occipital lobe. Most are concepts that our programmers introduced: *Resource maximisation. Necessities of life. Power-source redundancies.* Essential small fry. In an aquarium, they'd be the little danios and tetras.

But other thoughts, the Giant thinks themselves. There are ideas we never placed in the aquarium. Luminous imaginings that swim down instead of up.

(No. Not imaginings. That's impossible.)

We try to transcribe them. *Music-architecture-joy nexus*, that was one of the first. *Impact of blossom on community engagement*, last week. Something about *photosynthesis* and *souls*. These thoughts glide like manta rays, coil like sea-horses, confound like wobbegong sharks. We barely recognise them as fish.



MY SISTER IS A MARINE BIOLOGIST. Her colleagues focus on ocean acidification and algae blooms, but she's obsessed with octopuses. When I ask why she bothers studying an extinct species, she grins. "Because we don't understand them!"

She loves that. The unknowability of other intelligences.

But the Giant isn't unknowable. They're us: everything inside is what we put there. Nothing else. They dream existence, but we programme them.

Find a way for us to live.

Perhaps we left that open to interpretation.



SEEDS, when I think about it, make sense. All seeds hold potential in common. Everything sleeps within them, waiting to uncurl: towering redwoods, corn, apple blossoms.

And they're small and simple. They don't take much energy or raw material; they're relatively easy to assemble.

"No," Miguel says earnestly. "They're more complicated than that." He leaps to the defence of his beloved seeds, though really I'm paying them a compliment. His words wash over me like half-translated poetry. Achenes, caryopsis, drupelets. Pips and fruit and nuts and pinecones.

Seeds are a leap of faith. They're an investment in the future. But they require an investment in the future from us, too; we have to be right there with them. Tending them. Seeds need time, and conditions to grow. With the world as it is, these seeds will struggle.

"That's why I'm here," Miguel says.

I wish he was more selfish. I wish he'd enter the pods with the rest of us.

I wish I didn't have to lose him.



WE'VE all shared knowledge with the Giant. Hemi knows the ferns. Emiko names the maples and azaleas. Amira uses her Granddad's herbarium to identify hyssop and sumac, and teach them to the Giant in turn. The amaryllis move Professor Yi to tears; she says something about her mother's garden. I find myself describing ivy for the Giant. Its deep green gloss, its

loft and sprawl. Once, when she was young, ivy climbed the walls of my grandmother's apartment. It twisted round the iron balcony and reached for the light.

But we didn't programme everything. There are plants growing in the lab now that even Miguel doesn't recognise.



IT WAS Miguel who pointed out that the language we use for the Giant is also the language of growing. Brain stem; the root of the structure; blossoming thoughts. A branching of ideas. A tree of knowledge. With careful hands, Miguel packs soil around the Giant's glass stem. He digs in potatoes. He plants beans, muttering about nitrogen. He mists the roots of orchids.



TREES FILL THE LAB, fusing glass and biomass. Crystal-veined leaves. Vines cascade over lobes. Bromeliads perch among glial cells. Ants march. Bees hum in lavender.



THE TIME COMES for the first wave of us to enter our pods. I'm one of them, lucky enough to have secured early access. Guaranteed pod-space. You'd have to be a fool to give that up. I make the same preparations as everyone else, but sometimes I catch myself thinking. *What if. What if I don't.*

Miguel's been avoiding me. I know he disapproves. Maybe he doesn't want to say goodbye. Or maybe I'm flattering myself.

The mood in the lab is giddy, frantic. Nobody can concentrate. Entry into our pods is a month away. A week. I chide

myself. My thoughts are as inexplicable as the Giant and their seeds. Then it's the day before, and I still can't shake them.



I SHUFFLE along with everyone else, nodding to the last-minute safety briefings, clutching my approvals and ID and health certifications and validated tickets. I'm with my brother and sister-in-law and their twin daughters. Everything has become so normal; it's not until I look at the twins that it hits me like a brick to the gut.

We're not meant to be scared like this. Our children shouldn't be hungry. They shouldn't have hacking coughs and grey skin from life underground. They shouldn't live in restricted, dangerous bunkers; never able to play or run or breathe clean air or meet anyone new.

The pods will give us what we're missing. Space to run and play, even if it's not real; clean air to breathe. Thanks to the Giant, there'll even be beauty there. They'll give humanity a future. They'll let us dream, like seeds, curled underground but waiting for the right conditions to bloom again. They'll give these girls a life.

Which is why it makes no sense for me to hug my brother and his daughters, swift and fierce, and step out of my place in the queue, and run in the other direction.

"Alex!"

I spin and wave. "I love you all!" But I don't stop running. In a perfect world Miguel would be waiting for me, arms wide open. He's nowhere to be seen. The world isn't perfect; it isn't even okay, but my heart feels light for the first time in weeks, and I can't help smiling.



I'D NEVER HAVE DONE it a year ago. What does the outside world have to offer? What's left? Only precarious survival. Only slow, heart-breaking work. A burning world. A garden outside paradise.

But I didn't know what was possible, then. I didn't know about green shoots in the lab, about amaryllis and roses, ivy and eucalyptus. I didn't know about pyrophytes, the seeds that germinate after fire.

A garden outside paradise is still a garden.

The Giant dreams fresh air, clean rain; they dream their roots into the ground, deep past the toxins and chemical burn. The Giant dreams taro and frangipani, baobabs and parsley, kauri and wisteria and thyme.

I think of the word *extinct*. From the Latin: *No longer alight*.

When we close up the lab in the evenings, the pale bark of eucalypts glows back at us through the shadows. Ivy shines in the Giant's flickering lights.

Here, this is the garden. What's left is what we make.



MIGUEL BLINKS when he sees me in the unofficial garden shed. I'm out of my depth and up to my wrists in potting mix. He looks like he's been crying, and there is dirt smeared on his cheek.

"Aren't you meant to be in your pod?"

I wipe the dirt off his face. "Teach me how to grow things," I say.

And, all at once, his smile is alight.



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MISS ELSIE'S SUNKEN PIANO

MARC A. CRILEY

Drabble: 100 words

Piano riffs and scales ascending from the mirror-calm lake permeate the shoreline forest. The evening serenade of katydids and crickets fades to a murmur.

“HydroWatt was filling the impoundment,” the cemetery groundskeeper says to me, “when huge storms upriver triggered flash floods. Miss Elsie couldn’t get her piano out in time. Leaving it behind broke her.”

A key-hammering gospel anthem erupts, startling the thrushes.

“She passed a couple months later. We buried her here, overlooking the old homestead.”

“Who’s playing the piano then?”

Triumphal chords echo across the hills.

The groundskeeper peers over his glasses. “Why, Miss Elsie of course.”

MISS ELSIE'S SUNKEN PIANO



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*, here, 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 blogs at marccriley.com and acts out on Bluesky as [@MarcC.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/MarcC.bsky.social).

THE GIANT'S UNQUIET BONES

KATE RAVENNA

Short story: 957 words

The giant's bones lie uneasy under the ground. Each time he turns in his slumber, fields of wheat and oats fall into new fissures. His metacarpals uncover themselves, dark branches suddenly sprouting from neat rows of oats, shadowy tibia glimpsed in the depths of rifts. The augur tells us he is looking for a wife.

The augur casts lots while families stand in huddled groups, gathering comfort from one another. No one reaches out a hand to draw me in – that would exceed their obligation. I tell myself I am resigned, that it does no good to wish for my mother and sister.

I am not surprised when the bone dice choose me. The augur would say it was a fair casting, but I am the only one counted an outsider, although I have lived here as long as I can remember. But to everyone else, I am here on sufferance, on charity, a cold duty.

I do not want to marry the giant—I do not want to marry

anyone—but what choice do I have? There is no one to speak for me. At least the marriage ceremony is as short as decency will allow. The augur speaks the vows for the giant. He cannot speak for himself, dead as he is.

They set the first marriage crown upon my head, the second marriage crown on a bone dark as the rich loam. I don't think it is anywhere where the giant's head would be, but it doesn't matter.

As simply as that, I am married. There is no marriage feast, for any kin I have that would have made the sweet rolls and roasted boar and honey cakes have long ago been sent into the ground.

I am suddenly tired to my marrow. I lie down on the ground beside the giant's clavicle, as weathered as driftwood upon the shore. I find myself telling the giant everything, as I used to do when I was a small girl, with my sister and mother still alive.

And the giant speaks to me in slow, measured tones of a slender hyoid rustling, as delicate and brown as a dry branch-let; in desiccated leaves fluttering down from half-sunken jaw bones; in creaking of slowly shifting long buried ribs, as immutable and enduring as heartwood. The giant asks me if he should rise up, not because I am married to him, but because I am the only one to listen.

I tell him no, I tell him that to wake would send the oat and the wheat and the cabbages tumbling into crevasses, and the villagers do not want that.

The branches that form his throat whisper through the skeletal leaves, "What do you want?"

I hesitate. No one has asked what I want in so, so long. I am told to do my duty, to be grateful for the scraps that come my way in measured charity that I must pay for in gratitude. No

one asks what I want, because I am an outsider, because I will always be an outsider.

The villagers have met their obligations, they have given me cabbages and cold porridge and a small house on the outskirts that belonged to the goatherd. Not once, in the fifteen years I have lived here, have they treated me as kin or friend. Not once have they been kind. Each blanket, each odd job, each cabbage has been carefully weighed and considered against the burden of edicts.

What do I want? I want the giant to rise up, to ride on his shoulder as he strides across this land under the night sky. I long for this as I have never longed for anything else. I break my heart with longing. To leave this village behind forever. And if I do that, these people who have never shown me kindness will suffer. Their fields will be great, gaping holes, impassible and treacherous. And I can't quite want that.

But then I must stay here, with the unquiet giant and my unquiet heart and suffer together. I think, perhaps, I woke the giant with my longing, and my village has bound us together.

I walk slowly back to my empty house, and instead of lighting the fire I cry myself to sleep in the dark and cold.

I desperately want not to be here, but I want to be kinder to these people than they have been to me. Not because they deserve it, but because it is better to be kind. Perhaps there is another way.

An idea gently unfurls — perhaps it is the giant speaking so quietly to my mind that it feels like my own thoughts. Before I can doubt, I speak. What if he rises, but slips out of the ground like slipping out of the covers, gently, delicately, as I have slipped out not to wake the cat on the quilt. I have no sooner said it than he moves, slowly, inexorably, quakes shaking the ground, earth running down in rivulets. I tumble over and around, shaken like a pea in a cup. I try and gather my

THE GIANT'S UNQUIET BONES

scattered thoughts. It is more destructive than I wanted, but less than I feared. Some of the fields have fallen into the rifts, and there is a strange rippling quality, as though the blanket has wrinkled.

I turn to the giant. I expected him to be a great monstrous skeleton that the birds have picked over, but I find that he is a gnarled tree, old beyond imagining, sitting, waiting for me. I climb onto the giant's shoulders. He rises up, higher and higher, until I feel that my head will touch the clouds.

He strides away, and I don't look back.



KATE RAVENNA lives in Los Angeles with her husband and contemplates apocalypses. Her two cats, Merry and Pippin, have thoroughly inspected and bitten this story. You can find her at www.StoriesFantastical.com or on Bluesky as @FantasticalKate

MORNING DEW

MEGAN BAFFOE

Short story: 950 words

FAIRY:

*And I serve the Fairy Queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green, [...]
I must go seek some dew-drops here,
And hang a pearl in every cow-slip's ear.*

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, A

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (2.1)

Zahur read a lot, in-between his gardening, so when he started seeing the fairy, it wasn't much of a surprise.

What *was* a surprise – and continued to be, every morning – was the fact that the fairy kept *lingering*.



HE WAS AN EARLY RISER. Dawn was his favourite time of day, a blossoming crocus in watercolours. And this summer, it was lovelier than ever, all because of the fairy. Often, Zahur would wake up to see that each petal of every flower had been embellished, row after row of gleaming pearls of morning dew. The garden looked like a light show.

And yet – somehow – he was most distracted by its engineer.

The fairy was objectively beautiful; all dark, shining curls, like Shakespeare had spilt his ink when writing him, threaded through with ribbons of gold. He had wings like cobwebs, and skin like honey, and eyes like daylilies. He moved with an unnatural grace.

Now, he smiled as if he could hear Zahur's thoughts, and positioned a final pearl on one of the petunias. And then – with a flutter of his spider-web wings – he vanished.

Zahur didn't go outside; didn't call out. He knew, from experience, that that would only scare the fairy away. (Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* hadn't elaborated on this point, Zahur presumed that his guest was probably already in violation of some strange, supernatural protocol.) So he drank his tea, and watched his garden, and waited for the sun to rise and burn the pearls into diamonds. It was a wonder, watching all the dew catch fire; he thought, in his more sentimental moments, that it must be how angels saw the stars. A thousand suns ripe for the picking, even if you couldn't taste.



TASTE.

Zahur couldn't believe that he had never thought of it

before. Really – after all the work the fairy had been doing – it was only polite. Just as you’d offer a builder a cup of tea.

After half an hour spent researching *what do fairies eat and drink?* – and then another, this time on the more specific *how do you make sweetened butter?* – Zahur felt reasonably confident in his ability to produce a suitable morning snack for a fairy. Milk, honey, fruit from the garden; he could technically help himself to the latter, but – perhaps out of politeness – hadn’t so far.

Zahur set his alarm earlier than usual to prepare the fairy’s breakfast. It wasn’t until he had set out the tray that the absurdity of the situation occurred to him. But then, he supposed, the path of true love never did run smooth.

He added a note, as non-demanding as he could make it – *My name is Zahur.*



ZAHUR’S INSTINCT had been a good one. The fairy was glad for any and all offers of food.

Over the summer, it became clear that he had preferences. Stone fruit were better than berries, berries were better than vegetables, and absolutely nothing was better than pears; milk, although not a particular favourite, was always received gratefully. The fairy adored the special butter – and even just the brown sugar on its own – but that was a rare treat.

Zahur could admit, in the quiet of his own head, that he still probably made it more often than he should for someone who hadn’t even returned their own name.

Gratitude *had* been shown, in the fairy’s own way. Zahur’s flowers looked painted; the fruit were something out of a Rossetti poem. The trees glistened in shades of mahogany and honey-comb, branches curling into the sky like melting

ribbons. No plants failed, nothing died; the animals and insects left everything edible alone. Even when the seasons began to shift, Zahur's garden stayed a storybook.

The fairy, however, began to change.

The gold in his hair faded to silver, and the webbing of his wings began to glisten. His eyes were softer, darker, wider, blue-black Suns with lashes like bird-wings, and they frosted over at the sight of a pest near Zahur's lettuces in a way that they hadn't before. He outright refused any fruit that he didn't particularly like, and demanded more of Zahur's time and energy.

The notes attached to the breakfast trays became letters. The days became colder and colder.

Zahur knew that he should stop leaving the trays out. Or see a doctor, or move away, or break up with the fairy somehow. He didn't. (Wouldn't.)



HIS AGONY ENDED on the equinox.

The garden looked different, that day – more sinister, but no less beautiful. The tree trunks were draped in cobwebs, soft like silk, and the spiders on them elegant as dancers. The lines of them dripped with morning dew like diamonds, more valuable than any jewellery.

Because – in the very centre – the spiders had spelled out a name.

Kunal.

It meant '*lotus*', Google told him. A flower that he did not as of yet have in his garden.

Kunal himself wasn't there. Zahur could come up with plenty of reasons – anxiety, anger, shyness – but wasn't sure which one would be applicable. His fairy had been unpre-

dictable as of late. But that was okay too – Autumn was here, and change was coming; Zahur could interpret this sign without any research, could hold the feeling of victory in his chest even as he dragged himself away from the garden to buy some more brown sugar.

The falling leaves would be his new sunrise.



MEGAN BAFFOE STUDIED English Literature and then Creative Writing at Oxford. She enjoys writing fairytales, fraught family dynamics and unreliable narrators. Her work has been published in venues such as *Baffling Magazine*, *midnight & indigo* and *The Mud Season Review*.

HOUSE CALL

CHRISTINE HANOLSY

Short story: 964 words



My mother called the doctor the very day the house fell ill.

“It’s running a temperature,” she told him. “No matter how we adjust the thermostat. At night it shivers in spite of the heat, and I swear I’ve heard it moaning.”

I was listening at the parlor door, one hand patting the dark polished wood of the frame. Something like this had happened to my friend Veronica Delaney's house last year. We used to send each other messages, Veronica and I: flashlights blinking in Morse code, post-it notes stuck to the glass in elaborate designs. But then Veronica had gone off to college, and her family had moved out. "Nothing to keep us here," her mother had confided to mine. That house stood empty now, porch sagging, window casings drooping. Dead as a doornail, my mother had said.

"Maybe a fresh coat of paint?" My father always thought that sort of thing would help: a new bracelet for me when I had the chicken pox; a silk scarf for my mother when she broke her wrist. "Or—I've been meaning to plant roses out front."

My mother hushed him. "You can't cure the flu with paint and flowers, George."

The doctor asked some pointed questions — had we had any visitors lately, was there any trouble with carpenter ants, had we ever noticed signs of allergies — and then took to examining the house itself. "Sometimes," he said, listening at the wall with his stethoscope, "a house just comes down with something. I'll do what I can, but you might just have to let it run its course. Try mopping the floors with disinfectant. And change the air filters, that will certainly do no harm. But," and his voice gentled, "I want you to be prepared."

My mother put her hand to her mouth; my father mumbled something conciliatory, and made a warding gesture with one hand.

All evening the house groaned and shook as if caught in a windstorm, but the great fir outside my bedroom window stood still and moths continued to bump against the screen door, attracted by the kitchen lights. I was enlisted to help scrub floors. The heavy lemon-bleach smell of disinfectant

made my eyes water and my nose wrinkle, but I polished the linoleum, the hardwoods, the tiled bathroom with all my heart.

The next day the house stood silent. We sat around the kitchen table, my mother, my father, and I, and watched a square of sunlight creep across the sparkling floor. I was sent to check the thermostat a half dozen times; I think my mother was afraid to look. There was no change.

"Maybe that's a good sign?" I said hopefully. "At least it's not going up?"

My mother just shook her head. My father sighed heavily and went to the garden center to look at rosebushes.

"He hates that he can't do anything useful," my mother explained. I knew how he felt.

Across the street, the carcass of Veronica's house seemed to sink further into the waist-high weeds.

That night we left the doors and windows open, let the sultry August air fill the house with the scent of jasmine and fresh-cut grass. My father had mowed the lawn, hoping to cheer the house up. I lay in my twin-sized bed and studied the shadows the moonlight cast on my wall.

Maybe my father had been right; maybe a little love and attention was what the house needed. Or maybe it had been the disinfectant, or the doctor's treatments. Or maybe the illness had spent itself. Whatever it was, somewhere around midnight the house gave a great shudder, and the air conditioning kicked on. My parents ran from room to room closing doors and windows, opening louvers, checking thermostats.

When the doctor returned for a final check-up, I asked him if Veronica's house had died from the same thing. He glanced out the window.

"No." He folded up his stethoscope, stuffed it into his lab coat pocket. "I can't be sure, but I think that house just gave up

when the kids moved out and Mrs. Delaney took that job in Des Moines. Houses know when they're being left behind, and depression can be hard to dig out from, especially when undiagnosed. I wish they'd called me in sooner. I might've saved that one, introduced it to another family."

"Is it too late, then?" I asked.

The doctor just shrugged. "Hard to say. It doesn't seem to have much to live for."

"We're going to plant roses out front of ours," I told him. "Before I go back to school. I think I'm going to major in environmental psychology, you know." I had just decided, then and there.

"Good, good," he said absently, checking his watch. "We need more people in the field, these days." He patted me on the shoulder and handed me his card. "Look me up next summer. I might have an internship. For now, take care of your house, and it'll take care of you, hm?"

I stood on the front porch and watched him leave, saw him slow in front of the Delaney's old house, and disappear around the corner. Improbably, a glint of sunlight reflected off the dusty windows. I caught myself searching for Veronica's silhouette against the dilapidated blinds, for some message I had missed.

Maybe a little of my father's optimism had rubbed off on me after all, along with his desire to feel useful. That afternoon, I dragged his lawn mower across the street.

I'll start with the grass, I thought, and weed the overgrown flowerbeds by the door. Plant some daffodil bulbs for the spring. I felt for the doctor's card in my pocket, for a bit of reassurance, and pulled on my gardening gloves.



HOUSE CALL

CHRISTINE HANOLSY is a Nebula award nominated science fiction and fantasy writer who cannot resist stories about love in all its forms and flavors. Her speculative flash fiction and short stories have been published by EDGE Science Fiction & Fantasy Publishing, Atthis Arts, *Small Wonders*, *Worlds of Possibility*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and more. She has worn many hats over the years, including editor-in-chief of an online writing community, Russian language scholar, composer, interpreter, and general cat herder. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her wife, their two children, and a pair of very vocal cats, all of whom have been extremely patient with her. You can find her full publication list at: christinehanolsy.com.

HEARTBEATS

ANNIKA BARRANTI KLEIN

Short story: 1025 words

Her stepfather built the house on the mountain the year she was born. She and her mother moved in sometime after her first birthday, and later she could not remember ever living anywhere else. She was four years old when she first noticed that the house had a heart of its own, and it beat in time with hers.

The first time the house had saved her, she was seven. She was playing outside by herself, climbing the big rock in the copse of birch trees in the backyard. One second she was standing atop the rock, triumphant. The next she was falling, her footing lost, the ground looming up beneath her. Then she landed in her bed, safe and sound. No time had gone by.

Years later she still remembered the house scooping her out of mid-air and gently placing her in the safest place it knew: home, where their hearts beat in unison.

As she grew older, she understood that she, too, was home

to someone, that her house needed her as she needed it. She would lie on her bed breathing softly and touch her hand to the crack in her wall. It was there that she felt the house pulsing around her. She felt the air go into her lungs. She felt the thud of the little drum inside her chest. And she felt the kettle drum that was the house's heart beating against her hand.

She closed her eyes, listening to their hearts beating together as one.

The second time the house had saved her, she was eleven. She and her friends Emma H. and Emma J. were building a bridge over the creek in the back wood. They had fought, and the Emmas had decided to be friends with each other and not her. After they went home, she went back to building the bridge, sure that if she finished it they'd be shocked and delighted and her friends again. One second she was placing a cinder block. The next she was falling, her shoe stuck in the mud, the creek rushing up to meet her like a roaring river. Then she landed face-first on her bed, safe and sound. Their hearts beat in unison. No time had gone by.

In school, the Emmas acted like nothing had happened, but she found herself growing away from them nonetheless, preferring the company of her house. She never found her shoe.

She was eighteen when her parents told her they were selling the house, moving down off the mountain, closer to town. She ran to her room and threw herself onto the bed, hand against the wall, sobbing, but she couldn't stop them, couldn't explain what the house meant to her. She was away at school the day the movers came. She felt a great hole open up in her heart, a house-shaped hole that she feared would never heal.

For years after the house was sold, she woke up every

morning with her hand on the crack in the wall, feeling the house's heartbeat, the smell of honeysuckle in her nose. It took minutes some days, hours others, for her to realize she wasn't there. She took sleeping pills to keep herself from dreaming of the house, but she stopped when she began to smell honeysuckle in waking hours.

Over time the visits became less frequent. Her mother told her that a family had moved in. Months later, she called again to say that something had happened. No one would say what, but the family had moved back out. Time and again she called, reported on family after family moving in and back out again. "In town they whisper about the house being dangerous. But," her mother said, "it isn't the house, of course it isn't the house. Who would be afraid of a *house*?"

She'd been in California for ten years when she woke from the same dream she'd had countless times since leaving the house. She was there, her hand against the house's heartbeat. The house welcomed her back. Perhaps she'd never left. She was there, and she was home, and her heartbeat was right again. The *house's* heartbeat was right again.

It had been several years since it had taken her so long to remember that she was no longer in the house. In her sleep, the house-shaped hole in her chest was full. When she woke, it ached in its hollowness.

She returned to the house when she was forty-two years old. Emma J. sent her a message when it came back on the market. "I don't know if you remember me, but I saw that your house is up for sale, and I know your mother would love for you to come back to town." She had not known when she accepted the friend request that Emma was a realtor, but she was. Emma offered to show her the house.

She booked a flight.



ALTHOUGH SHE WANTED to go alone, she agreed to let Emma drive her up the hill from town. It was surprisingly nice to see her again. As the car turned off the road onto the long driveway and approached the house, she closed her eyes. She could feel the open air as the car emerged from the trees into the clearing in front of the house.



She opened her eyes. The honeysuckle had grown wild and engulfed the front and side of the house. The paint was chipped and the porch sagging. The gable window into her old room appeared to be looking down at her, wondering, perhaps even longing. She felt the pull toward the house and stepped out of the car.

Emma produced the key. “Would you like to take a few minutes on your own?”

“Yes,” she whispered, taking the key. She barely had to push it into the lock before the door gave way, opening just for her. Her feet took her to her old room. She touched her hand to the crack in the wall, still there after so many years. She smelled the honeysuckle.

Their hearts beat in unison like no time had gone by.



THE CAT DISTRIBUTION System knows where **ANNIKA BARRANTI KLEIN** LIVES — in a tiny apartment in Los Angeles with her family and more books than she can possibly read in one lifetime. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in *Asimov's*, *CRAFT*, *Fireside*, *Fusion Fragment*, *The Future Fire*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Weird Horror*, *Worlds of Possibility*, and more; her novels are represented by Kate McKean at Howard Morhaim Literary Agency. She was the guest editor for *Interstellar Flight Magazine's* 2024 flash fiction series.

IN HER TOWER OF SCALES

MARISCA PICHETTE

Short story: 1,180 words

When Rapunzel was a girl, she learned the world was much, much larger than she thought. She read it in a book. Books lead girls astray, her mother always said. (Astray is another word for “into freedom”).

While Gothel was at work — making magic mirrors guaranteed to tell the Queens and Kings everything they wanted to hear — Rapunzel tore out the end papers and penned a letter to a realm as distant as her faintest dreams.

She sealed the envelope with candlewax and tied it to the leg of her pet wyvern. Just before her mother got home, she sent it flying away, away.

Her hair grew inches while she waited for a response. Gothel finished a standing mirror and three compacts (for the vain monarch on the go). Rapunzel read her way through the tower library, pocketing blank pages for later.

When she was almost as tall as her mother, a reply came at last. The scroll was fastened to a gull's leg with dried seaweed, the paper stained and gritty with sand. Rapunzel opened it while her mother was at the bottom of the tower, cooking the roast she received as payment for her latest commission.

Dear R,

Your idea of an exchange delighted me and my sisters, but only one of us may travel at a time. I will go first.

Gods willing, I'll be there in spring.

-E

Rapunzel tucked the scroll under her pillow, rereading it each night and relishing in her secret. She kept it for a week only. Gothel found the crumpled scroll when she changed the sheets on Friday.

"Exchange?" she asked her daughter, brushing the mice from her hair. They were a stubborn colony to remove. Every month, she found more babies, more nurseries of dandelion fluff nestled between Rapunzel's many braids.

Rapunzel nodded, unable to contain her excitement. Now her secret was secret no more, she shared all. "She's coming from an island! She said it's always sunny and beautiful where she lives. Oh please, can we not visit?"

Gothel looked at her daughter — less a child now than a woman in her own right. How many years had they lived in isolation? She'd toiled in silver for decades her enchanted skin neglected to show. She considered Rapunzel's question. Soon, news that an eligible maiden dwelled here would spread, as fairy tales are wont to do. Gothel's life was about to get much more complicated.

She had a few savings, and enough unused vacation days to span a season. She looked out the tower window. The sky

was gray, the clouds heavy with sleet. Spring couldn't come soon enough.

"Okay."

They packed two carry-ons and booked seats on a budget flight across the sea. The second Saturday in March, they locked the tower door and handed off the key to Rapunzel's wyvern. Their guest was due to arrive the next day.

"Take care of her," Gothel told the drake. It bowed its head, and they bustled off. They had a much larger dragon to catch. Flights to Greece were few and far between.



EURYALE DISEMBARKED from her hippocampus ferry, her shoulders weighed down by art supplies. She walked the uneven path to the tower in the woods and met the wyvern at the door. The simple riddle it posed caused her no difficulty at all. Collecting the key, she stepped inside.

Stairs wound up in silence above her. She climbed, huffing with the effort of towing her paints and easel along. When she at last reached the top, flopping on the sunlit bed, she stared at the ceiling. She had never been alone like this.

First, she explored. She read Rapunzel's books. She planted violets in the window boxes, too long neglected by a girl who cared more about daydreaming. She painted in the afternoons. Alone save for the mice, she grew out her hair.

Snakes slithered into the corners and down the spiral stairs. They curled on the windowsill and slunk down to the grass.

When the prince came, chasing rumors of beauty and eternal youth, he saw the mass clinging to the tower's wall and grinned at his luck. Here were some vines, perfect to climb up to the unguarded window. He wrapped his hands

around smooth coils, speckled and warmed by the spring sun.

He just hoped his luck would hold.



RAPUNZEL AND GOTHEL spent a month lounging on beaches and touring ruined temples. They wore gauze and sunglasses — all the rage in gorgon cities. Mornings were spent in cafes, afternoons snoozing and collecting trinkets for home.

As spring tipped toward summer, Gothel counted her change and sighed. “I’m afraid we must go back, my dear.”

Rapunzel closed her latest book: a trashy romance picked up from a street bazaar. The cover featured a mass of limbs that managed to be both incomprehensible and alluring at once. She’d told her mother that chimeric fiction was in vogue.

“Already?”

“I don’t have much left. The King will be wanting his mirror. You know how vain he is.”

Rapunzel sighed. She folded her towel and followed Gothel back to the dragon port, the azure sky begging them to stay just a while longer. On the back of a mighty golden wyrm, they flew home.



WINDING up the narrow path to the tower, a small mound at the base caught Gothel’s attention. It hadn’t been there when they left in March.

As they drew close, details resolved themselves. Armor, finery, even saddles and gilded bridles cluttered the tower’s base. The many heads of Euryale’s serpents heaped beside, snoozing in the afternoon sun. What had been mere garden

snakes a month ago had grown to anaconda proportions, each sleek head as wide as Gothel's chest.

Rapunzel knelt by the slumbering snakes. They looked well-fed. She looked up at her window. It was blooming, a trellis of wisteria shading whatever waited within. She looked at her mother, then at the hoard of expensive clothes whose owners had no more use of them. Finally, she looked at her as-yet unpacked bag, resting in the grass.

"I've always wanted to visit Italy..." she ventured. She was sure her mother had noticed the King's banner amid the rubble. The unfinished order would likely remain so.

Gothel picked through the pieces, removing a gold-trimmed helmet. Rapunzel threaded her arm through a silver-plated belt, returning the spare tower key to her pocket.

"I think," her mother said slowly, "the house will be safe enough while we're gone."



HIGH IN HER TOWER, Euryale reads and paints and practices piano (Rapunzel never had the knack, no matter how much Gothel nagged her to play). Her snacks ran out weeks ago, but she no longer feels hungry herself. Her hair sates them both.

Occasionally, she thinks she hears something over her music, but it never rises enough to give her cause to cease the scales she plays to keep her hands limber. She assumes her snakes will let her know when her hosts eventually return.





Fairy Tale Forest by Ana Niki

MARISCA PICHETTE is a queer author based in Massachusetts. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, *Tales & Feathers*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Baffling Magazine*, and others. Her poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin*, *Sirens in Your Hair*, was a finalist for the Bram Stoker and Elgin Awards. Their eco-horror novella, *Every Dark Cloud*, is out now from Ghost Orchid Press.

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

PART TWO
SELF ACCEPTANCE

A SIMULACRUM OF SELF

AIMEE OGDEN

Short story: 781 words

At age thirteen, Caroline makes a walking, talking simulacrum of herself. Just another science fair project, at first — *Applications of computer programming in modern witchcraft* — but she spends so long admiring the results that she can't quite bring herself not to take it for a test drive before she gives away the game by presenting a posterboard about it.

When her mom calls her for dinner, Caroline sends the simulacrum, even though she hasn't fine-tuned the conversational response module yet. While the simulacrum plods downstairs, Caroline climbs down the downspout and sneaks around to peer through the kitchen window.

Mostly what happens is ... nothing. The simulacrum doesn't get scolded for talking with her mouth full nor caught reading a book under the table. She doesn't speak unless spoken to, so she doesn't speak at all—just nudges food around her plate, nodding occasionally. When the simulacrum

gets up to clear the table at the end of the meal, Mom praises her for changing out of that ugly orange sweater and purple sweatpants she was wearing earlier. Caroline 2.0's simulated face smiles.

The real Caroline climbs the oak tree back to her room and scribbles out the title on her posterboard in favor of some baking-soda volcano bullshit. The orange sweater's sleeve gets snagged on a branch; she throws it in the hamper and never wears it again.



SHE DESIGNS the Caroline 3.0 for her boyfriend's benefit. When he's had a bad day at work, the 3.0 never panics and says something weird about what she just read about platypuses or Monet or quasars in a misguided effort to be comforting. When she stares at him as if she's counting each of the perfect freckles on his face, she has the computing capacity to actually do it. Her jaw doesn't hurt when he asks her to do that one thing, and her roots don't grow out brown.

When he proposes, it's to the real Caroline. She says yes on her own behalf as well as the 3.0's, but the ring is uncomfortably snug on her finger.



NO ONE at work notices when she sends in the 2.1. This model is basically an update of the 2.0 she once made for her parents, with a friendly coffee addiction built on, and an interest in the TV shows people like to talk about in the lunchroom. She remembers everyone's birthdays in time to pass a card around the office, and she never monologues about the latest cozy mystery she's read (and not just because she's never read any).



THE 4.0 IS DESIGNED to be the best possible mother: funny, calm, wise, infinitely patient in the face of car keys dropped down drains or sticky fingerprints on important work documents. But when Caroline built the 3.0, she hadn't considered what sort of modifications to the spell structure might have been necessary to allow the construct to get pregnant. Could she develop a replacement that wouldn't make her husband suspicious? The 4.0 stays in a closet in the laundry room, eyes closed, smiling faintly. Waiting.



WHEN SHE'S 42, Caroline builds the 5.0, just for herself. She builds in hobbies she thinks sound cool — board games? Photography? Guitar? — and an affinity for colors she's not brave enough to wear. She can't decide between 'no makeup' and 'bold exciting looks' so she doesn't program a preference at all. She doesn't want the 5.0 to be 22, but she makes her the best version of 42 that she can imagine.

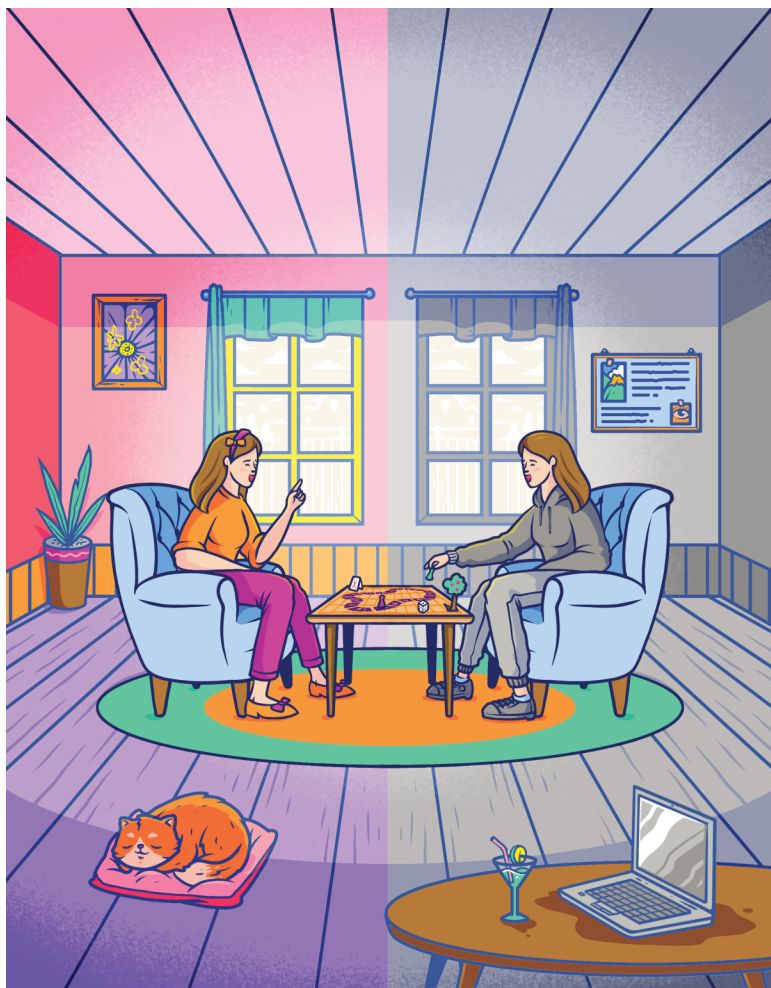
Go on, she says, when the simulacrum is finished, when her own bright brown eyes fix on her with more than blankness in their gaze. Be free. Do the great things you want to. Everything I didn't.

The 5.0 looks around the laundry room, then takes her purse from its hook by the door. Caroline hears the car leave the garage, and her fists clench at her sides and she doesn't know what to do or where to go or who to be.

She cries so loud, and so long, that she doesn't hear the garage the second time. The 5.0 slips in without knocking — and why should she? It's her house too — and, as Caroline sits up, blotchy-faced, on the couch, the 5.0 starts setting up a new

board game on the coffee table, something with lots of fiddly-looking little pieces and stacks of cards with delicate art and a rulebook that must be twenty pages long.

I know it looks complicated, the 5.0 says. But we have to start somewhere. She holds out two little wooden game pieces in the palm of her hand. Do you want to be purple, or orange?



AIMEE OGDEN is an American werewolf in the Netherlands. She is a two-time Nebula Award Finalist, most recently for her novelette "What Any Dead Thing Wants", and her latest novella, *Starstruck*, arrived in June 2025. Her short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed*, and *Clarkesworld*.

AMAD RAZI is an artist who works on illustration, animation, graphic design and other creative projects. He lives with his beautiful wife and daughter in Indonesia. You can find more of his work on Instagram where he is @DrownHaze.

SHOOTING STARS

REBECCA ZAHABI

Story: 509 words

I am shooting stars with my bow, but I'm not very good. My arrows go straight up in the air before falling back on the ground. They draw bell-shapes, or dance sideways when the breeze catches them. I'm only small, so I have a child's bow, with a softer, bouncier curve.

I'm standing in front of the treeshore, the waves of snow unfurling in front me. It's night-time, the air is cold.

My arrows aren't getting anywhere near the stars.

"You'll never touch them, you know."

The 20-year-old me is there, leaning against a pine tree. She has brought her own bow and arrows, with metal tips and complicated engravings. Mine are only wood, for now.

"Maybe not," I say, "but imagine how great it would be if I did. Even if there's only a million-to-one chance, I should try."

She laughs and ruffles my hair. The 20-year-old me is my friend. She comes shooting here often. I watch as she strings her bow, aiming for the same star as me. The arrow flies

straight at it but misses by inches. It disappears, swallowed away by the darkness.

"It was so close!" I say. "You'll get it soon."

"I've been training for a long time." She smiles.

She helps me onto her shoulders to show me other parts of the sky, far beyond the snow-covered hills.

"This is the star I'm aiming for now".

I have to squint to see it. "It's very far."

"It is. And it's not even the one I want to have in the end."

She points to a light blue star, a piece of daylight cut out next to the moon. It is straight above us; I have to crane my neck backwards to spot it. It doesn't seem possible to touch it – her arrows will curl down like mine if she tries.

She puts me back on the ground. She glances down the treeline to where the 80-year-old me is dozing in her rocking-chair, her silver arrows at her feet. Blurred by the mist, she looks like someone else's dream.

She is too far away to talk to. We can look at her, but she doesn't hear us when we call. As far as I know, she sleeps there every night. Her dreams aren't filled with arrows and stars, but with sleet and evergreens.

"I wish we knew why she isn't shooting anymore," says the 20-year-old me.

"Maybe she's got all the stars she wanted," I say.

"Maybe she stopped trying."

I go back to the work at hand – I want to make some progress before dawn. The 20-year-old me picks up an arrow she's carved. It's birch wood, pale like the underbelly of the clouds, with pictures etched down its side. Slowly, she notches the arrow, pulls back her elbow and lifts her wrist, curving to aim at the high blue star.

I say, "You'll never touch it, you know."

She pulls the string further, until it sings.

“Maybe not,” she says, “but imagine how great it would be if I did.”



REBECCA ZAHABI (SHE/HER) is a mixed-heritage writer — a third British, a third French and a third Iranian. She started scribbling in her home village in France at age 12, and has written in a variety of genres, from short stories to novels to videogames. She's particularly proud of her bestselling trilogy, *Tales of the Edge*, and of working for Larian Studios. You can find out more about her on her website: www.rebeccazahabi.com

MY FIRST NAME WAS DROPLET

AKIS LINARDOS

Short story: 1,000 words

It was given to me by Sister after I spilled out of Father's left eye.

In warm, ethereal arms, my sister carried me for a long time. When I formed eyes, I saw her smile in vapor threads, and when I formed liquid earholes to hear from, she whispered to me sweet lullabies.

Wish that I'd stayed in her arms forever, but Sister had to let go. Gently she placed me upon a cracked patch of land, dry and slanted, its marrow long since sucked dry by demons. My sister told me: Be careful, little droplet. This land has grown into a hostile place, riddled with monsters. Be steadfast. Grow strong.

Down a crack, I slid, and into a rivulet my body stretched. Dirt suffused my liquid form, turned me muddy.

My second name was Worm. It's what the creature chasing after me called out. With eight legs it skittered fast toward me; with two large mandibles, it clicked and clacked.

Come here, sweet worm. Come here and let me soak upon your watery larval blood.

The crack deepened into a chasm. So fast the creature crawled, its scuttling reverberated across the sharp divide. Closer and closer, its looming shadow caught the sunlight and towered over me.

With mandibles sharp it snapped my tail, sucking a painful sip from me.

Shocked at the hostility of this world, desperation clawed my mind. Was I born to be devoured?

Come to me, honey worm.

A sudden turn inside the crack. Mud turned me malleable enough to summon some force into my rivulet form. Against the divide's shape I flowed, leaping over the chasm. Between the maggot-crawling roots, I skirted, evading the creature's mandible snap. No roots but beastly bones, upon which clung flesh and blood. A carcass of something twisted and long dead.

A droplet should not devour, but my name was droplet no more. Upon the maggots I feasted, then bloated and enlarged.

The creature hesitated to my halt. Because it likely had realized, that I had fed enough.

By the form of many maggots, I sprouted tendrils and a worm-long tongue with which to snap at things.

My third name was Frog, the Spider Devourer.

And it remained unspoken, because I had given that to myself.



CREATURE DIGESTED, its shape learned, I formed my own skittering legs — viscous and unstable. My own four pairs of spider eyes — so I could see more than before.

In a desert where there was little to absorb but the

bloodied corpses of the demons, I rolled and skittered. In a place so void of life, I felt stranded. If only I could wriggle back into the eye of Father Sky. If only the air was not so stale, and I could feel the gentle touch of Sister Wind.

In the desert's heart, I found a plant of red and green with needles dressed. By its shade, I rested, pondering what its name might be.

How did the demons miss it? How did it survive after their grinding machines sucked the water from the skies?

Beneath me, the earth undulated. Long roots burst and wrapped around me. Longer the plant's shadow loomed, and twisting I saw the crescent slash along its form, a mouth curled downward in sorrow.

Quench my thirst, it said, as its roots pierced through my body, sucking the water out of me.



THROUGH THE PLANT'S tentacled body, my streams flew through many tunnels, rushing among fluorescent verdant rings. No longer frog, nor worm. And neither a single droplet — I was many.

Not an I, but a we. Droplets with thoughts aligned.

The plant's green walls reached toward us, thirsty for our blood. The green flesh pulsating, water-craving.

With painful sips, our forms shriveled. If we fragmented further, consciousness would scatter.

Maybe better this way? Maybe ours was to glimpse briefly a dry existence. Only to bless this single famished plant with liquid relief.

Maybe that was enough, and we could close our eyes and let go.



No.

Our destiny was ours to shape, like our very form. We refused to abandon creation to a waterless fate.



THROUGH TUNNELS GREEN AND WINDING, we sucked the gas from all plant's vessels, and sucked the things that made it tick.

Now we formed crescent slashes of our own, many mouths from which to form words with a single voice.

Rest, thirsty plant. I would lend you all of me to revive a fragment of the world that once has been. But I must save not one, but many. I must revive the world anew.

I ask you grant me strength and seeds. So that I may scatter your progeny and fill the world with green.

The walls ceased pulsating, as if struck by nature's hand. Demanding life be reborn in its fullest brim.

And in the spreading tunnels of rushing green rings, we absorbed and bloated until the plant burst and propelled us to the skies.



AMONG THE VASTNESS of Father Sky, we float on the familiar hands of Sister Wind, not one but many Droplets, ballooned to boulder-large. And since the plant taught us to scatter, from when it tunneled our form to many, now we split ourselves apart once more.

Again.

And again.

Until we are so many, we form a thing larger than its parts.

MY FIRST NAME WAS DROPLET

And although our consciousness will fade, still we are creation's maker, filling the land with sapphire blue. No longer constrained to one place but everywhere, all at once.

Our last name, our first and true name, finally remembered, is Sea Mother.

The Rain.



In a cove of a Greek island, **AKIS LINARDOS** was born a rather peculiar infant and has only grown stranger every year. By day, he's a researcher of biomedical AI and ethics, hoping there's something less dystopian to come from this technology. His words have wormed their way into *Apex Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Flame Tree*, and *Uncharted*, among others. Visit his website for updates on his dreadful machinations:
<http://akislinardos.com/>

WHAT THE CROWS KNOW

VALERIE KEMP

Short Story: 1,520 words

For reasons she cannot and will not fathom, Cora keeps waking up in the woods. Though she loves seeing the sun spill its first pale light over the fields as she steps out of the trees, she would prefer to see it from her bed or, even better, in photographs taken while she's still asleep. Instead, she wakes over and over, barefoot amongst the moss and leaves. Tangled in her clothes like a toddler trying to dress herself.

It wasn't so bad during the summer, but this morning the air slices into her skin. Her breath makes faint clouds as she trudges home. There'll be frost soon and what will she do then? This is the third time she's woken in the woods this week. She can't ask her parents to tie her to the bed each night.

Crows crowd the branches of the elm tree struck by lightning last spring. They watch in silence as she crosses the clearing between the woods and her house, their heads tilting in unison to follow her path. Cora searches for her favorite, the

WHAT THE CROWS KNOW

crow with the missing foot, but it's like looking for a favorite grain of sand on the beach. She walks on, hunching her shoulders against the question in their eyes. *I don't know!* She shouts at them in her mind. The crows blink, unimpressed.



Cora has never been a liar, but something about this whole thing feels like she should keep it to herself. She's researched sleepwalking — this isn't it. She checks the local news and Nextdoor app regularly. As far as she can tell, she hasn't

committed any crimes or been caught running around naked and weird. After the third time she inexplicably found herself in the woods in the early morning, she invested in a pair of sneakers and claimed a newfound love of running. She sleeps with them on every night, fully dressed, just in case. If her parents thought her new hobby strange, they never said. But then, even in the rare moments the workaholics are home, they never say much to Cora at all.

A single crow sits on the rail of her back stairs. It greets her with a *caw* before dipping its head and departing. As she watches it go, she catches sight of Silas Evans on his deck next door standing still as the dead elm tree. The intricately carved metal cover of his prosthetic leg — birds in flight — gleams with the sky's pink glow. They lock eyes. Cora holds her breath.

Time unravels — they're eight again, ready to start another day of adventures in the woods. Cora is struck by the memory that the forest was once her happy place, and Silas, her best friend. They'd spend entire days, just the two of them, lost in the magic of their shared safe space.

Theirs are the only houses on this stretch of country road — his vintage ramshackle, hers new construction — but they would've been friends anyway. Silas liked the way she pretended not to hear the yelling inside his house, and Cora liked the way Silas pretended not to notice that no one ever called for her to come home. Her chest squeezes. She'd forgotten what it's like to not feel lonely.

Cora struggles to find words to break the silence, but everything she thinks of, even *good morning*, feels fake. Too thin. It isn't a good morning and he'll know that the second she says it.

Silas has a way of seeing through people. Seeing the truth. She liked that once — the way he always seemed to know how she was feeling, what she needed — but then they got older

and she had things she wanted to keep private. Things that wouldn't help her fit in or make the connections she needs to get out of this place. And she *needs* to get out of this too white, too quiet place. The weight of all the truths Silas could see in her — some she wouldn't even admit to herself — made her feel so heavy it was hard to move.

So she avoids him now, like everyone else. School is hard enough without having to face the one person who always knows when she's pretending her life isn't suffocating — and judges her for it.

But across the patch of grass between their houses, Silas's dark eyes are, if not welcoming, not exactly unkind as they probe her from beneath his hood and slash of blue-green hair. She's struck with the sudden urge to confess everything. It pulses inside her mind like a heartbeat. *Tell him. Tell him. Tell him.* Maybe he's seen her going into the woods. Maybe he knows what happens there.

She sucks in a breath, whether it's to tell him where she's been or take in oxygen she'll never know, because just then a crow calls out in the distance. Then another, and another, their insistence like a leash, tugging, until she's forced to pull her gaze from Silas and look. The dead elm shakes with the weight of so many crows preparing for flight. They burst from the branches like black leaves in a windstorm, falling up instead of down.

A tremor rumbles through Cora. When she turns back to see if Silas felt it too, he's gone. She expects relief, but all she feels is alone.

Cora shoves her hands into her hoodie pocket and finds a small pearlescent stone inside. She pulls it out. Smooth and round, the cream-colored pebble emanates a faint blush from its center that mimics the sunrise. She remembers this stone. The single-footed crow brought it to her one lonely morning

after they shared her breakfast. Hopped right up the porch steps and dropped it in her lap. But that was weeks ago. How did it get into this pocket?

The boy, the bird, the stone, and the woods, circle through Cora's mind as she eats her oatmeal. They follow her into the shower. They peer over her shoulder while she brushes her teeth, waiting for her to meet her own gaze. Waiting for her to decide.

Courage coalesces inside her. The desire to know. The inexplicable hope for something she can't quite define, overtakes the fear that the truth will change everything. Maybe everything changing is exactly what she needs. Isn't that how growing up works? She digs the stone out of her pile of dirty laundry. The glow from earlier is gone, but when she closes her fist around it now, it vibrates subtly. Like fluttering wings. A strange certainty takes root — she needs to find Silas, and she knows where to look.



CORA NAVIGATES the dense forest by intuition. Crows follow her path from the treetops, cawing as she passes. She can *feel* Silas in that skin prickling way you know someone's watching you. She realizes she's always sensed him that way, but the last few years she's used that sense to avoid him. Now, it leads her to him.

She finds Silas far off the trail in a copse of oaks. He leans against the tallest tree, arms crossed. Relaxed in a way that says he felt her approach, too. The sight of him so assured stutters Cora's steps, steals her voice. She thrusts a shaking hand at him, the stone centered in her palm. He *knows* what it means, just like he knows everything else about her, she's sure of it.

A breeze rustles the remaining leaves in the trees, stirring

the carpeted ground. Neither of them move. Silas studies the stone, her face. The crows call — *co-RA co-RA*. Her skin prickles. Has it always sounded like her name?

Silas pushes away from the tree and reaches her in one long stride. He folds her fingers over the stone. “You still don’t remember.”

His touch triggers an avalanche of sensations. Wind slipping along her body like silk. The sun on her back. She yearns for it. “I want to.”

The caws become a chorus, building and merging until the whole forest sings. Above them, a murder of crows circles. Watching. *Waiting*.

Silas stands much closer now, his eyes piercing hers. “What else do you want?”

Cora’s breath goes ragged. Her pulse thrums. The strings that keep her so tightly held together, loosen. She looks up, up.

“Then, come play.” Silas pushes back his hood. His blue-green hair turns obsidian in the instant before he vanishes. Empty clothes hold their shape for one surreal moment before they fall. His leg hits the ground with a soft *thunk*.

Cora squeezes the stone so hard her nails split flesh. “Silas?”

A crow emerges from the crumple of fabric, hopping toward her on one foot, its stare intense. “*co-RA!*”

Her body understands what her mind cannot. She drops into the dark.

Come. Cora. Come. Play.

They call to her and she searches for them until the darkness parts. Cora pushes her way into the light. She flexes her wings. The one-footed crow nods.

Come. Play.

A sky as wide as the world waits.

She flies.

VALERIE KEMP



VALERIE KEMP WRITES speculative and contemporary fiction for all ages. Her work has appeared in *Apex Magazine*, *Haven Spec*, *Cast of Wonders*, and the anthologies *Just Above Water* and *Defy the Dark*. She is a 2022 graduate of Viable Paradise.

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GARGOYLE GIRL

SYLVIA HEIKE

Short story: 2,000 words

It was almost sundown when they arrived at the new piano teacher's house nestled in the Wishby countryside. The little gargoyle girl sat in the backseat, clutching her music book. The rumbling journey had made her a little queasy, despite being made of stone. Or perhaps it was just nerves.

A pop song crackled through the old car radio. Mother said nothing, but the gargoyle girl bit her lip to keep herself from humming. A red velvet bow streamed at the top of her head, matching her new dress. It chafed ever so slightly against her wings tucked underneath.

"We're here," Mother said and stopped the car. The gargoyle girl's queasiness subsided. Her nerves didn't.

The woman wasn't really her mother, but a young widow who had adopted her a few months ago. The gargoyle girl liked her well enough. Mother had sewn her the pretty dress and

brought her to another lesson. Too bad it had to be a piano lesson.

“Music is music,” Mother murmured, as if reading her mind, and helped her out of the car.

They were standing on top of a large hill with a big old scary-looking house looming above them, with great oaks standing vigil on either side. The house had tall gothic windows with stained glass roses, several spires, and elegant obsidian roof tiles. The gargoyle girl loved it immediately.

But then she remembered what she was here for and her shoulders slumped and she nearly dropped the music book. Mother didn’t seem to notice — she was too busy adjusting her red ribbon and white lace collar and smoothing out the hem of her dress.

“Remember what we talked about? No singing,” Mother said in a hushed voice, and rang the doorbell.

A noise not unlike the Saint Ingrid church bells sounded on the other side. The door creaked open, revealing a lady who looked at least a hundred years old. Everything about her was faded and paperlike, except the red of her lips and dove-black hair. Her eyes were a striking icy blue with tiny pinprick pupils.

“Good evening, Mrs Crenshaw,” Mother said. The gargoyle girl felt a gentle nudge on her back.

Mrs Crenshaw gave them a wan smile while locking her gaze with the girl. “Come on in, dear.”

“I’ll pick you up in an hour,” Mother called after her as Mrs Crenshaw led her into the dark, swallowing corridor.

The piano teacher’s house was as old and intimidating on the inside as on the outside. There were life-size portraits and piles of dusty tomes everywhere, dripping candles, and curious old things such as hats and canes and leather suitcases that had since long gone out of fashion.

The music room at the back of the house was lit with a

giant chandelier. A gleaming grand piano stood below it. "I'll be right with you," the teacher said and vanished to another room, leaving the gargoyle girl by herself.

The grand piano was no ordinary thing. Every leg was carved with leaves and vines, an eternal summer trapped within the wood. She ran her hand along it, half-expecting a bird to fly out. As far as pianos went, she had to admit, this was a pretty good one.

And almost everywhere she looked in the room, more musical instruments. Large wooden flutes and small silvery ones, lyres and violins and bongo drums, and a whole family of handheld contraptions she couldn't dream of naming. It made her wonder — did the piano teacher really know how to play them all, or did she just like having them around?

"Shall we get started?" The teacher appeared behind her and led her to the padded stool where she joined her. "Your mother said on the phone you've played before? A little?"

The gargoyle girl didn't correct her.

"Why don't we start with something easy? Something like this, perhaps?" The teacher opened the music book to a song about Mary and her little rambunctious lamb.

The gargoyle girl placed her fingers on the keys, straightened her back and put her chin up, and played. She finished the song with ease.

"Very good." The teacher nodded approvingly. "You've played more than a little, haven't you?" It wasn't a question. "What else can you play?"

The truth was, although the gargoyle girl hadn't made it beyond the first lesson with either of her previous piano teachers, she'd had plenty of practice before. On the church's pipe organ, that is.

Thanks to a kind deaf janitor and a number of music books *lost* under the pews and never picked up from the *found*, she'd

taught herself to play — not just church songs, but all sorts of music over the years. Mainly during thunderstorms and other ill-weathered nights when the church remained empty of visitors. And oh, how she had sung! With her voice belting from wall to wall, to a varying audience of ghosts.

Quiet, pale creatures, those ghosts. Probably stuck there either way. Not exactly ones to be called friends, not like the crows and jackdaws and pigeons on the roof. Except maybe for the little ghost dog who always wagged its tail.

I'm sorry, sweetheart. No singing. Mother's oft-repeated words suddenly echoed in her mind.

Instead of Mary and her little lamb or twinkle-twinkle-anything, the gargoyle girl gave the teacher her best rendition of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*.

Or at least, she tried. The piano, though only one row of black and white keys, behaved much differently to a pipe organ, the notes dying off as soon as a key was even lightly released. One thing remained the same. She couldn't reach any of the pedals.

While she played, lips clamped shut, her mind drifted to the previous piano teachers. The twinkling eyes of Mrs Flowers. It really was too bad what had happened to her. She'd actually liked her. Mr Harlow, not so much. He'd sat a little too close, breathed a little too heavily, tried to place a hand on her knee. Just the memory of his chimney-like smell made her shudder. Maybe he'd deserved what happened to him. Maybe his cursed confinement would last longer than anyone else's.

She finished the musical piece with an angry crescendo.

"Bravo," Mrs Crenshaw said. She seemed to ponder for a moment. "It's clear you have years of practice. Yet your mother admitted to no such thing. Look, do you even want to play the piano?"

The gargoyle girl stared at her hands on her lap.

The teacher sighed. "I thought as much. Such a gift flowing from your fingertips, yet I saw no joy on your face. Listen, child. I have plenty of other instruments. See anything else you'd like to try?"

The gargoyle girl looked around blankly. There was only one thing her little heart yearned, and it was to sing.

For centuries she had perched dormant on the cross-shaped roof of the church of Saint Ingrid on the isle of Wishby, gurgling rainwater, and watched how bright-faced children came and went with their parents, holding hands. How they sang in the choir, wearing gowns. Twenty, thirty shining faces singing together like angels. Their gilded voices rising higher and higher until vibrating the roof beneath her.

She had Mother, but she didn't know her true parents. Perhaps she had none. Perhaps she was made of the longing of the mothers in the graveyard who'd lost a baby and shed tear after tear over cold granite. Perhaps she was born of the love and dedication of the stonemason who carved her form. Or perhaps once upon a time an angel had loved a gargoyle, very, very much, like Mother said.

But despite her wings and usually sweet demeanour, she was no angel, not even a stony one.

"No instrument piques your fancy, does it?" Mrs Crenshaw creased her brow. "What about singing? I may have overheard your Mother mention it."

The gargoyle girl froze and looked into the icy blue eyes of Mrs Crenshaw. Had the teacher really heard them through the door? "I can't." She thought of Mother and her cosy pink room in her warm home where she would surely not be welcome if something bad happened again.

"Sure you can. Anyone can sing if they want to," Mrs Crenshaw said. "You just have to put your heart into it."

"Mother says I shouldn't—"

“Nonsense!” Mrs Crenshaw slapped her hands in the air and proceeded to fold the music book to good ol’ *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. “How about this one? I’m sure you know it. You sing while I play.”

The teacher started playing the song. The gargoyle girl felt a dangerous heat rising inside her, touching her heart. Her throat tickled. Oh, how she wanted to sing! Her little heart pumped like lava at the mere thought of it. But she must not. She must be good and do as she’s told and not disappoint sweet, kind Mother.

But Mother kept forgetting she was no angel.

And it’s very, very hard to contain something as hot and natural as lava. Even the earth can’t quite do it.

“Sing,” Mrs Crenshaw urged her. The only adult in the room.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star...” The gargoyle girl’s sweet childlike voice filled the room, fragile as cobwebs at first. The corners of her mouth twitched up. She was singing — and loved every second of it. Maybe everything would be all right. “How I wonder what you are...”

The teacher nodded approvingly and kept playing.

“Up above the world so high...”

The gargoyle girl’s face split open and her true features came out. Stony, ashen, grotesque. Her voice dropped several octaves. The chandelier above shook violently. Her wings grew several sizes, unfurled, and ripped through the back of her new dress.

The piano fell silent.

No, no, no. It had happened again. The piano teacher had frozen in time, fingers still on the keys, mouth slightly open. And slowly but surely, she would turn into stone.

The gargoyle girl cried out. It came out more like a roar.

Music is music, she reminded herself. But it was not so, and it was too late for that. All too late.

What would she tell Mother? What if Mother sent her away? She couldn't bear the thought of returning to the church roof, or even a roof as nice as on this house. She choked back tears of black rainwater emanating from somewhere within her.

Silence.

Then she heard something crack.

Mrs Crenshaw, pale as she was, had not turned grey. The teacher cracked her neck. Once, twice. Turned her head and stared at the gargoyle girl whose mouth hung open.

"You have quite the voice, my child," Mrs Crenshaw said dryly, rolling her shoulders. "Lucky for you, my little *gargouille*, I have a few centuries of teaching experience. It takes a lot more than an untrained voice to faze me. Although admittedly, for a moment there, you caught me by surprise."

The gargoyle girl barely registered her little face and wings changing back. "H-how are you not—"

"Not stone? Well, it helps that I'm not exactly human." Mrs Crenshaw smirked and briefly flashed her diamond-sharp fangs. "What do you say — why don't we speak to your mother and discuss a new plan for your musical education?"

When Mother picked her up after dark, the gargoyle girl hugged her for a long, long time. "Singing lessons?" Mother said, her voice airy and full of questions. "You'd love that, wouldn't you, sweetheart?" The gargoyle girl beamed and clutched her harder.

"Very well," Mrs Crenshaw said amicably. "Same time next week?"



SYLVIA HEIKE

SYLVIA HEIKE is a fantasy & science fiction writer from Finland. Her short fiction has appeared in *Flash Fiction Online*, *PodCastle*, *Nature Futures*, and more. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize and been longlisted for the BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction. When not writing, she enjoys knitting, gardening, and watching birds. Find her on Bluesky @sylviaheike or at www.sylviaheike.com.

MAZAL TOV, MAZAL TOV

Y. M. RESNIK

Short story: 3,450 words

The Sunday between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is a terrible time to wake the dead. The cemetery is too crowded. Full of nice Jewish families paying holiday visits to their deceased loved ones, asking forgiveness for sins real or imagined, beseeching the departed to intercede on their behalf with The Creator. It's hectic and sweet and not at all suited to the conversation I intend to have with my father. Which is why I took the day off from work and schlepped out here on a Monday night, right before the gates are locked and shuttered for the evening, when it will be just me and the ghosts.

It's been three years since we buried Abba and I've faithfully trekked out here every Yom Kippur to wish him a happy holiday. Last year I even donned a long skirt and sleeves so that I could escort my mother, who refuses to drive on the highway. Abba had insisted on being buried here, in America near his

living relatives, instead of with his deceased family abroad, because he wanted visitors.

That all ends today. Because today I'm not conversing with a headstone. Thanks to the little charm I found on an admittedly sketchy kabbalah website, my father is going to show up himself and we're going to talk about all the things I was too afraid to tell him when he was alive. All the things I still haven't told the rest of my family. And if he doesn't give me some kind of supportive answer, then I'm cutting my losses with all of them and never looking back.

Today I figure out how to be me, whether my family accepts me or not.

I pull the decorative stones from my bag, one pink one purple one blue. Ima used to tease me about bringing my own stones, until she realized the ground in the graveyard had been scoured clean by mourners looking to properly pay their respects. Not a rock in sight. Then she happily accepted a stone from my purse so that she could lay one down on Abba's grave.

I'd placed a stone every time I visited too. To weigh him down back into the earth where he couldn't reach out and haunt us. To mark the border between the living and the dead. Or, in this case, to shatter it.

Or so the Kabbalah website had claimed. The squiggly small print had rambled on and on about intention and act until I thought I would fall asleep from the new age music playing in the background. In the end, I decided it didn't matter. I didn't need an incantation from the zohar or a family relic from the old country. I knew who I was and my father should too. Even if he was dead.

I'm hoping from his current vantage point, he realizes that it's okay for me to want something different than what he and Ima had planned out for me. That I've got nothing to be ashamed of.

I fold my note over and over in my hands. I've bent the plain cardstock so many times on the drive over, worrying it between my fingers like a good luck charm, that I'm afraid the words are no longer legible. Maybe deep down that's what I was going for. Why my fingers are still fidgeting the edges. I force them still.

Erasing the message would erase a part of me. The part that I've been erasing every minute of every day I spend with my living relatives. I'm determined not to do the same with the dead ones. I open the paper to be sure the message is still there.

The words are scrawled in the swirling black ink of my loopy cursive rather than the tiny block letters of my print handwriting. Because I am not small and I refuse to feel that way anymore.

*Dear Abba,
I'm queer. Just thought you should know.
Love,
Baila*

I'm still the same person. I'm hoping he can see the truth in that. I still enjoy baking because it reminds me of science class, still wish I could be an actress even though it would be "immodest", still love to play chess even though there's been no one to play with since he died.

I shift my eyes over to the graves a few rows down. Zeidy's old chess buddy, Chaim Stern, is buried there. Ima insisted on giving me a tour of the "friends and family" section the last time we visited.

After Zeidy died, Abba took over his weekly chess match with Mr. Stern in prospect park. Mr. Stern's sons were all avid

players but I was the only one of Zeidy's offspring beside Abba interested in the game. Eventually they agreed to teach me the basics so I could play Mr. Stern's granddaughter Malka, but she destroyed me so quickly I refused to try again. We ended up playing on the swings for hours. Malka's green eyes sparkled with mischief as she taunted me with the fact that I would never win.

At least I'd been in good company. To Mr. Stern's delight, Malka had creamed every player foolish enough to take her on. "It means the girl has a good head on her shoulders," he'd told Abba with a wink. "Maybe she can play her husband someday."

And just like that, the memory sours. Everyone in the community was always saying stuff like that. As if all our futures were mapped out and planned.

I pull my eyes away from the Stern plot and march into my family section.

"I'm coming for you Abba."

Autumn leaves whip around the headstones where they whisper like a thousand spirits reincarnated. It carries with it the musty scent of earth and trees, reminding me of borscht. Which is ridiculous, because we only ever made borscht on Passover. Ima didn't like how the beet juice seeped through her gloves and stained her hands. But Abba had adored it, so she went all out once a year. Beet soup was their own private love language.

The wind pushes against my back, nudging me towards the grave with invisible hands, and the hairs on the back of my neck prick up. Is this his way of saying hello? A scent I could only associate with his memory?

Better not waste time then. I place the first stone down with a clink. Followed by the second and then the third, fussing to line them up exactly straight. The ground quivers

beneath me, knocking them over. It is a gentle vibration, like the hum of laughter in Abba's throat when I hugged him by surprise.

Is that him too?

The rustle of the tree branches doesn't seem upset, or angry. Simply amused. Mischievous. Branches rub up against each other conspiratorially.

"Really Abba?" I hiss at the air as the stones topple over yet again. "I'm trying to be serious here. It's not a joke."

Nope. Not a joke. Or a phase. Or some weird teenage rebellion. I am a grown woman and I want him to see that. To see me.

I jam the note towards the stones at the precise moment the wind chooses to transform into a gust, showering me with a smattering of small twigs and pebbles while snatching the note from my hand.

I curse under my breath as I chase after it, no longer worried about being sacrilegious in the graveyard. The fluttering piece of paper is headed straight for the Stern plot and the smell of borscht is intensifying. Now it's mixed with black coffee and the overpriced French aftershave Ima gifted Abba one year for Hanukkah.

Abba is definitely here and he is either highly amused or highly determined not to let me talk to him. Because he's leading me on a wild goose chase, floating the paper in front of me only to snatch it away at the last second. I can practically hear his voice in my head.

Last one up the stairs is a gebrutene genzel.

Gebrutene genzel. A burnt duck. Somehow, back in Poland, this was considered the height of hilarity. Except this graveyard is in America and I'm not laughing. I'm tripping over the too long skirt I've worn in case I run into anyone that might report back to my mother.

By the time I reach Chaim Stern's grave, where the note has landed, I am mildly disheveled, completely out of breath, and furious.

"Fine," I say, reaching to snatch up the note. "I'm going home. You'll never have to see me again."

"Who the fuck are you and why are you yelling at my grandfather?"

I freeze, hand paused over the note. A gentle breeze wafts it into the air, bringing it to rest at the combat-boot-wearing feet of the person now interrogating me.

Funny Abba. Real funny.

I straighten up to watch as the note is retrieved by a girl in jeans and a leather jacket. Her hair is thick black with an undercut on the left and bangs dyed pink that droop lazily into her emerald eyes. She flicks them away impatiently with a toss of her head. Those eyes are incredibly familiar, but there is no way I know anybody that would dress like that. Maybe she's a long lost relative of the Stern's who doesn't realize this is a religious portion of the cemetery where modesty laws are strictly upheld. The resemblance is certainly there.

"I said, what are you doing at my grandfather's grave?" She holds out the note. "Communing with the dead? Hardly seems respectful to go running through the matzaivos and then dumping notes by people you don't know."

Her tone makes me bristle. She's got deep green, mesmerizing, trademark Stern family eyes, but I can't get my own eyes off her clothes for long enough to puzzle out the mystery of her identity. How can she be so comfortable wearing jeans in the middle of the ultra-orthodox section of the cemetery? Certainly a very distant relation of the Sterns. My family is religious, but the Sterns are full on Chassids.

I cross my arms over my chest. "Disrespectful? I'm not the

one dropping f bombs and accosting random strangers as they try and ask mechila before Yom tov.”

Asking for Mechila, forgiveness, is the traditional reason to visit the graveyard before Yom Kippur. This girl has no way to know I was here intending to do the exact opposite. A plan I would like to get back to as soon as she releases my note.

“Besides,” I continue, hoping to press my point. “I’m not a stranger. Mr. Stern taught me how to play chess. I visit him before every Yom Kippur. Along with the rest of my family. And not once have I ever seen you. Believe me, I’d remember.”

I rake my eyes over her outfit, which is hugging her ample curves in a way I cannot help but notice. It sets up a pleasant heat in my body, and if this was any other time and place, I’d probably have run away by now for fear of embarrassing myself. The few attempts I’ve made to venture outside my comfort zone, once in a bar downtown and once at an LGBTQIA+ college mixer, both ended in disaster.

I’d been overwhelmed by people dressed like her, tongue tied by the possibility of them laughing at my English scattered with yiddishisms. Nervous that someone from home might spot me and alert my mother. I’d fled in terror after five minutes.

Today was supposed to start me on the path to fixing all that. Except here I am again, shrinking and uncomfortable, unable to express myself.

Well, if I’m going to be pegged as the overly religious girl because of my long sleeves and Brooklyn accent, then I might as well lean in and use the stereotype to my advantage. I glare at the rainbow tattoo peeking out from her left sleeve.

“Yes,” I declare. “I would definitely remember you.”

Instead of the flush of embarrassment I was hoping for, she bursts into laughter. It’s not a few discreet giggles either. The

full-throated joy that escapes her mouth is deep and lush like thunder rolling down a mountainside.

“Seriously Baila?” She gasps in between hiccups. Her laughter is full of joy, not mockery or derision. A gentle tease from a friend I’ve long forgotten. “You didn’t internalize too many of Zeidy Sterns lessons if you take everything at surface value. No wonder I always beat you at chess.”

Something about the way she says my name, the Yiddish rolling off her tongue smooth as water, is undeniable. The leaves rustle around me again as I am transported back in time to hundreds of afternoons spent in the park, loitering around the chess board with a green-eyed pixie of a girl that was always chasing squirrels and skinning her knees.

“Malka Stern?” The words drop for my mouth in a surprised tumble. It just isn’t possible that this confidently queer woman is my chasidishe childhood playmate. “What are you doing here?”

I don’t ask the million and one questions I want to ask about what changed since the last time I saw her, all dolled up in a puffy dress and huge bouffant hairdo, at her cousins Pinchas’s wedding five years ago. Clearly, I’ve missed a few things.

Her mouth twists into a rueful smile. “I could ask you the same thing,” she says, but the words have no bite in them. Now that she knows who I am, she’s no longer all jagged edges and hard lines. “I come every year to see Zeidy. Except lately I come at night or on the off times. The rest of my family wouldn’t necessarily appreciate my presence. Not dressed like this anyway. But I like to think none of that stuff matters anymore to Zeidy.”

The green in her eyes mists over a little, like dewdrops on ivy, and the wind whips at my back, pushing me towards her. The smell of borscht is back again.

Abba is trying to tell me something. Something important.

Malka leans against the headstones in a casual way that I envy. It tells me that she's comfortable in those jeans, in that hair, with that tattoo. She didn't come here on the off hours because she's ashamed or afraid. She won't change who she is for her family, she simply doesn't want the heartache of offending them.

Kind of like how she used to offer to end the game early when it was clear I was losing. She was always polite that way. Even when she was infuriating.

"This isn't exactly my favorite mode of attire either," I admit. "But I didn't have the guts to show up here in anything less."

I tug at the collar of my blouse. Itching to be rid of the high neckline. I may not have gone as far as jeans and bomber jackets like Malka, but it's been a while since I wore anything higher than a crew neck. The top couple buttons come undone under my fingers and Malka's eyes widen into saucers when she spots my necklace with its two interlocking silver crescents.

Sapphic crescents.

That charm is the one little rebellion I allow myself around my family. They'll never see it tucked away under my shirt, much less understand what it means. Except Malka apparently understands well enough. Which sends a little shiver down my spine. I've never told anyone before and the very fact of her seeing that necklace, seeing me, is exhilarating and terrifying all at once.

"Oh," she says, giving me a little head nod. "How long's it been?"

I hitch my collar up higher. A step back into the shell I had been planning to shed today. "Long enough."

She must sense the hesitancy in my vague answer because

her shoulders droop, the defensive stance of earlier all but obliterated in the small step she takes towards me, holding my letter.

“Hey that’s OK,” she says. “You don’t owe me anything.”

It is the safest I’ve felt around another person in my entire life. Because she’s right. I don’t owe her anything. In fact, the only one I owe anything to is myself. And I came here to be seen. Only, maybe I also owe myself the freedom to come out to an actual living breathing person who can communicate acceptance back to me. Which, if I’m being honest, is not something Abba can provide in his current state.

But maybe Malka can.

I take the note from her hands and begin shredding it into a hundred little pieces of confetti. Because if I’m giving away this piece of myself, then I’d like to do it properly, out loud with another living breathing human, not with a note to the deceased.

My fingers work furiously, so absorbed in tearing apart every ounce of frustration about my family that I’ve bottled up until now. I hardly notice the wind picking up and sending the ravaged paper swirling around both of us.

“I guess I’ll leave you to it,” Malka says, clearly sensing I’m working through some stuff and mistakenly trying to give me space. “My Uber will be here in a couple of minutes anyway. I was sorry to hear about your dad. I would’ve come to the shiva but my family isn’t really speaking to me, so I didn’t find out until it was too late.”

“Wait!” She can’t leave now. Not when I’ve decided that she’s the person I actually need to talk with today.

The smell of borscht is overwhelming as she starts to walk away. A little trail of paper scampers on the breeze as she turns back around. Abba again. Even though I’ve decided I don’t need his permission to be myself, he feels the need to stick

around and interfere. To reassure me that he already knows. That he has always known.

“Hey Malka?” I ask. She pauses, then turns around to eye me hopefully. The shredded note detritus comes to rest at the toe of her boot. I could swear it’s heart shaped. “You want a ride?”

She grins, her face lighting up like a million fireflies in the night as she punches in the cancellation code for the Uber to her phone. “I still have Zeidy’s chess board. If you want to come over for a game. I will agree not to beat you so horribly this time as a thank you for the ride.”

I blush, recalling how many times I lost to her.

“Who says you’ll win at all?” I counter, steering her towards my waiting vehicle and away from the headstones. “A lot has changed since you last saw me.”

Her face grows serious, eyebrows pinching together under her runaway bangs. “I can see that.”

She pauses, biting her lower lip as if she is unsure whether or not to continue. She’s giving me an opening. I only have to find the courage to take it. I take a deep breathe and look straight into those cat green eyes.

“I’m bisexual by the way.”

There it is. Out in the open. My delivery was awkward as fuck, but I’ve claimed the word for my own. That’s victory enough for today. I can try for a more tactful approach the next time I choose to come out to someone.

“Thank you Baila, for trusting me with that.” Malka returns my gaze measure for measure. “I know it can’t have been easy. I’ve been there myself. Lesbian.”

Which is a small gift she gives me in return. Her casual assertion of her own identity simultaneously lets me know that she accepts me, that this is totally normal, and that life is

just a series of coming out over and over again for people like us.

We stand in silence for a minute, looking out over the graves, each of us thinking our own private thoughts.

“You think they know?” she finally asks.

She doesn’t have to explain further. The weight of the words we’ve left unsaid is heavier than the piles of rocks we’ve left on the headstones.

“I like to think they do. We don’t call it the world of truth for nothing after all.”

She nods once, then pops into the car. I give the headstones one more cursory glance, Maybe the afterlife doesn’t have to be the only place for my identity to thrive. Because my truth is waiting for me in that car, behind a pair of green eyes that are very much alive.



Y. M. RESNIK (she/her) is a writer living in the Tri-State area. her debut novel, *The Elysium Heist*, came out July 2025. When not writing, she can be found collecting tiaras and trying not to kill her houseplants. You can keep up with her at ymresnik.com.

THE FACE OF A GOD

H. V. CROW

Short story: 1,000 words

“**T**he wrath of Lord Apollo and the favor of that same god often look the same. It is often called his wrath that he sent you spiraling to your tragic death, but I have often wondered if it could have been him reaching to touch you, just as you reached to touch him.”

“I could not tell you, my lady, even if I knew.”

“Did you feel alone as you fell?”

“I suppose. I could feel the misery and panic of my father. He knew there was no saving me. He was adored by Lady Athena. He knew I would die the moment the wax began to drip.”

“That is what your father felt. But I did not ask what your father felt. What about you? What did you feel?”

“Perhaps I felt alone. I do not know what I felt. There was a panic, yes, but in that moment, I also tasted freedom. I knew what it was to fly. I knew what it was to fall.”

“And that was freedom?”

“Oh, yes. Every moment of it was nothing but freedom. I touched the sky, my lady. I felt the sun and the clouds. And, as I fell, I felt the sea. Eventually, it was the soft embrace of death. It was painful, sure, but it was free.”

“How could death, could Erebus, be free?”

“I spent most of my life trapped in that wretched labyrinth. I was free of it. I still am.”

“But this here, this is a different kind of prison. You cannot leave this kingdom. You are, once again, trapped. Like every other soul. Like they believe me to be.”

“Perhaps. But this is a trapping of my own choice.”

“You chose to fall? To die?”

“Not consciously. But perhaps. I was drunk on the taste of freedom. I reached for Lord Apollo. In his glory, he may have reached back.”

“If you were given a second chance, would you have chosen differently? Would you still leave your father over the sea with nothing but the taste of grief in his mouth?”

“I do not think so, no. I fell to my death content. I fell knowing I had touched the face of a god. That satisfied me at the time, and still does.”

“Strange. I do not understand.”

“I would not expect you to, my lady.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am a mortal. To touch the face of a god means everything to me. You are a goddess. To touch the face of a god means nothing to you. You may touch the face of a god any time you desire. You need only to lift your hands to your own fair face.”

“I suppose that makes sense. It is not something rare to me as it is to you.”

“For a mortal like me, it is worth dying for.”

“What of your father?”

“What of him?”

“He did not try to touch the face of a god. He simply flew away. Why did you reach for Lord Apollo, but he did not?”

“My father knew kings, and monsters, and gods. He was familiar with immortals and what they were like. He did not need to touch the face of Lord Apollo to understand.”

“He understood? But how?”

“Like I said, Lady Athena liked him. He was a favorite of hers, much like Odysseus. She allowed him knowledge many others do not have. I do not fully understand, but he had an understanding I did not possess.”

“The Lady Pallas Athena. I have always known her to make choices outside our understanding, for reasons that do not make sense to us.”

“My father was one of those. If it is amenable to you, I’d like to ask you a question, my lady.”

“Ask, then.”

“If you could go back to your original stay in Erebus, would you have eaten the pomegranate?”

“I do not know.”

“Why do you not know? It is a fairly simple question.”

“But is it really? Or is the matter much more complex than you realize? My husband is not all terrible. He is a sweet man. He loves me dearly. He has never gone around with mortal girls like Zeus, or wrought destruction upon a town over a simple insult like Poseidon. I would never want to change this.

“But I will always be the girl who was kidnapped. There will never be a version of my story where I am not tricked, stolen, or wronged in some way. That is something I wish I could change.”

“Did you choose to eat the pomegranate?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know what it would mean to eat in Erebos?”

“No.”

“Then what choice are you doubting? Is it that one? Another?”

“I do not know.”

“I have never once been asked if falling was a choice. It was not. It was a consequence. My choice was to reach for Lord Apollo, and I fell happy. Your choice was to eat. To trust the food around you. The consequence is your months spent here. Now, if it is still amenable to you, I’d like to ask you the same question again, my lady.”

“Ask again, then.”

“If you could go back, would you choose differently?”

“I still do not know.”

“But?”

“I think I am alright with not knowing. I am not alright with not being able to tell my story. I am not alright with always being the wronged little girl. But perhaps I do not need to know if I would change my choices.”

“Your choices made you who you are, my lady.”

“Just like you.”

“Yes. Just like me.”

“I must return to the palace. Thank you for speaking with me. Our conversation today was ... enlightening.”

“It was my pleasure, my lady.”

“One more question, Icarus?”

“I will answer if I can.”

“Did you really fall smiling?”

“I tasted freedom, Lady Persephone. I touched the face of the sun. I touched the face of Lord Apollo. I fell laughing.”



THE FACE OF A GOD

H. V. Crow is a young writer in St. Charles, MO. They write what they love, and love what they write. They hope to make the world a better, more hopeful place with their loving words.

THE WITCH'S CAT

JULIA LAFOND

Short story: 3,450 words

I'm smarter, faster, stronger, and more devastatingly handsome than any housecat. As a witch's cat, I have to be. It's my solemn duty to protect my witch from any threats, be they vengeful spirits or filthy rodents. It's difficult — dangerous, even — but it's a small price to pay for sharing in her magic.

At least, that's how it's *supposed* to work.

Patricia, who insists on being called “Patty” to sound less like “a grandmother,” hasn't cast a single spell in the seven months since she adopted me. If I didn't know any better, I'd think she wasn't a witch at all, but her aura is so strong I'm constantly having to drive off strays hoping to get a slice of that sweet, sweet magic (which would be much easier if she let me outside, but I digress). Her power could bring the entire neighborhood to its knees if she'd just *use it*! Then she wouldn't have to worry about leaky plumbing or cat food

prices or whatever other pointless human things she dithers about.

With nothing better to do, I resign myself to another nap atop the carpeted contraption she insists on calling a "tree." But just when I've gotten comfortable, her voice rings out.

"Here, Caspian!"

I curl up tighter. If she wants me bad enough, she can cast a proper summoning. At least she wouldn't be able to keep acting like she doesn't know how to use her magic.

Then it hits me: Neither her family nor any of her friends have the faintest spark of magic. Of course she never learned any spells. She might not even know she *is* a witch!

"Hey, Caspian!" She shakes a bag of treats. "Here, Kitty!"

I hurry over, and not just for the chicken crunchies: if she doesn't have any other teacher, I'll have to do it myself. Surely it won't be too difficult for someone as naturally talented as me.

"Now, Patricia," I say, leaning my paws against her knees, "I know it's normally the witch who speaks first—"

Patty abruptly deposits me on the counter. Before I can compose myself, she's frantically tapping the wall with a yardstick.

"Get it, Caspian!" she squeaks, holding herself as far away from the spider as she can.

"Must we do this right now?" I moan.

She keeps urging me onward, so I stretch, readying myself to dispatch this pathetic creature for her; it's hard not to feel insulted at how easy this will be.

I creep closer, find my balance, and spring. My paws land on empty wall; the spider has already jumped aside with unnatural speed, and I finally notice the purple markings — it's a Venomskull Spider. It's a good thing my witch is afraid of spiders, because if she tried to kill it herself...

“Leave this to me, Patricia,” I growl, hunkering down in preparation for a real challenge. “You’ll only get in my way.”

Of course she doesn’t listen. She stays close, hovering in the door to the kitchen like she’s worried I might let my quarry escape. Hardly. This battle will have only one victor, and that victor will be me.

The spider has scuttled further up the wall, so I clamber up the cabinets, wishing I could levitate myself — one more reason to teach my witch how to use and *share* that magic of hers. Before I spring, the spider leaps at me. I flip out of the way before it can touch me, dropping all the way to the floor.

“Caspian, are you all right?” Patricia cries, rushing toward me.

I puff up my tail in warning. “Stay back!”

As if to prove my point, the spider parachutes after me. Patricia shrieks and retreats to the doorway.

If I were an ordinary cat, I might have attacked the spider midair, only to send it flying out of reach. Instead I wait patiently and pounce the moment it lands, crushing it beneath my paws. The smell is like week-old garbage left out in the sun, and probably tastes even worse.

I limp over to Patricia. “Ordinarily I’d never ask, but could you give me a...” I almost choke. “Bath?”

“Oh, no, you hurt your little paw?” Patricia scoops me up, poking and squeezing my forefoot like there might be a problem other than the rancid venom soaking into my fur.

Unable to bear such indignity, I somersault out of her grasp. “Now listen here—”

“Guess you’re all right. Oh, good kitty! You killed that scary spider for me, yes you did!”

She keeps prattling about my victory in a tone better suited for a toddler taking their first steps. Eventually I storm off. If

she wants to hear the *very important* things I have to say, she's going to have to apologize first.

I'm about done bathing myself when she shoves her phone in my face.

"Say hi to my mom, Caspian!"

Utterly disgusted by her brazenness, I flounce away.

"Please?" she begs, keeping her phone pointed at me.

"No!" I yell. "Besides, she won't understand me!" My words are solely for my witch, no matter how little she listens to them.

"See?" crows Patricia, no longer following me. "Can you believe his voice is so *trilly*?"

I crawl under her bed to get some peace and quiet, wondering why Patricia was acting like I was some sort of... of...

Housecat.

She didn't understand a single word I said.

I curl up into a ball, wondering what it will take for her to realize she's a witch.



MAGICSUCKER MICE's single-minded focus on their target is also their greatest weakness: this one is too busy stalking Patricia to notice me stalking it. It's over in a single pounce.

Now to present my witch with its corpse. Surely such a high-caliber offering, so much better than the measly Venom-skull Spider and Deathwatch Beetles I gave her yesterday, will awaken Patricia's instincts for the arcane.

She's in the kitchen, sipping the only thing she ever brews: coffee. When she spots me, she groans, "It's too early for this."

I deposit my vanquished prey at my feet, patiently waiting for her to recognize what a valuable bounty it is.

“Good boy, Caspian,” she says, in a tone more cloying than sincere. “Thank you for killing that mousie for me.”

Patricia bustles past me, scooping the dead mouse into the dustbin. The fruit of my labor, relegated to the garbage.

All right then. I’ll just have to teach her some respect.

I leap onto the table. The second she re-enters the kitchen, I nudge her mug to the edge.

She freezes in place. “Don’t you dare!”

A flick of my paw sends the mug flying. She’ll never make it in time, so if she wants to save the nasty-smelling liquid, she’ll have to use telekinesis.

She doesn’t. She lunges forward just in time for the mug to shatter against the floor, splashing coffee everywhere.

“Caspian! Bad kitty!”

My witch unceremoniously dumps me in the laundry room, groaning and griping to herself as she cleans up the wreckage. Before I can so much as rid myself of the disgusting brown droplets, I hear the increasingly familiar scuttle of a Venomskull Spider.

We go back and forth, making so much noise Patricia must realize something is wrong. But not even once I finally fell the dreadful creature, letting silence reign once more, does she open the door. She truly takes me for granted.

Since my witch won’t accept my offering, I consume it instead. A faint tendril of magic curls through me: so little I wouldn’t notice if it weren’t for the unrelenting absence gnawing at me. No witch’s cat should have to scavenge bugs, yet here I am, on my own again, licking up every last drop of foul venom. But maybe if I store up enough magic of my own, I can *show* Patricia a spell.



THE WITCH'S CAT

THE CREATURES ATTRACTED by my witch's magic are increasingly frequent, bold, and strong. Just after dawn I even caught a Spindlenewt creeping around in Patricia's bedroom, and though I defeated it, its insidious magic made me drowse off. By the time I awoke, my witch had already thrown out its corpse, denying me the opportunity to replenish the strength I expended saving her from unending slumber.

She doesn't know any better, but it's hard not to resent how she hoards her magic. Still, that's exactly why I'm doing this: once I teach her to be a proper witch, she'll finally appreciate what I do for her and compensate me accordingly.

"Breakfast, Caspian!"

A full serving of tuna awaits me. Once I finish feasting, I rub up against her legs, thoroughly enjoying having my ears scratched, and I forgive her.

A Magicsucker darts toward my witch. It's an unwelcome reminder of just how little magic I've scraped together, but I don't have time to dwell on it.

I leap at the mouse, and in my sleep deprivation, I miss. Luckily Patricia has crawled up onto a chair, begging me to end its life. The Magicsucker uselessly scrabbles at the chair's spindly legs trying to reach her. I stalk forward slowly, then with one measured strike, put it out of its misery.

"Good Caspian," Patricia gushes from the safety of her chair. "Wait, no, don't eat that!"

Lest she attempt to stop me by force, I carry it under her bed to devour in privacy. The mouse's power flows into me, and at long last, I have enough to cast a single spell.

Once I decide on a simple but flashy spell, I saunter over to my witch.

"Watch and learn, Patricia! They call this a Ghost's Lantern."

My power coalesces into an orb of bluish light, and I send it

darting around the hall. She stares slack-jawed. It's almost funny how overawed she is when she's capable of so much more, but it's a start. Now that she knows the truth of magic, she'll have to accept what she is.

When the Lantern fades, I stare at her expectantly.

"Why didn't I film that?" she groans, pulling her phone out of her pocket. "Nobody will ever believe I saw ball lightning right here in my house!"

Ears back and tail bristling, I storm away. Ball lightning. She thinks it's *ball lightning*. I could probably levitate myself around the house and she'd just chalk it up to "the zoomies." She will never be a proper witch, and I will never get my share of her magic.

I hover by the front door, staring up at its wooden expanse. I'm strong enough to survive on my own — that's how I spent my whole life before ending up at that shelter. If I gather up enough magic for telekinesis, I could let myself out. It goes against all my duties, but how can I be bound by a partnership that doesn't exist? Patricia might be sad if I leave, but sooner or later she'll replace me. Maybe with the mangy tabby that's been hanging around no matter how much I hiss at it through the window — Patricia certainly likes petting it enough.

The idea of a new life is more tantalizing than a can of tuna. No more fighting off endless waves of vermin while being treated like a mindless housecat; I can find a proper witch to partner with, sharing in their magic as I come into my own as their familiar.

A chill prickles down my spine, making my fur stand on end. I'm not sure what or even how, but my instincts are screaming that something just *heard me*.



THE NEXT COUPLE days slip by as uneventfully as possible given we're being besieged by vermin unchecked by any wards. Still, I can't shake the feeling something is brewing. Considering my recent luck, I can't help but expect catastrophe.

My worst fears are confirmed when I hear Patricia's sobs.

Is she dying of Skullvenom? Being drained by a Magic-sucker? No, it doesn't matter; I have to hurry. Maybe, just maybe, it's not too late.

When I bolt into her room, she's huddled under her comforter, but her aura is bright as ever. I hop onto the bed next to her, sniffing around for any sign of what's wrong, and quickly conclude she's just sad: probably about some silly human problem she could solve with a snap of her fingers if she stopped denying what she is. I should go resume my perimeter, in case any *real* problems slip inside.

I pace closer.

"I don't know what's wrong," I sigh, headbutting her arm, "but it'll pass."

Sniffing, Patricia scoops me into her lap. "Good Caspian," she chokes out. "You're such a good kitty." For some reason, she starts crying even harder.

I snuggle up against her, purring like she's a frightened kitten — right now she certainly seems like one.

Her tears chased away by my irresistible charm, Patty coos at me like I'm a housecat, but for the first time, I wonder whether that's really such a bad thing.



THE KNOCK on the door is unsettling enough, but what's really making my fur stand on end is the unfamiliar aura. Patty doesn't know any other witches, so who are they and why are they here?

Patty goes to the door like she's expecting them. I can't decide whether it's a good or bad sign.

Standing on the front porch is a woman who's taller and thinner than Patty, and with a much hungrier smile.

"Thank you so much for having me," the other witch gushes. "Please, may I come in?"

I let out a warning growl. Patty has no idea just how vulnerable she'll be making herself by issuing an invitation.

"Caspian, it's okay!" Patty gestures the visitor inside; the magic in the air shifts as she becomes a guest. "I'm sorry, he's always skittish, so—"

The witch gasps "Oh, it's him all right!" She stoops down on one knee, holding out her hand. "Fluffy, do you remember me?"

I don't know what she's talking about, but if she comes any closer I'll take a swipe at her.

Her lips don't move, but her voice whispers in my ear: *Don't you want a new witch?*

She's the one who heard me. I wanted a better life, and now she's here to fulfill my wish. But why wait until now?

"He doesn't seem to recognize you," Patty says, and her frown can't conceal the undercurrent of hope. "Are you sure it's him?"

The witch smiles up at her, though it can't conceal her undercurrent of irritation. "I'm sure my little runaway will warm up to me once he gets a whiff of my scent."

Play along already! This is supposed to be a reunion!

Oh, so that's what's going on: she's claiming to be my owner from before I ended up in the shelter. Clever story, especially since there's nobody to contest it: I was on my own before Patty took me in.

I pad forward hesitantly, wondering what this other witch is like. Will she feed me well? What's her house like? Does she

live in a coven where I might have to put up with other witch's cats? All I really know is that her magic isn't just decorative.

"Oh, Fluffy, I've missed you so much!" She waggles her pointy nails, which would be even better for ear scratches than Patty's are. "I'm glad Patty's been taking such good care of you for me."

Some instinct makes me glance at Patty, who's on the verge of tears. My ears droop as I realize what she was crying about yesterday: me. She doesn't want to give me up.

This is all happening so fast my head is spinning, but the least I owe my witch is a proper goodbye. I tear myself away from the other witch and rub against Patty's legs.

"You can get another cat," I say, even though neither of them can understand me. "I *want* to stay, it's just that..."

My tail droops as I realize it's true: I like Patty. She feeds me, plays with me, cuddles me, and most important of all, cares about me. So what if she thinks I'm a housecat? So what if she doesn't use her magic? So what if it draws ever-growing hordes of magic creatures? I can scavenge the strength to protect her. She's *my* witch, and I belong with her.

The other witch wiggles her fingers at me, beckoning me closer. *Make up your mind!*

I already have, so I turn up my nose and stalk away.

Patty wipes her eyes. "He can be such a little brat sometimes. Maybe a little more time?" Despite her words, her hope is stronger than ever. She might not know the truth of the bond we share, but she can feel it.

So be it.

The click-click-click of Deathwatch Beetles ring out in unison. I turn around slowly, all my fur standing on end, to see the other witch has stopped smiling. Did she really come here for my sake, or was it because I let slip my witch was practically defenseless?

“Patricia, was it?” she says, slipping a wand out of her purse. “Do you—”

I’m faster than an ordinary housecat, so I dart across the room and knock it out of her hand before she can finish her sentence. It rolls across the hardwood floor. Too late I realize I’ve just cornered myself, and the witch has turned her attention solely on me.

“Caspian!” scolds Patty. “I’m sorry, he—”

The other witch silences her with a sneer, giving me just enough time to dart past her. My feline instincts are screaming at me to keep running, but I plant myself in front of Patty, growling and spitting at the intruder. Anyone who wants to harm *my* witch will have to go through *me*.

That can be arranged.

Magic like a Spindlenewt’s washes over me. I’m tired. I’m more tired than I’ve ever been in my life. My head nods, but I can’t let myself close my eyes with a threat standing right in front of me.

“Just go down already!”

“What did you say?” Patty growls. The sheer anger in her voice jars me awake.

The other witch’s breath hisses in; she didn’t mean to speak aloud. “I said—”

“You threatened my cat.”

Patty steps in front of me, as if *she’s* trying to protect *me*. I have no idea what to do about that, so I ready myself to pounce in case the other witch tries anything else.

“No, no, no! That’s not what—”

Patty points at the door. “Get out!”

The other witch sneers, drawing herself up to her full height. “If you don’t want to be civil, then I won’t be.”

I hurl myself at her too late: she blasts Patty with telekinesis. A blow with that much magic behind it will be

more than enough to break every bone in my witch's body. The other witch calls up the dregs of her spell, forcing me to float back at a snail's pace. Now even vengeance is out of my reach.

A pair of familiar arms closes around me.

"I said," growls Patty, "*GET OUT!*"

Magic, Patty's magic that she doesn't know how to use, lashes out at the witch. There's a puff of smoke, and the witch is suddenly outside.

"That's not possible!" she shrieks, though the closed door spares our ears from the worst of it. "You can't—"

"Are you going to make me come out there?" roars Patty, her aura a wildfire of barely contained rage. I'm not sure she even realizes what she's done. I've never seen her like this, and don't want to ever again.

The witch came here to prey on a defenseless novice and her disloyal cat; having found neither, she retreats. The Death-watch Beetles fall silent.

"Caspian, are you all right?" Patty holds me up at arm's length, searching for nonexistent injuries.

"Fine, aside from my dignity," I sigh.

Patty's eyes bulge. "Did you just *talk*?"

Oh, right: she finally used her magic. Apparently what it took was thinking she might lose me and end up on her own, like I used to be.

"I did," I reply, knowing the best thanks will be an explanation. "You, Patty, are a witch. That makes me a witch's cat for as long as you'll have me."

"Always," she snuffles, hugging me tight. "You'll always be my cat."

I snuggle closer, glad to have chosen and been chosen by such a good witch, and even more glad we'll never again be alone.

JULIA LAFOND



JULIA LAFOND GOT her master's in geoscience from Penn State University. She's had flash fic published in venues such as *Nunum*, *James Gunn's Ad Astra*, *Radon Journal*, and *Worlds of Possibility*, and she also writes TTRPG content under the brand Calenmir's RPGs. In her spare time, Julia enjoys reading and gaming. Website: <https://jklafondwriter.wordpress.com/>

PART THREE
LOVERS

LET THE MOTHMAN IN

RACHAEL K. JONES

Short story: 1,000 words

Jenny first encountered Mothman on the day Dad died. The cryptid was crammed inside the fridge, displacing the two middle shelves, his fuzzy antennae digging into the milk.

In the living room, Mom was arguing with Dad again. Dad had a bulging green duffel bag slung over his shoulder and his car keys in one hand.

“Hey Dad,” Jenny said.

He paused halfway to the door. “What do you need, Sweetheart?”

“There’s a moth in the fridge.”

He stood there frowning, his fingers clutching the door-knob. He never even looked back at Jenny. “It’s just a moth. Kill it yourself.”

Dad left the house, but he never came back.

Mom said there was no way to prevent the car accident, but Jenny knew the truth. Mothman was a harbinger of doom. He always appeared before something went wrong. There was a bridge collapse not far from here after some college students saw him a few decades back, and a series of apartment bombings in Moscow after people saw him there in 1999.

Mothman tried to warn her about Dad, too, but Jenny had failed to listen.

People told a lot of tales about Mothman. Mothman had red eyes. Mothman had 10-foot wings and hailed from West Virginia. Or maybe he didn't. That was the beauty of cryptids. They were whatever you made of them. They were a missed opportunity, a what-if, all the things you appreciated only after you lost them.



JENNY SAW Mothman again three years later in the pantry at Violet's house. Jenny was hunting for some microwave popcorn, but instead found Mothman plastered to the ceiling, wings outstretched, blocking the light. His bulbous red eyes glowered down at her. He slowly chewed on a white-striped sock as she backed out and closed the pantry door.

She didn't know what kind of doom could befall her at Violet's house. Violet was round and cute and smelled like cinnamon. She read vampire novels and did charity walk-a-thons on weekends.

Violet made room for Jenny on the couch when she came back with the popcorn. They started the movie — something with vampires in it. It was only an hour later when Violet leaned her head on Jenny's shoulder that Jenny guessed the nature of Mothman's warning.

Violet tilted her face upward, her lips parted in an

unspoken question that Jenny longed to answer. But Violet's eyes reflected a flicker of Mothman-red. Jenny pulled away.

Anyone who has met Mothman knows some risks aren't worth the consequences.



MOTHMAN APPEARED three more times that week. First in Jenny's hallway closet, chewing a hand-sized hole in her new wool overcoat right over the heart. Jenny was supposed to meet Violet for coffee, but she quietly canceled her plans.

It happened again later that night when Violet texted Jenny to check on her. Jenny was pulling on her pajama pants with one hand and holding her cell in the other. The phone tumbled to the floor and skidded under the bed. There was Mothman, his giant wings scrunched against the box springs, nibbling the fringe off a red wool scarf.

The text went unanswered.

That only made Violet desperate. She showed up at Jenny's door with a bouquet of daisies. "Are you avoiding me?" she asked, which shattered Jenny's heart. Jenny didn't know how to tell Violet she was only protecting her.

"Bad things happen to people who get too close to me," Jenny admitted. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"But you're hurting me *now*," said Violet, clutching the bouquet so tight her knuckles went white.

Jenny almost relented. But over Violet's shoulders, a dark shadow settled upon the lamppost, and two red eyes glittered in the dark.

"I have to go," said Jenny. "I'm sorry." She closed the door in Violet's face, trying to ignore the gentle sobbing on the doorstep.

In the morning, a moth-eaten child's mitten lay on the doorstep, tangled with wilted daisies.

"I'm *trying*," Jenny told the mittens. "What else do you want from me?"



THE LAST STRAW was when Mothman turned up in the shower, bending the nozzle beneath his weight as he snacked on a towel. Jenny screamed at him with the force of her broken heart. She yanked the towel from his proboscis and began whipping him with it. Mothman hopped and fluttered, trying to get away, but he bumped up against the ceiling. He looked genuinely surprised, like he couldn't understand the force of her anger.

"Leave me alone!" she shouted. "Get out of here!" She opened a window, and Mothman zoomed outside in a black blur.

Jenny felt bad about it immediately after. Jenny didn't like yelling. Her mom yelled enough for two people. He had looked so scared of her, so bewildered.

The next time Mothman turned up — inside the armoire — Jenny took the time to look at him. *Really* look at him. His red, watery eyes. His long, curling nose. The ugly Christmas sweater stuffed defiantly down his throat.

Maybe she had been wrong all along about Mothman. Maybe he didn't make the doom. Maybe he was just hungry. Maybe he had a mothball allergy and nowhere else to go.

Maybe he didn't show up to drive people apart. Maybe he just didn't want anyone to miss their chance at connection.

Jenny rounded up the half-eaten scarf, the overcoat, the mittens, and piled them on the bed. "Stay awhile," she told

Mothman, raising her hands to show him she meant peace. "Have as much as you'd like. I want you to meet someone."

Mothman must have harbored some resentment about the towel, because he took his time unfolding himself from the armoire. But he didn't try to flee.

Jenny called up Violet. Time to accept her doom. "There's a moth in my room," she said. "Do you want to see it?"

"I'll be right over," said Violet.

They stayed up late with vampire movies and popcorn, and Mothman snacked on the towels.



RACHAEL K. JONES grew up in various cities across Europe and North America, picked up (and mostly forgot) six languages, and acquired several degrees in the arts and sciences. Now she writes speculative fiction in Portland, Oregon. Contrary to the rumors, she is probably not a secret android. Rachael is a World Fantasy Award nominee and Tiptree Award honoree. Her fiction has appeared in dozens of venues worldwide, including *Lightspeed*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Strange Horizons*, and all four Escape Artists podcasts. Follow her on Bluesky @RachaelKJones.bsky.social, or find her at www.Rachael-KJones.com.

PRINCESS REIMAGINED

BETH GODER

Drabble: 100 words

A cloak of red. A poisoned apple. Glass slippers at a ball.
A tower high. Three drops of blood.
She'd lived each one. Each incarnation.

She smashed the uncomfortable glass slippers. Ate the apple whole. Her blood sang a warning, which she ignored. She climbed down her tower and married the wolf, who turned into a prince at night, dancing with twelve princesses, until she trapped him in a house made of straw and sticks and fine, red bricks.

She slept and slept, shunning every kiss, until a woman with dragon eyes found her.

Together, they wrote their own story.



BETH GODER is an archivist and author. Over fifty of her short

PRINCESS REIMAGINED

stories have appeared in venues such as *Escape Pod*, *F&SF*, *Analog*, *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and Horton's *The Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy*, among others. You can find her online at <http://www.bethgoder.com>.

A HINT OF CINNAMON, A WHIFF OF MINT

AMANDA SAVILLE

Short story: 1215 words

The sea tasted of scales and kelp through Erika's fingers, the salty brine soothing her frothing nerves. *Okay. Amy will be here any moment. I need to decide. If I find a shell first, I'll tell her. If it's a piece of trash, I won't tell her. Okay, maybe not tonight at least. I need to tell her. Ohhh c'mon you sponge, get it together! Wait, is that a clam shell or a plastic bowl?*

"Erika! That's not where we're supposed to meet!"

Erika straightened up with a yelp, her arms flailing a bit too much like those dancing inflatable noodle men the local used car lot seemed so enamored with. *Great, that's a lovely look.* "Sorry! I was looking for shells! Or trash! Or something!"

She waded out of the ocean, the sand gritty between her toes, tasting of earth and cigarette ash. Amy drew her like a lure. She was a beacon in the dark, from the glitter of her purple eyeshadow to the glint of pins on her denim jacket.

Amy held out a Tupperware container. "I figured you might be. That's why I brought bait, just in case."

For one brief, blissful moment, all of Erika's anxieties darted away. "You didn't. You made fudge, didn't you? Have I told you lately you're the absolute best? Because you're the absolute best."

They plopped down on the beach and Amy opened the container with a pop and a smile. Erika selected a cube from the wax paper and suppressed a shiver. Her sense of taste was always dulled in human form, like trying to eat salmon through a sock, but Amy's fudge broke through everything. Erika swam in chocolate, smooth and silky and flavored with just a hint of cinnamon, the way everything Amy made seemed to be, her own personal taste infusing into her creations. Then Erika remembered she had to actually eat it and placed it in her mouth, closing her eyes in delight.

"I think you're the only one who likes it when I make sweet things." Amy said, laughing.

"What're you talking about?" Erika asked between mouthfuls of fudge.

Amy shrugged. "My family doesn't care much for it. They're very meat and potatoes. Much more into going out and hunting down dinner themselves. But we didn't come here to talk about my family. So what's up, dragging me out in the middle of the night?"

Erika swallowed hard. *Kelp slime*. A part of her had hoped she could forget all about telling Amy and enjoy the waves and her closeness. She dug her fingers into the sand to chase away her fudge-based bliss while she scrambled for words.

"Amy ... I really like being with you, you know?" What an understatement. She liked Amy when they met at Creature Double Feature on the Lawn and spent the night making fun of the cheesy special effects. She liked the way Amy laughed, the way she thought, how their conversations wandered into shallows and deep waters. But the last time they'd sat on the beach

together, Amy's index finger had curled around Erika's pinky, sending her into a whirl of emotions she didn't think possible. They stayed together for a long time like that, Erika not daring to move, certain it had to just be a weird spot for Amy to put her hand. Maybe she hadn't even noticed. Maybe this was just a thing girls did? What do you even do with this?

She didn't want to tell Amy what she was. Derek ran when Erika tried to show him, and the hurt of that moment still had a hook in her heart.

Amy smiled, warmth washing over Erika. "I like being with you too. Sometimes I think I don't quite fit in the world, like it's the wrong size. With you, everything feels just right." She paused, long enough that the tides seemed to shift. She leaned closer, and Erika tensed. She was close, so very close, so close Erika could feel the heat off her body, licking at the edges of her skin. "Can I kiss you?"

Erika didn't think record scratches in one's brain actually happened. She pulled back. "I — that is — um — kiss me?"

She immediately regretted it when Amy's face fell. "I'm sorry, I thought — it's okay if you don't want to. I mean, you might not like girls and—"

"No! I love girls! I mean, I like girls on principle and I'd love to fall in love with one, but the last time I got serious with someone, he found out something about me, and ... yeah." She took a breath. "You know, if that's gonna happen I'd rather get it over with now and save us both the trouble. I have something to show you."

She stood and faced Amy's questioning gaze, her back to the ocean and the moon. She stepped away until the waves lapped at her feet again, salt and seaweed and everything she had emerged from. A broken scallop bumped against her ankle. *Oh. There we go.*

The change felt normal, as easy as diving. May as well let

Amy see her half-form. Erika's bones softened, her hair disappeared, her skin turned smooth and red, the arms emerged from her back, snaking to the sky. The air tasted of salt and smoke from old fire pits, but her gaze was enveloped by Amy, who watched her with eyes wide.

Erika's voice was rough and wet, but she did her best. "Surprise."

"Well ... that's different. Wereoctopus?"

Her surprise showed mottled on her skin. "Y-yeah?"

Amy took a step forward, considering her. She held out her hand. "May I?"

Erika snaked an arm around Amy's palm, only barely brushing her with her suckers. She tasted plumeria soap and roasted cinnamon and *Fear? Oh no please not fear not fear...*

Amy's thumb caressed her skin. "And to think Mom is always warning me to watch out for handsy dates."

Erika blanched paper white.

"I'm kidding!" Amy laughed, "Sorry, I guess I'm a bit nervous. Not about you! It's just, well, as long as we're revealing deep secrets, may as well air it all out."

She stepped back, giving Erika a shy smile as she burst into flame.

"Amy!" Erika flailed, all her arms a tangle of anxiety, fighting between running for Amy and running for water to put the fire out and realizing she had absolutely no buckets, until the flames died down. "O-oh my."

Amy was big. Very big. Her scales glistened violet in the moonlight. Her wings billowed. She cleared her throat with a puff of flame. "This isn't really something you open a relationship with," she said, her voice more like the sound of fracturing stone, "But it explains your smell."

"My ... smell?"

Amy nodded, and put her snout close to Erika. “It’s lovely. Like mist and mint.”

Erika reached out an arm, hesitating, until Amy lifted her head and suckers brushed against scales, sending a rush of cinnamon and heat through Erika’s body. “Our families are gonna flip out.”

Amy laughed, and it threatened to turn Erika into jelly. “One thing at a time. How about we go back to the kissing idea for starters?”

Erika flushed red with joy. This time, the decision was easy.



AMANDA SAVILLE LIVES in North Carolina with her partner, a small herd of plants, and her yarn stash. Her stories have appeared in *Mermaids Monthly*, *Unidentified Funny Objects Vol. 9*, and *Translunar Travelers Lounge*. Find her on Bluesky and Mastodon @acsaville.

FIVE REASONS WHY I AM ABSOLUTELY NOT IN LOVE WITH MY NEMESIS

A MAGICALLY SEALED JOURNAL ENTRY

STEPHANIE BURGIS

Short Story: 1,000 words

1.

That ridiculous new hair style. Ugh!

It's one thing to lean into your image as a wicked fairy when you're out and about, dropping curses and scaring kings. Everyone who chose that professional track delights in wearing black and looking like a nightmare. But showing up at that last christening with a single pink highlight in her jet-black curls was so bizarre, it could only have been meant as a taunt — and when Malevola looked over at my perfect pink chiffon dress and *winked*, she made it very clear exactly whom she was mocking with that choice.

Obviously, I don't blame her for cursing my latest goddaughter. That's all part of the job, just as I have to counter every curse she sets, whether I really want to or not. We both knew what we were getting into when we made our choices on graduation day all those years ago.

But making fun of my work-wear? In public?
Unacceptable.



2.

SHE CAN'T BE TRUSTED.

I know we used to spend time together...all right, yes, rather a lot of time. But what else can you do when you're roommates? *Clearly* none of that meant anything to her, any more than it ever did to me. All those late-night conversations were just filler, a meaningless way for her—for *us*—to pass the time before our real lives and futures could begin.

And I definitely never believed anything she said about our futures. Raising a child together, indeed! Everyone knows fairies are only suited to blessing or cursing human children, not raising them ourselves. I can't believe I even bothered to listen when she promised that she would find us a way.



3.

I WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND why she chose the wicked path without even warning me ahead of time. So often, in my most terrible dreams, I've relived that moment when she made her choice at our graduation ceremony. They swept her off to be trained in wickedness before we could even say goodbye. How could she have done that ~~to me~~?

Yes, she gave me that enchanted crow feather the night before and told me I could always use it to summon her—but even then, she must have known it would be useless. *No good*

and wicked fairies are allowed even the slightest bit of contact after that official moment of choice! Our supervisors keep a sharp eye on that sort of thing for the sake of maintaining order. We would both lose our wings if anyone even glimpsed us talking to each other outside of a christening where we'd been set to be opponents!

Not that *I* care about that loss, obviously. But after everything she used to say about the two of us on those long, dark nights of dreaming and ~~kiss~~ *talking*...

Why didn't *she*?



4.

HER LATEST CURSES have become more and more absurd—and, quite frankly, over the top. There is a difference between wickedness and outright cruelty. Threatening to kill my latest goddaughter before she turns eighteen with a *spinning needle*, of all nonsensical ideas?

When Malevola *knew* I was already furious and off-balance, between that taunting message in her hair and her wink?

I was so frazzled, I almost couldn't come up with a magical gift strong enough to counter that curse—and even my best attempt wasn't enough to keep my goddaughter safe in her parents' castle.

Admittedly, those particular parents...*well*. I am a good fairy, so I won't say what I thought of the way they talked about her. 'Girls are only worth the match they can make' indeed! She may be better off without them.

But! Little Aurelia was *supposed* to be a princess, even if that would have meant being locked in a nursery far from her

parents and then married off to someone she'd never even met. It's not how *I* would treat a daughter, but then, I was born in a flower blossom and raised without parents, so what would I know? The point is, this girl won't be safe in any castle, now, until she's at least eighteen years of age.

Worse yet, Malevola put on such a melodramatic show with all her cackling and finger-flames that finding a simple nanny nearby won't work, either. Aurelia's parents are determined to hide her where no one can find her until the threat of that curse is long past. I *tried* to tell them it probably wasn't necessary, but after all of Malevola's ridiculous threats, even my supervisors agreed with them.



5.

Now, she's upended my entire future! For the next eighteen years, I'll have to stay in strict magical hiding, out of sight from every other good fairy as well as the rest of the world. Considering how clever Malevola used to be, how did she not predict this?

We won't even see each other at christenings anymore!

No one will see me for the next eighteen years I'll spend here, alone in this secluded cottage with my goddaughter...this poor, sweet child who deserves all the love her own parents never would have given her.

Honestly, I don't mind *that* part. I always did wish that I could raise a child myself. I only...

Wait. *Wait.*

Oh.

My.

Blossoms.

What if Malevola *did* see this coming?

What if she actually *meant* everything she promised on those rich, dark nights we spent dreaming together about our future?

She always said I was rubbish at keeping secrets. But surely...

All along, could she have actually been planning—?

Right. I need to find that crow feather of hers, *now*—because it's her turn to change our new daughter's diaper. And then she'll hear *exactly* what I think of her taking such outlandish risks to make me happy!

SCRAWLED in a different handwriting at the bottom of the journal entry, in vivid, blood-red ink:

*I knew you'd work it out eventually, my love.
Here's to the next eighteen years of family life!*



STEPHANIE BURGIS grew up in Michigan but now lives in Wales with her husband and two kids, surrounded by mountains, castles and coffee shops. She writes sparkling fantasy rom-coms, including *Wooing the Witch Queen* (the first in the Queens of Villainy trilogy), the Regency Dragons series, the Harwood Spellbook series, and more. She has also had eight MG fantasy novels published, including the Kat, Incorrigible trilogy, the Dragon with a Chocolate Heart trilogy, and the Raven Crown duology. A graduate of the Clarion West work-

STEPHANIE BURGIS

shop, she has had over forty short stories published in various magazines and anthologies, and many of them are included in her collection *Touchstones*. You can find excerpts from all of her novels and novellas (and links to many of her short stories) at her website: stephanieburgis.com

DELIVERED

REM WIGMORE

Short story: 486 words

You and I and a screech of tires, and me on the footpath narrowly alive, eyes wide with the blazing sight of you. You're stuck in my thoughts like grit in a sock. I can't shake out the scorched afterimage.

Back when the church lectured me, I never listened much, even less when I was older and they said how many sins it was to love women, or men, or both, let alone anyone who was neither.

But you don't look like in the books. Mostly light. I mistook your halo for the moon, but the moon hadn't risen yet. And I woke sprawled on the pavement clutching a thin filament of a feather, livewire in my palm.

Too much wine, you say. No wine at all, just vodka. But really. I've had breaks with reality before, and you're more like reality breaking through. What I'm trying to say is, I don't believe in God or angels. I do believe in kind people, like the

hands that held on through my worse times. After I dropped out, before I pulled myself up.

Dunno if your kind are messengers of the Lord, or Apollo, or Jehovah, or just yourselves. But I like being saved and I wouldn't mind fleshing out the finer points of theology sometime, if you like, over coffee. Or what sports teams you like, or spectrum of colour you exist on. Do you get radio up there?

Honestly, I was sliding back to the gutter before. This mad world. Whether your lot are the real wheel-of-eyes angels or just the living world made animate, light and motes and shit, you're too unknowably vast for me. But everything is. Come boil my brain with beauty instead of the end times.

Here's what I couldn't take: the whole world, the flung-wide cosmos. Too big and ancient, same timescale as glaciers and cathedrals. But the glaciers are melting and the cathedrals burning and all came tumbling down.

I hear when the old church burned not a person died. Not one. People followed the rules and got everyone out alive, little motes of miracles. Even the bees lived, smoke-drunk and buzzing. Was that you, a small sideways step of intervention, did you save the bees too?

Honey?

I'll stop, I'm blushing. Ant, meet magnifying glass. There's just worse things to worship than someone who's kind. I'd love to be that kind.

Guess I can try.

If this reaches you, come see me, once I've saved up enough to walk the Champs-Élysées. I'll try not to drink. Come meet me with six wings on seven wavelengths. If the sight of you fries my eyes outta my head, I'll grab some shades on the way.

Let me see you again, if you're kind, if you want. I'd like to meet the bees. I have a feather to give back to you.



REM WIGMORE is a speculative fiction writer from Aotearoa New Zealand, author of the solarpunk Vengeful Wild duology (*Foxhunt* and *Wolfpack*). Their other works include *Riverwitch* and *The Wind City*, both shortlisted for Sir Julius Vogel Awards. Rem's short fiction appears in several places including *Baffling Magazine*, *Capricious Magazine* and two of the *Year's Best Aotearoa New Zealand Science Fiction & Fantasy* anthologies. Rem's probably a changeling, but you're stuck with them now. The coffee here is just too good. Rem can be found online at remwigmore.com.

HEARTS AND FLOWERS

MARISCA PICHETTE

Story: 1750 words

Anita had roses in her eyes. They were deep red, with slivers of maroon in the shadowed spaces between petals. Binh thought they could smell the roses, the soft sweetness of the blooms dusting Anita's cheeks. It was silly, they knew, to think this. Anita had rarely come close enough for Binh to smell her, but Binh was sure her fragrance would slip under theirs, blending seamlessly with Binh's foxgloves.

Binh's eyes jutted forward and down, four foxglove trumpets that drew countless bees to their face. Helena said that foxgloves had no scent, but she was one to talk. The crocuses crowding her eyes smelled less than the air around her. Binh thought it was a pity, since Helena also worked with cows, and could have benefited from a little perfume.

While Helena's eyes flashed white and orange and purple, wild bouquets that bounced when she walked, Anita's roses were quiet, reserved. Binh watched her as she walked from the

Garden School, her cloak studded with silver and emerald. On a sunny day her lips shone golden in the sun, her skin a tender, sapling grey.

Binh did not work in the school, but their stall looked out on the yard, strategically placed to catch the attention of children and families. Binh made and sold pastries and bread-cakes, a trade inherited from their father. Children bought these goods for themselves or via direction from their parents, a sweaty handful of seeds offered up as payment. Binh turned a good business, something their father, his orchid eyes thin with age, never failed to brag about to his companions in the Greenhouse. Binh sometimes stopped to wonder what it must be like, sitting in the humidity all day, ants crawling up and down your arms as nurses sprayed mist on your skin. But they never thought about this long; they were many seasons away from infirmity.

They kneaded the dough for their breads with good, moist soil. Some of it came from behind the house, but Binh ordered the rest, different kinds for different tastes. Some sandy and dry, some thick with clay. The children often purchased the thickest cakes. They loved the way the clay got caught in their teeth and smeared their green faces brown.

Anita bought the loam cake. She stopped every Friday, picking up the smallest of the lot and placing a single red rosehip in Binh's hand. On those days, Binh could smell her.

"How is it going?" Anita asked, smiling.

Binh cradled the rosehip in their hands before putting it into the seed bag. "My cakes are popular, especially with the sprouts."

Anita chuckled at the nickname and Binh wondered if she called the children that at school, or if it wasn't the sort of thing a principal would do. She held up the loam cake. "One of these days you must share the recipe with me. Binh, isn't it?"

Binh nodded, their skin prickling with pleasure. "If I tell you," they ventured, "you'll stop buying them, and we won't be talking like this each week."

Anita's lips crooked to the side. "I can buy other things. I've always wanted to try your spun hyphae," she said, indicating the white floss favored by swift-growing children. "Could I watch you make a loam cake, though? Say, tomorrow?"

The scent of roses wafted across the stall. Binh inhaled, trying to keep their composure. Anita was standing, cake in her grasp, tendrilled fingers holding it close. Binh wanted so much to feel those hands.

"If you would like," they said, amazed at the smoothness of their tone. "I was going to make some more tomorrow anyway." It was a lie. They had plenty of loam cake; not many bought it, save Anita and Les. Les, with purple poppy mallow fanning from their eyes.

"Great!"

Anita hugged the cake to her as Binh tried not to get carried along by the excitement in her voice. "What time will you be mixing?"

Binh snatched a time from their mind. "Early. An hour past Unfurl?" They gestured to their house, though it was hardly necessary. Their stall was right in front of it. "I live here," they said.

Anita nodded. "I know."

She turned and walked away, her cloak lengthening her figure, swaying with the breeze.



BINH PACKED their stall away early, stowing the breads and pastries under the shelves and covering their collection with a

waxed cloth. They went inside before the sun was fully down, making sure all the curtains were drawn back from the windows, so there would be no chance of oversleeping when Unfurl came.

Binh pattered through the kitchen last of all.

All the loam cakes they'd made to ensure they never ran out when Anita came on Friday—these had to go. They couldn't hide the cakes in the kitchen, not with Anita coming to mix. Binh finally decided to pile the cakes in their father's old room, now unoccupied, his bed lying fallow in the eastern corner.

With that small deception complete, Binh lined up the ingredients for their loam cake on the stone dais in the kitchen. One cup of shredded bark from the forest, harvested by Les and brought to Binh for mixing. Les' business was in treating soil, growing gardens of mycorrhizae on the edge of the forest. The stripped bark from fallen trees was of secondary use to Les, so it found its way to Binh to be mixed, in exchange for drained, dry soil useful to Les.

Next to the bark, Binh measured out two handfuls of manure from a sack. The smell reminded them of Helena. After the manure came the main components: a cup of silt, a cup of sand, and a cup of clay.

With everything ready, Binh retreated to their bed and lay awake, too nervous and fearful to sleep.



UNFURL CAME AS A SURPRISE, Binh's foxglove eyes rising with the sun. They must have slept, after all. They freed themselves from their bed, a tangle of roots reflecting the restlessness of their sleep. They had just enough time to smooth the trichomes of their hair before Anita knocked on the door.

She smiled, roses lush and wide in her face. “Good morning, Binh.”

“Good morning, Anita.”

They showed her to the kitchen, the ingredients laid out and waiting. Anita nodded as Binh explained their process, then invited her to join in the mixing.

Binh’s hands worked quickly, their fingers firm with practice. Anita moved more slowly, her grasp swaying and bending through the soil. They began in separate bowls, but eventually moved into one, as Binh demonstrated how to mix the clay with the silt. They were very close to each other. The smell of roses filled Binh’s awareness.

Her hair was dark and mossy. Binh thought about the feel of it as they pressed the ingredients together. Anita shifted closer.

“How do you make it into a cake?” she asked.

Binh dragged their gaze guiltily from her hair, focusing on the tendrils of her hands in the bowl they shared. They placed theirs next to hers, gathering the ingredients into a ball, sculpting it into a cake.

Anita’s hands worked the mixture under Binh’s, then slipped away, climbing Binh’s wrists, arms. Her eyes met theirs. Binh inhaled her scent.

When Binh’s fingers sank into Anita’s hair, grains of silt still clung to their skin. Anita’s trailing grasp slid down Binh’s back, passing over their pits and crevices. Where she was smooth, pliable, Binh was textured and rough.

They twined together, the bowl forgotten on the dais, the sourness of manure crushed under the fragrance of roses. Binh’s lips tasted Anita’s, nectar-sweet and surprisingly strong. Their petals slid together, trading secrets.



MIDDAY. The knot of roots on the bed had worsened, Binh and Anita's feet tangled together in the soil. Sun warmed their bodies as they lay together, everything soft and contained, save the thorns of Anita's toenails poking up from the dirt.

Binh inhaled. Roses. "I want to show you something," they said.

Anita rested her head on Binh's arm. "Okay."

They unwound themselves, dust clouding the air. Binh took Anita's hand and led her through the house, out into the garden behind. She paused at the door, embarrassment snagging her face.

"What if someone sees us?" she whispered, her exposed stomata perked with sudden chill. Binh struggled to cut back the fresh arousal that crept up at the sight of her, naked as her first bloom.

"No one will see," Binh said, and pulled her forward onto the grass.

She hugged their arm as the two of them walked across the yard. Direct sunlight shifted to dappled shadow as they reached the back of the garden. The little glasshouse was waiting, nestled at the foot of a birch tree.

Binh freed themselves from Anita's grasp and turned to face her, their back to the glasshouse. "Do you know how many loam cakes you bought from my stall?"

They were surprised when she smiled, her answer swift. "Forty-one."

Binh stared. "You counted."

"Didn't you?"

"I..." They looked at the glasshouse. "Come see."

Binh opened the door and led Anita inside, the warm, humid air wrapping around them. She sighed with pleasure, her stomata subsiding as the chill left her. Binh walked

forward but stopped before they reached the raised bed. They moved to the side.

Anita's eyes widened. "How many?"

"Forty," Binh said. They moved to the corner of the bed. A fresh mound had been raised, squeezed in the last possible space. "This is the forty-first."

Anita walked forward. The roses were tall, their blossoms full like her eyes. They grew well in the glasshouse—fast, too, since they were fed on loam cake. The air was filled with their scent.

Anita rounded the bed and walked back to Binh. She was shaking her head. "You never traded any of the rosehips I gave you? You could have bought more soil for mixing."

Binh breathed her fragrance, multiplied forty times over. In the warm air, they felt light-headed. "They're yours. I couldn't give them away." Their hand twitched towards the blossoms, a forest of green and red. "This is your garden."

She turned, gazing at the roses. "It's too much," she said. "There's no room."

Binh frowned. "No room for what?"

Anita reached for them, took their hand. Her fingers stroked theirs as she looked up into their eyes.

"For foxgloves."



MARISCA PICHETTE is a queer author based in Massachusetts. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, *Tales & Feathers*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Baffling Magazine*, and others. Her poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin*, *Sirens in Your Hair*, was a finalist for the Bram Stoker and Elgin Awards. Their eco-horror novella, *Every Dark Cloud*, is out now from Ghost Orchid Press.

THE SLAYER'S DESCENT

AYIDA SHONIBAR

Drabble: 100 words

I traverse the hill, sword gripped and ready to avenge. A lady knight never forsakes her partner.

The dragon turns at my mournful footsteps. Its mouth opens.

I steel myself for the onslaught of iridescent fire. Instead, the reptilian tongue unfurls in a slither of violet, a forked path beckoning me into its maw.

Awed by its eminence, I succumb to the imposing belly of this beast that claimed my only soulmate. I pad past the gallows of sharp teeth and down the humid throat, toward certain death. Darkness engulfs me.

In it, I hear a familiar voice. "My love?"



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FAIRY, ROBIN, SUNFLOWER

AVRA MARGARITI

Short story: 850 words

My first lover was a fairy of opalescent wings, singed hair. Ambassador of her species, she had spent some time with the king of the mountain dragons. But despite his mighty fire doing no harm to her fireproof wings, she didn't leave without scars. My fairy escaped his cave on a piece of dandelion fluff, landing on my treehouse roof a half-starved, wispy wraith.

I was trying minimalist living, which is to say I could only afford the rent for my landlord's treehouse, the one he had built haphazard in his backyard before his son ran away to space--a newly discovered planet--never to return. The fairy rented the teal-painted birdhouse across the yard. Each morning we would greet the sun, and each other.

I was also called a fairy in school, I joked once. When I was acting queer, which was always. Called a changeling too, when I forgot to mask, failed to mimic.

My fairy floated up to my rough-hewn window, accepted

my walnut cup of coffee, kissed the wooden splinters out of my fingers.

Next came the robin, who was also a cursed prince, sometimes a hexed princess. Our landlord said he had to room with the fairy or fly to greener pastures. Except his wings had grown too arthritic to carry him along the wind, much less against it. Not that he was old. Hereditary, he told us. All the members of my avian/human family shrivel and curl like bark struck by lightning before they reach thirty.

In an impulsive act of kindness, I asked the fairy to move in with me, allowing the robin enough room in the birdhouse to roost and rest; in the birdbath, to soak his weary wings. My fairy now slept in an armoire drawer stuffed with velour and velveteen — my fingertips' favorite fabric.

It's not that I worry you'll crush me in sleep, or that I dislike your touch, the fairy clarified. I simply prefer to sleep alone. The dragon king of the mountain didn't understand.

In the air replete with robin song hung the question: Can you?

That was the era of me quitting my job at the pizza place, unable to handle the customers' little acts of abuse. The boss didn't take it so well. I had to stop showing my face around the restaurant, which cost me, since their calzone had been the only food my mouth could stand to taste for months.

When the robin showed up on my windowsill one evening with a familiar paper bag in her beak, calzone still steaming hot, I let her in. The fairy and the robin circled each other before settling on the kitchen table — a plastic kids' set whose chair had my knees jutting out like a grasshopper's. The landlord could be heard from the main house, lamenting the lateness of his delivery order. We broke bread, the fairy, the robin, and I. When the robin let me run my fingers along her plump plumage, I rejoiced at the sensation of velvet softness.

It wasn't long before the robin moved into our treehouse haven. One more lover now to remove the wood splinters from my body with their beak — I kept colliding into uneven walls, clustered furniture.

Our landlord grumbled from the main house. Threatened to rip out the birdbath, see how my robin liked it. Only agreeing to a raise in our rent helped placate him. We watched him watch TV through the open window sometimes, since there was no room for any screens in the treehouse. Robin, from his pillow on top of the mini fridge, tittered happily whenever I described one of the sitcom scenes while our fairy massaged his wing joints, paying special attention to the strained ulnae.

The third soft being to join our fledgling family was a sunflower. They did so poorly in the backyard, choked by weeds and bullied by invasive species, petals drooping, face like an inverted heart, that the fairy and the robin wasted no time inviting them in our home.



The sunflower preferred not to speak, much like myself

between ages nine and twelve. The tilt of their golden wing-like petals said enough.

Can I stay? Are you certain?

I made sure to replant the sunflower myself, to show them just how certain I was. Unlike the rest of my lovers, they preferred their terracotta pot stayed close to my bedside, which also happened to be under the window and the life-giving sun. Yet at night, when the biggest celestial body was silver and waning, the sunflower turned toward my sleeping form under my weighted blanket. They leaned close and protective.

I appreciated the concern. I hadn't left our landlord's property in months — hadn't been job-searching as I should have — but all my lovers were too kind to mention it.

We weren't a particularly tactile bunch, the four of us, but on days when the sun was strong, the porch-pilfered calzone warm, and each touch of plume and petal smoother than velvet--our treehouse was a sight to behold.



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WE CARRY WHAT'S OURS

V. ASTOR SOLOMON

Short story: 3,815 words

Ada knows this is a rescue mission as soon as they're planetside. While it doesn't look like anything is immediately on fire, there's a distinct smell of smoke that leaves the air thick and cloying, tickling her throat and making her cough when she takes in a breath. She doesn't need to clearly see the collapsing architecture or smoldering landscape, to know that this place is crumbling.

What she doesn't know is who called them here, who wanted them to save what.

Kace messaged them a few moments before, saying they'll meet up with the client soon and inform Ada and Ivy what they're all dealing with. Ada nods, and Ivy smiles, bouncing on the balls of her feet, excited to see who'll be joining them this time. She's always been eager to interact with the people who come aboard their ship, happy to play host and entertainment both. Ada, on the other hand, is more content hiding. Between

her projects and keeping the ship in the air, it's not hard for her to find excuses to not interact.

"What do you think happened?" she asks, looking in Ivy's general direction. Ada can't see her, not really, but she can see the shape of her, the colors she's wearing, and it's enough to help her know where to look. Sometimes, with people who don't know her, she can fool them into thinking she can see much more than she can, but one good look at her eyes, pale and scarred over, usually tells the truth of her vision.

"Not too sure," Ivy replies, moving to peer out at the city from one of the ship's windows. "Whatever it is, it looks bad. They've been getting people out of here for weeks now, taking folks to better places since well, here's so volatile."

"So, we're definitely here to take someone then?"

"I think so, it wasn't entirely clear, though. I guess we'll find out sooner or later."

"Well then." Ada closes her eyes, walking away from the window and back towards her lab. "Won't this be an adventure."



KACE SENDS pictures a few hours later with an audio transmission attached. There's a terrarium in the shot, with oddly formed mushrooms living within it. Even as Ada enhances the image so she can get a good idea of what she's looking at, she gets the feeling that the mushrooms are studying the person taking the picture, that they're posing for them.

The note itself says '*Anyone know how to keep these alive?*'



IT TAKES LESS time than expected for Kace to get back and once they return, the three of them don't waste any time leaving. They don't want to stay in a city that seems to be steadily choking to death. Ivy gets them in the air and out of danger of crashing into anything, then it's Ada's turn to pilot as they settle into the sky.

She listens to Kace as they discuss what to do about the mushrooms. Ivy's chirping in on occasion, cheerfully claiming ignorance on what to do. They're supposed to transfer the fungus, that it's a small part of a larger organism that was supposedly dying out due to the fires. They're taking them somewhere they might have a chance of survival.

Ada smiles to herself. From what she can tell, it's going to be a long ride, but she prefers those compared to the stop and start missions they've been taking on. It's going to take at least four months to get from point A to point B and she's fine with that. She'll happily fly on for years if she has to. It saves her from having to interact with people beyond Kace and Ivy, and that's always a plus.

People make Ada nervous, she feels constantly like they're too close, too many and too loud all at once. Even when they aren't touching her, they have a presence to them that she doesn't like. Crowds make her anxious and queasy, and while she does enjoy interacting one on one or in small groups, she can't really do so in small spaces, or in a space she hasn't really had the chance to know first.

Ivy will take it harder, she'll chatter on and become clingy for a while, but Ada doesn't mind that either. Ivy's family, maybe not in the literal sense, but in every way that counts. She loves her with all her heart and she'd probably have married her at this point if marriage meant anything to either of them.

Kace is there too, so much so that her heart sings a little

when she thinks of them. They were the one who gave her a chance, who brought her on board and said that she could try and learn as much as she could pick up. They don't make her feel incomplete, they don't make her feel like she is less when she can't do something. They understand that she has her limits, that all of them do really, and the other two can make up for what one can't accomplish.

"How big is it going to get?" Ada asks, as they break the sky and take to the dark.

"Pretty big," Kace says. "It can get as big as the entirety of Grania. Though apparently if we keep it confined, it should be okay."

The Grania isn't a huge vessel in the grand scheme of things but when Kace got her, they had a larger crew in mind. The fact that it turned out to just be the three of them, isn't bad but sometimes it makes the ship seem vast and gaping, a place to get lost in.

Ada used to feel that way. Once she got the chance to memorize the layout, to create a map in her brain and sort out where everything was and how everything worked, she learned to be comfortable in the emptiness. Besides, there were always the comms to get in touch with someone, if you were feeling lonely. Besides that, all their rooms were adjoining, so it wasn't as if the three of them didn't see each other. Ivy usually slept with Ada anyway, and sometimes both of them would join Kace, so loneliness was never much of an issue.

"Something else," Kace says, a little hesitant in their words. "Apparently we're supposed to talk to it. It uh-- it's pretty intelligent."

That made Ada turn around. "Can it respond to us?"

"Apparently." Kace shrugs. "I didn't ask for a lot of details but the guy was saying that he'd been talking to it and it acknowledges him. The mushrooms tilt back and forth for yes

and no and he also mentioned that it sort of hummed at him sometimes.”

Ivy laughs, grinning wide. “It sings, that’s adorable!”

Ada shakes her head, unsure of what to say at first. She wondered if the mushrooms somehow found a way to ask to be taken away, if they begged not to be left to die.

The thought makes her shiver a little.



THE MUSHROOMS DO NOT DO AS WELL in the terrarium as any of them hoped. It’s too small a space, too cramped to spread out the way they seems to want to. They seem trapped somehow, caged and confined in a way they were never meant to be.

Ada is tasked with the job of trying to figure out what to do. She studies the mushrooms, even picks a few to get a good close look at them, though she asks first. They’re a hearty thing, able to survive a lot, probably even the fires on their place of origin.

“Did you want this?” Ada asks aloud, not quite thinking that the mushrooms would answer. She would talk to them on occasion, as instructed, but she rarely engages beyond the initial greeting and bits of idle chatter.

She catches sight of movement, the stems bowing as if they were nodding, acknowledging that they have heard her.

She laughs, then turns to them properly. “Did you know you could have survived? That there’s more of you back home that probably will?”

They nod again, bobbing up and down.

“Did you not want to be there anymore?” She wonders if a fungus can get wanderlust.

Another agreement tells her she’s on the right track.

"Being cooped up in here must be driving you to--Well, not tears but you know what I mean."

A third nod and a shifting of the entire organism tells her all she needs to know. There has to be something she can do, something she can give them so that they feel less confined. After all, they still have months of travel ahead of them and they've already moved the organism to the biggest container they have.

There's something about that final gesture, the stirring of the entire being within the box, that gives Ada an idea. She has no clue if she can pull it off but, if she can, it could be a fascinating project.



IVY'S WATCHING Ada as she works on the form before her. She's supposed to be handing her the tools she may need, but really, she's there to keep Ada company.

"So this," Ivy starts, peering over Ada's shoulder. "It's going to hold our fungal friends and let them be mobile."

Ada nods. "Yep. There's a lot of tweaking but the casing is done and I can start transplanting them into it, so they can get comfortable and I can work around them."

"And you're sure they want this?" Ivy asks, her head tilting just slightly. "Like, they didn't ask, I guess, but they're going to be happy?"

"They feel trapped," Ada explains. "They confirmed that a while ago. They can't stand the terrariums and I'm just trying to find an alternate solution until we can get them where they want to go."

Kace peeks their head through the doorway, grinning. "Hey, how's it going?"

Ada returns the smile, waving with her free hand. "It's

coming. I'll have the casing down in the next few days, then it's all about the guts."

"Sounds fun," Kace says, leaning against the wall. "So, I guess we're going to be four after this? Like, you're giving them the ability to communicate and move and all that?"

"That's the idea."

Ivy walks over to Kace, giving them a light prod. "You think we're gonna get too crowded in here or something?"

"Hell no," they say, shaking their head. "Just making sure I understand what's going on."

"You're as caught up on this as we are," Ada assures. "We're just going to have to see how this goes once I've managed to finish this first bit."

Ivy moves to the terrarium, getting close to the glass without quite touching it. She hums a high, sweet tune and smiles wide when the mushrooms echo the sound in their low, almost purring voice.

"I think they're excited," Ivy announces, turning to look at Ada and Kace again. "They're gonna love it."

"I'm hoping," Ada says, not moving from her work. "We'll just have to see."



ADA TRANSFERS the mushrooms to their new home several days later. They take well to the space within the constructed form she's built, seeming to stretch out like a cat who's been curled up for too long. They sing, loud and low at Ada whenever she's around, and she takes that as a compliment.

There's still work to do, ambitions for the project she's found herself undertaking. The body—she no longer looks at it as a casing—has a range of motion capabilities that she wants to work on, tweaking and programming things so that

the body can respond to the mushrooms' commands. She also has aspirations of giving them speech capabilities but if she can't manage that, she knows it won't be for a lack of trying.

She's never thought to ask if they can speak in a way that she can understand. Of course they comprehend and have enough control to make the mushroom heads respond to yes or no questions but there's nothing that tells her whether, somewhere in the network of the fungus, there is a mouth, a tongue, an ability to create sound other than their songs.

Maybe they choose silence, or maybe they just don't expect to be heard. She isn't sure how often anyone has listened to them, how much they've been respected and treated fairly.

Ada runs a hand over the chest of the body, fingers stroking synthetic skin that feels just a little too smooth to be real. She knows this is what they want, that they crave mobility that just didn't come with the conditions they'd been in, but she's still worried she's messed this up.

Shaking her head, Ada returns to her work, occasionally talking to the being before her. She wonders if they have a name, if there's something the three human shipmates could use.

She starts thinking, wondering, if they didn't have one of their own, would they be willing to accept one?

Ivy knocks on the door, flouncing her way to Ada's side. "You've been at this for a while, you know." She gives her a little poke. "Come take a break with me?"

Ada shakes her head. "I wanna finish a little more. I have--"

Ivy taps her on the nose. "Come take a break with me." Her tone is more firm now. "Your eyes are red, I know you're tired and I doubt they'd mind."

Suddenly, the hand that Ada had been working on, the one she was attempting to connect so that the mushrooms could

manipulate it into movement, wiggles its fingers, pulling away from Ada's grasp, and gently prods her arm towards Ivy.

"They're on my side." Ivy's expression is triumphant. "It's good to know I've got backup."



ADA STARTS CALLING THEM RENATA. She can't say why exactly, but it feels right on her tongue, and they seem to like it. She asks if it's all right first, if she can call them by a name that she chooses, and they sing so loudly she can feel it in her bones.

They don't move much, choosing to sit in Ada's lab and letting her work on them on and off. She hums and they hum back and all of them, even Kace and Ivy, come in and sing a few bars of whatever tune matches closely enough.

She's given Renata good range of motion at this point. They can walk away from her, they can even move in an awkward, somewhat stiff dance. There's still some tweaking to be done, alterations to make the motions smoother but she's not trying for a perfect copy of human ability. However, a bit more fine tuning wouldn't go amiss.

She's been working on getting them to talk, trying carefully to coax words from their mouth. She's fairly certain there's a capability there, it's just a matter of acting on it.

They've chosen not to speak yet, and that's fine by Ada. She can wait, she just wants to know that she's given them the opportunity. She can hear the hum coming from them, still low and soft, and soothing at this point, but she hears it from everywhere. Every part of Renata's skin rings with the song, and Ada finds it beautiful.



KACE SITS NEXT TO RENATA, watching Ada as she tinkers with an addition to what she's done so far. No one knows her plan yet, not even Renata, who she's confided in more and more.

Kace swings their legs, stretching long lean limbs that crack into place as they rise to their feet. "You gonna show that off yet?"

Ada shakes her head. "Not yet. It's still a work in progress."

"Artists," Kace says, not unkindly, shaking their head.

No one called her an artist before Kace. People saw her fiddling as nothing more than that, a girl playing with her toys. Kace knew though, they saw that Ada could create whatever she wanted, if given enough time and parts. They saw the artistry in the mechanisms she made.

Kace always saw her worth, even when Ada couldn't see it herself. It took time to build up her self-esteem, to show herself that she was worth time, effort, and love. Now though, now she accepts everything offered to her with open arms, eager to hold onto it and keep it close.

And she realizes, in that odd moment of contemplation, that she includes Renata in that goodness. Kace and Ivy used to be the only ones there but Renata has absolutely joined them.

She's not sure how she loves them, not exactly, but she knows she does. She wants to see them flourish, to be happy and healthy and at peace with themselves and the stars around them. She loves the idea that she's helped, even a little bit. That she has given them something they couldn't have had without her, that she created a way for them to be content in the space they occupy.

Ada shakes her head, looking over at Kace and Renata. She's so happy right now, it's both surreal and delightful and she wants to savor every second of it.



ADA TALKS with Kace and Ivy before giving Renata their gift.

"Are you sure it's okay?" Ada asks, her heart in her throat. She's been working on this for so long and while she should have asked before investing so much effort into it, she kept procrastinating.

Kace taps at the ship's console, staring out into the black as they speak.

"I think," they say. "I think that we'll be in good hands. I trust Nat." They've been calling Renata Nat for a while now and both Ada and Ivy get a giggle out of it. They also know it's Kace's way of showing they've embraced Renata as one of theirs, though Ada still isn't sure if Kace feels the same way she does.

"I think it's great," Ivy says, chewing on a long stick of candy she's managed to pull from somewhere. "This is going to make things easier on all of us and they can feel like a part of the crew, you know?"

Ada nods. "That's what I was thinking. It's our way of showing them that we trust them and we want them to stay."

It's been an unspoken question between all four of them. Would Renata stay? Would they want to? The journey is almost over, the ship is almost at the drop-off point. Should they dock and help get Renata accustomed to life on a single world, or would they want to stay and live with the crew of the Grania? Would they want to bounce from place to place, never settling?

"Give it to them," Kace tells her, looking over their shoulder. "We'll figure out what to do from there, but you should definitely give it to them."



THE CROWN that Ada has crafted is a nest of wires and circuitry.

It's tangled and glows and full of blood, and love and everything Ada has within it.

Ada holds it in her hands, looking down with all the love in her heart. It was difficult to create, it was days and nights of no sleep, it was tears when she couldn't get things quite right and small shocks as a learning experience. However, now it's done. Now it can find its home.

"It's for you." Ada offers the crown to Renata, smiling hesitantly. "I hope you like it."

Renata tilts their head, the action slow as they process what's going on. They take the crown, examine it, turning it around within their hands and humming as they do.

Then they look up, their hum turning questioning.

"It uh-" Ada starts, her voice shaking a little. "It's the key? The key to the ship, I mean. You can -- You can fly her with this. You can make her do what you want, as long as you're wearing it."

For a long moment, neither of them move, and Ada is sure she's done something wrong. Then Renata closes the distance between the two of them, pressing a kiss to Ada's cheek and another against her lips. They hum as they kiss her, gentle at first, then deeper once Ada doesn't pull away. They set the crown on her desk and wrapping their arms around Ada's waist, holding her close.

The hum sending a tingle through Ada's lips and down her spine. She doesn't break the kiss though, instead running her fingers up Renata's arm and resting against the back of their neck, holding them there.

They do break apart but only so Ada can settle the crown against Renata's head. It looks beautiful on them, like it had always been a part of them and not an addition created after their initial body had been constructed.

When they smile, Ada gets almost giddy with joy but when

they speak, pushing forth a voice she has never heard before she feels herself go weak at the knees.

“Thank you.” Renata says, their voice sounding much like their humming, low and comforting, velvety and soft. “Thank you so much.”



It's the four of them now, Kace, Ivy, Ada, and Renata. They fly through the stars, delving into planets every so often for supplies or jobs, or for their own enjoyment.

The ship seems smaller these days, at least to Ada. There's always someone to run into, someone to talk to, or simply exist around. They fall into rhythms, comfortable and easy, like they've been doing them for years.

Ada works into her lab, Renata sitting on one of the benches, steering the ship and humming softly as they watch. She hums a few bars back, looking up from her work every so often to say something, or just to smile at them. They fit so well in their new body, wear it like a skin they've always had. She did good work, even though they've taken what she made and adapted it here and there.

The way they move is entirely their own, not programmed or taught. They have found their own way of existing within the framework of the universe, and it's stunning to watch.

Ivy comes to join the two of them, asking Renata to dance as they keep up their music. She hums along, looking at Ada to see if she'll join, which she gladly does.

Kace finds them like that, all moving to Renata's song, their bodies weaving around each other as if they were made for this.

They join in, reaching out their hands and taking the two

nearest bodies in for a spin. Then it's all of them, dancing and singing and flying into forever.



V. ASTOR SOLOMON is a queer, nonbinary, disabled, neurodivergent author who has been publishing short fiction since 2018. Their stories are anything from sweet and a little strange to something much sharper that doesn't hesitate to bite. Their work has been featured in various venues and anthologies, and their website is howsweettheword.com where you can find social media and their published work.

PART FOUR

FAMILY

SHOPPING AT THE SOUL PATCH CONSIGNMENT STORE

AMANDA HELMS

Short story: 760 words

Claudia lifted a small length of a silver-gray soul piece. It shimmered like sunlight dancing on the scales of a salmon. “How about this one, Nate?”

Her son, lanky in an oversized t-shirt from some local band, peered at the bit of soul through a fringe of black hair. “I dunno.”

“Come on, hold up yours. Let’s see if this might fit.”

Muttering something Claudia pretended kindly not to hear, Nate obliged, although he made a melodramatic show of reaching into his chest, rooting around, and then *sloooowly* pulling out his soul.

It was a pearlescent blue-purple, nearly as long as Nate was tall, and riddled with holes from the pieces they’d had to remove when they no longer fit, like Nate’s short-lived stint as a drummer (truth be told Claudia was glad that lasted only three months or so), his dreams of being a veterinarian (probably wise to change; Claudia had heard veterinary work often

incited serious psychological distress), and his interest in the Impressionists (okay, that one had hurt a little; it'd been the one part of Nate's soul that had truly matched Claudia's).

So many holes to fill. It wasn't uncommon for it to take some kids extra time to fill their souls, according to Nate's therapist. Seventy-five percent full by the time they left for college was a good marker.

Nate's soul, though, was only around forty percent. Especially considering how frequently he changed his mind, it'd be tough to get him through another thirty-five percent in two years.

Making sure to show none of that in her expression, Claudia shifted closer to her son, holding the soul piece. "This one's for soccer, medium interest level. Soccer might be good! Been a while since you've done any sports." She held it up to the place where she thought badminton had been, back when Nate was, what, ten? Twelve? Frowning, she turned the soul piece a little. There. Held at a forty-five degree angle, it might fit. And, yes, look at it! It reached toward Nate's soul, as if recognizing the place it could slide into—

Nate darted away and shoved his soul back into his chest. "Not soccer." His gaze drifted to the windows, out to the sunshine. "Can we go yet? I don't think we're going to find anything here."

Soccer would've only been good for another ten percent, anyway. Claudia returned it to the rack.

"You know, when I started college, my soul was only sixty-three percent full. I spent lots of time feeling aimless. It was harder for me than it should have been."

Nate didn't answer, instead wrapped his arms around himself like he wanted to protect his gap-ridden soul.

Mouth pinched, Claudia veered toward Serious Pursuits. The soul pieces here were much larger, ones that could wrap

around Nate's entire chest. She rifled through them. Dog grooming—no. Concert pianist—it had a rather intricate pattern that might not meld well with Nate's soul. Still, the image of him in a tux, seated at a baby grand, elegant fingers dancing across the keys . . . she put that on her "maybe" arm.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

Theoretical mathematician—who'd let that go? She snapped it up. While she continued hunting, she kept up a steady stream of encouragement. "You have options, Nate. Lots of them! But these days, it's really better for you to have your soul mostly set by the time you start college. If you choose a Serious Pursuit, then that'll fix yo—it. Just think, we could leave here today with you at seventy-five percent! Try these." She shoved the pile of soul pieces in his arms.

He dropped them immediately, turned tail, and ran.



TWO HOURS LATER, Claudia found Nate in the neighborhood park. He sat on a bench hunched over his soul, outlining one hole with a fingertip, as if he couldn't bear to touch it.

Claudia's heart clenched.

"I'm not like you, Mom," he said.

"I know," Claudia said.

He exhaled. "What if I never figure out what I want?"

Gently, she withdrew Nate's soul from his hands and held it up. Sunlight shone through, refracting the blobbier bits into rainbows. Through the holes, the sky shone clear and blue as a sapphire.

"This is marvelous, Nate." She handed his soul back to him. "I'm sorry I haven't said it before." She smiled at him. "It'll be okay."

Claudia sat beside her son. Together they admired his soul,
an intricate lattice comprised of prisms and negative space.

Full of them both.



AMANDA HELMS (SHE/HER) is a biracial Black/white fantasy, science fiction, and sometimes horror writer whose stories have appeared in or are forthcoming from FIYAH, Lightspeed, Uncanny, and other fine venues. She lives with her family in Colorado. Though all of them are natives, none ski or snowboard, proving that such creatures indeed exist. Find her at amandahelms.com, on Instagram @amandaghelms, or Bluesky @amandaghelms.bsky.social.

INHERITED SHADOWS

WEN WEN YANG

Short Story: 800 words

As soon as the conference call ended, I heard the *thump thump* down the hall. I pulled off my headset and listened. Xiang was playing with her dolls in her room, their stuffed feet shuffling across the floor. I was about to put the headset back on when I remembered it was Xiang's second day in kindergarten. I jumped out of my chair and ran down the hall.

The bedroom door was open and warm sunlight streamed in through the window. I caught sight of a shadow slipping under the bed as I stepped through the door. The bed skirt gently settled back into place.

One of her dolls had tipped over onto its side, its head resting on a teddy bear's leg. It had been upright when she had dressed this morning.

I blinked, wondering why the shadow seemed familiar.

I stood still, willing my breath to settle. "Come out," I

whispered to the bed. I used the same tone when Xiang hid behind the sheer curtains during hide-and-seek. "I saw you."

I counted up to thirty, then backwards. Maybe all parents imagined the sounds of their children's footsteps when they first went to school. Separation anxiety wasn't exclusive to pets.

The bed skirt fluttered. "Mori, is that you?" The voice was so soft, a whisper of drizzle. A gray shadow unfolded from under the bed. It stretched with a blurry outline as if my eyes couldn't adjust to its contours. It moved as soundlessly as a dust mote. It settled into the form of a standing octopus, scaly tentacles the shifting colors of mother of pearl, with a furry, bulbous head.

"Yinying?" Its name came to me as if I was greeting a childhood friend at the grocery store.

"Yes!" It bobbed, fur bristling in excitement.

"Did you — are you attached to the bed?" My daughter had inherited my childhood bed, though she didn't use the canopy because it was too dusty.

"No, no." Yinying's tentacles slithered clockwise. "I came from your mom and hers before her."

How often had Xiang come knocking on my bedroom door in the middle of the night, complaining of monsters under her bed? I had cradled her in my arms before settling her back in her room. I had checked under the bed like my mother had done, bleary eyed and sleep deprived.

"The monster's gone!" I had reassured her. "It went home to sleep, and you should too." I never said there is no monster, like my mother had. Because I had remembered seeing it when I was her age. I remembered how deflated I felt when my mother had dismissed my words.



“DID I — did we inherit a monster under the bed?” How could my mother have forgotten this rough, downy monstrosity?

“No, you inherited a safety test.” The tentacles stopped swirling. “You were never in danger, but you knew someone would comfort you if you were.” Two tentacles mimicked holding a third coil. “Xiang went to you, you went to your mother. But you and Xiang were the only ones who played with me.”

Tears stung my eyes and I blinked them away.

“Xiang usually wants to dance with her dolls but she wasn’t here yesterday morning.” Yinying’s twisted tentacles looked like the wringing of many pairs of hands. “I didn’t want her to think I had forgotten.” It shrunk ever so slightly. “Does this mean she’ll go to school like you did?”

“No,” I answered so sharply that Yinying recoiled, tentacles tucking under itself. I softened my voice. “Sorry, no.” I had endured five days of regular school, plus language study on Saturday and Sunday morning’s religious school. I was not binding my daughter to a schedule every day of her childhood. “She’ll be able to play after school and on weekends.”

Yinying drew its tentacles out. “How many hours until after school?”

I checked my watch. “Five.”

Yinying held up five tentacles.

I nodded. “She’s already talking about bringing friends over to play.”

Yinying split into two, then three identical shadows. “We can play,” they chorused.

I imagined the children shrieking, vowing to never return. “Maybe you can watch. Make sure *they’re* not little monsters.”

Yinying snapped together into one tentacle monster. It drifted back and forth. “I’ll wait until she’s back. If she’s too

tired, maybe she'll want to play on the weekend. How many nights until the weekend?"

"Three nights."

The tentacles dropped to the floor and melted into a puddle of shadows.

As the gray shadow moved toward the bed, I asked, "Do you want to keep me company in the office?" I pointed down the hall. "You can stay under my desk."

The shadow swirled into a tornado, knocking over the teddy bear.

"Yes!"



WEN WEN YANG is a Chinese American from the Bronx, New York. She graduated from Barnard College of Columbia University with a degree in English and creative writing. You can find her short fiction in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Apex*, *Cast of Wonders* and more. An up-to-date bibliography is on WenWenWrites.com.

JULIA KIM is on instagram as [mulanartist](https://www.instagram.com/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."

FEATHERS

P.A. CORNELL

Short story: 760 words

Her father and I only had one night together, and he said he was an angel, but I thought it was just something guys say to get you to sleep with them and promptly put it out of my mind. Angie was born nine months later, a perfectly healthy girl with all the usual parts. It wasn't until a few weeks passed that little bumps appeared on her back. I called a colleague in pediatrics, but by the morning of the appointment the bumps had changed to feathers, and I understood.

I watched the feathers grow in number over that first year, until they became two fully-formed wings of gleaming white. They were beautiful, but they terrified me. They marked her as 'different' and I remembered from my own childhood that this was never good.

I could hide them under clothing well enough, but I lived in fear that others would see.

As she grew, I kept her from swimming and sleepovers. Made her promise she'd never change for gym in front of anyone. When she got sick, I cared for her myself, praying she'd never need medical attention beyond what I could treat. Maybe I was wrong to hide this part of her — to make her hide it.

Angie had always been a sensitive kid. Sweet and vulnerable. I should've known meaner kids would target her. Make her feel othered. Flames I only fueled through my own fears.

The first time I came across a black feather, I thought it was one she'd found somewhere. Some crow or raven's loss. I picked it up off the floor while tidying her room and placed it on her desk without a thought.

When she was little, she'd been joyful, friendly, full of smiles. But by her teens she became sullen. Introverted. She barely left her room.

I stopped having to remind her to hide her wings. She did that herself, wearing bulky black sweaters, avoiding any occasion that might reveal them. Dances, dates, clothing shopping at the mall.

"You never have your friends over," I'd say.

She'd shrug, and I'd find myself wondering if she had friends.

One day I came home unexpectedly, catching her coming out of the bathroom wrapped in only a towel. And there I saw that the feathers that had once been almost too bright to look at, had become grey and damaged. When she saw me, she screamed, several feathers turning black before falling to the floor.

"Angela!" I gasped, but she ran to her room and locked the door, ignoring my pleas to be allowed in.

Later I'd ask how long this had been happening, but she'd only shrug.

"I hate myself," she said. "I hate the way I look. I hate this body."

I held back tears. She'd always been the most beautiful thing I'd ever laid eyes on. How could she possibly feel that way? But then I understood my part in it. I saw how I'd made her ashamed—how I'd made her think there was something wrong with her. How the pain she felt could be seen on each feather that greyed, then blackened, then fell to the floor.

"Angie, I'm so sorry," I said, knowing my words weren't enough to heal the damage life had inflicted on her.

Rising from my seat, I grabbed the kitchen shears and headed to her room. One by one I took each shirt she owned and cut two slits into the back.

"Mom, no! What are you doing?" she cried.

Undeterred, I went on. "You're perfect just the way you are. You don't need to hide your beautiful wings. Not from me or anyone."

She watched me for a while, then reached into her desk drawer for a second pair of scissors. Together we cut slits in every top and jacket we could find. By the end we were laughing and crying all at once.

"We missed one," Angie said, squirming uncomfortably inside her sweater. She pulled it over her head and handed it to me, leaving her in just her bra, which didn't obstruct her wings. I watched then as her feathers began to change from grey to white. Then as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she stretched her wings so wide they spanned the room and lit it up like the sun. Her beauty overwhelmed me and brought renewed tears to my eyes.

"Sorry," she said, tucking her wings back.

"No," I said. "Don't apologize. You're exactly who you're meant to be, and you're perfect."



P.A. CORNELL is a Chilean-Canadian speculative fiction writer. A graduate of the Odyssey workshop, her stories have been published in over sixty magazines and anthologies, including *Lightspeed*, *Apex*, and four “Best of” anthologies. In addition to becoming the first Chilean Nebula finalist in 2024, Cornell has been a finalist for the Aurora and World Fantasy Awards, long-listed for the BSFA Awards, and in 2022 won Canada’s Short Works Prize. When not writing, she can be found assembling intricate LEGO builds or drinking ridiculous quantities of tea. Sometimes both. For more on the author and her work, visit her website pacornell.com.

FAIRY CHARM

RITA BRIAR

Microfiction: 72 words

Sarah whispered upon the stolen wand a charm to call a fairy. Her will was strong: a fairy was what she needed most. Beautiful sparkles shone all around her, as they did when her grandmother cast magic. But no fairy came.

She returned the wand, shame-faced. "I'm sorry for taking it, Grandmother," she said. Then she asked, "Why didn't the spell work?"

"Because, Dear Heart," her grandmother said, "you are a fairy."

FAIRY CHARM



RITA BRIAR is a writer, gardener, and volunteer wrangler for WisCon. They're active on Bluesky as [@ritabriar.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@ritabriar) and several Discord servers, as well as a local book club and a local writer's group. Magic keeps sneaking into their writing, even the things about living on the moon.

HOW TO COOK WITH THE NEGATIVE SPACE IN YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S RECIPES

JENNIFER HUDAK

Short Story: 1,000 words

1. Find your recipes.

You have a stack of them, though you haven't looked at them in years. Some of them are scrawled on index cards, front and back, in your grandmother's sharp, slanted script. Others are typed, using your grandfather's old typewriter with the slightly dropped e. All of them are incomplete. "The recipe has all the information you need," she used to tell you, or "The exact amounts don't matter," or "You have to just feel it." But it doesn't, and they do, and you can't.

You'd attempted to discover some of the missing elements through trial and error: the relative proportion of peppercorns to dill in the pickling spice, for example; or the amount of lemon juice needed to cut the sweetness of the rugelach filling. Your spouse declared the results delicious, but you knew they

were only a pale imitation of your grandmother's. After several more unsuccessful tries, you buried the recipes deep in your desk drawer. The edges of the pages will be brittle when you take them out, the ink faded. You will have to make do.



2. Gather your ingredients.

WHILE SOME OF the recipes are simply disappointing, others are missing something so crucial that the dish is inedible without it. Flour amounts for the mandel bread are measured not with standard cups but with your grandmother's coffee mug, which was thrown out or donated after she died. A step in her borscht recipe is written in another language, some hybrid of Yiddish and your grandmother's shorthand that you can't decipher. The precise combination of oven temperature, pan size, and baking time for the stuffed cabbage is omitted, and you should be able to figure it out, but every time you try, the dish either burns an acrid black or remains cold in the center. If your grandmother were still alive you might ask her about these omissions. But you know how she'd answer. "Why don't you let me do the cooking," she'd say with a wink. "Maybe it's just not your thing."

You knew what was going on, of course. Your grandmother wasn't one to share the spotlight. She dyed her hair a shocking red and wore an even more shocking bright red lipstick. She stacked her fingers with thick rings glittering with fake diamonds. She smiled broadly, and danced often, and charmed everyone she met.

She knew her dishes were magical. She knew they'd lose that magic if just anyone could make them.



3. Read through the recipes once again, from start to finish.

YOU GRANDMOTHER'S recipes weren't *really* magical, of course. You know this. And yet, without her here to prepare them, they reveal an emptiness at their center no ingredient or instruction can fill. So perhaps there was some magic involved. Why else would she secret away the core components of her dishes, taking them with her to the grave? How can the absence of a person change a recipe so drastically?

And then you think about your college art class, where you learned about negative space. You remember how pointless it felt, sketching the emptiness between the model's elbow and torso, the cushion of air that cradled the side of her neck. But when, at the end of the period, you stepped back to examine your paper, you saw the model there, full and fluid, carved out of the negative space you'd drawn.

You think of the negative space your grandmother left behind. You wonder if there was more to these recipes than she ever let on. You wonder if the point isn't to replicate them at all, but to find a different way of seeing.



4. Don't be afraid to get dirty.

COOKING with negative space is an exercise in grief and anger. This is *loss* you're kneading on the floured board, loss you're tossing into a hot pan to sizzle and brown. The process is messy and furious, guided by instincts you have to seize before they evaporate. It's chemistry, and it's art, and yes, it is magic. You are infusing the dish with your grandmother's

absence, and in doing so, you're bringing her into being once again. Not exactly the way she was, no. Because you are also infusing it with your own presence: here, now, the person you have spent your whole life becoming. You're using ingredients — sumac, EVOO, kiwi jam — your grandmother would never have recognized, in proportions you'll never write down. Leaving your own negative space, perhaps, for your own future grandchild to discover. Because the discovery is the point, you're beginning to realize. And discovery cannot be given to you. It's difficult work, and it takes years, and it's never finished.



5. Eat.

YOUR GRANDMOTHER USED to embarrass you, sometimes. She was so loud, so bossy, so unapologetically herself. You can taste that now, as you're eating the dishes you've prepared. They taste different than you remembered them, or perhaps it's simply that your palate has changed, now that you're older. Now that you've realized you don't have to apologize for yourself, either.

It's true, these are not your grandmother's recipes, not exactly. You have changed them — but then, so did she, when she inherited them. When she carved out her own life, so different from her parents; when she showed you such a thing was possible. And while part of you wonders if, somewhere in the beyond, your grandmother is mightily pissed off that you've discovered the secret to her magical recipes, you prefer to believe she's proud of you. During dessert, when you're eating your rugelach and drinking your decaf, you'll feel her heavily-ringed hand resting on your shoulder, smell her

perfume on the air; and if a soft breeze kisses your cheek, it will leave a smear of bright red lipstick behind.



JENNIFER HUDAK is a speculative fiction writer fueled mostly by tea. Her work can be found in venues such as *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *ECO24: The Year's Best Speculative Ecofiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Sunday Morning Transport*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. She is a Nebula Finalist and a graduate of the Viable Paradise writer's workshop. Originally from Boston, she now lives with her family in Upstate New York where she teaches yoga, knits pocket-sized animals, and misses the ocean.

NEITHER KITH NOR KINDERGARTEN

H.E. BERGERON

Short story: 1,540 words

On Fridays during the school year, I teach kids to grow vegetables.

Most of my classes are younger: K1, K2, first grade. I think that's a good age, full of enthusiasm but happy to follow instructions, new enough to the world that even common crops can surprise them (garden variety, heh heh).

They like to ask the big questions: Why do plants have leaves? How do trees grow? Farmer Robin, are you a boy or a girl?

I give small answers. Because they need leaves to make their food. They get taller from the tips of their branches, and they get wider from just underneath the bark. Nope, I'm a farmer.

I might take a swing with some vocabulary. Photosynthesis. Parenchyma. Non-binary. But at that age, they usually don't retain new words.

My first semester at the job, March through June, was

pretty great. Then I had a break for summer, visiting just twice a month to keep the garden alive, very relaxing. Then I showed up full of excitement for the first garden lesson of the fall and I found a beanstalk growing out of the middle bed that was too tall.

First of all: I only planted bush beans, not pole beans, and those suckers get *maybe* a foot high. Second of all: pole beans need a structure to climb and this vine was totally freestanding. Third of all: beans grow fast, but they don't go from seed to full fruiting plant in two weeks. Finally: it was taller than me. It was taller than the school. It reached up into the sky like it was making for the vanishing point of an art piece, like it was hooked to a hard point screwed into the clouds. I couldn't see the top of this beanstalk. *Birds* couldn't see the top of this beanstalk.

And it did *not* want to come up. It had a root system let me tell you. I hauled on it with garden gloves and dug around it with a trowel and eventually I got it out. And then I pulled down until I couldn't see anything dangling from wherever its top was above the clouds.

This was all very inconvenient. I'd had a whole lesson planned about the bush beans, but any of them that the beanstalk didn't crowd out, I ended up killing when I dug up the roots. You can't seed new beans in September, they're a summer fruit. I had the kids plant some spinach instead.

I got a call from my sister at home that night. She wanted to know if I was going to visit for the holidays. Obviously not. I said, "Jenny, you know I won't. I can't miss work during the busy season." She said, "You can't blame me for trying."

The next Friday the lesson was an insect and worm scavenger hunt. Kids go wild about bugs, in kindergarten. All they want is a magnifying glass and a roly-poly to poke. I got there and I didn't see anything immediately suspicious. Great! We

wiggled like worms, we sang a silly song I wrote to the tune of ‘The Ants Go Marching’. I handed out clipboards and magnifying glasses so they could draw some critters and then turned my attention to the row of radishes in bed two, which needed to be thinned.

It was one of the teachers who said, “I’ve never heard bees like that before.”

I tuned in then. My ears pricked up, I tilted my head around like a satellite dish, and I heard it too. The bees, the ants, the pillbugs, and one lone butterfly trying to snag a meal on the cilantro that had bolted: they were all singing. So quietly. Like little chiming bells. No words, just a tune, a layered melody that I was pretty sure I could detect fragments of ‘The Ants Go Marching’ embedded in.

I laughed nervously. “Oh yeah. It’s a seasonal thing,” I said.

When the teacher from my second class asked about it, I said it was a native species we don’t usually get in urban areas. This answer seemed to please and mollify.

After all the classes headed back inside, after I did the chores that students don’t get right the first time, I got a few extra supplies out of my van. I put a jar lid off to the side where it wouldn’t get stepped on. I poured heavy whipping cream into it out of an orange pint carton. I ripped up a cinnamon bun from The Dough Also Rises (best bakery in the neighborhood) and left a piece sitting in the cream.

I got a postcard from Jenny that week. Actually it was written on the back of a maple leaf, but the postal service is more willing to roll with the punches than you might imagine, as long as there’s a valid stamp. I was of two minds about hearing from my sister. The rest of the family had just kind of given up after I left, I imagine they don’t think about me very often, and although it stung a little, there’s something to be said for a clean break.

I was hopeful the next Friday but I showed up maybe forty-five minutes early anyway, because I was also suspicious. And I was right to be. The nasturtiums that I grew in the corners of the beds, with their vivid yellow and orange flowers and their round lily-pad leaves, were sparkling just a little too much in the fine autumn sunlight. When I slunk over to check them out I found that they had transformed in my absence into literal jewels. Translucent. Glittering. Exquisite.

I gathered them up and threw them in my gardening bag because what else was I supposed to do? The edges of the petals were so thin as to be sharp, and kids were for sure going to hurt themselves if I left the things lying around. I was pretty bummed to be honest. The nasturtiums had started to go to seed, and the seeds before they mature have this fresh, spicy flavor to them, like horseradish. I'd planned to let the kids taste-test them.

We harvested the radishes instead.

Afterwards I went and hunted around for my jar lid. It had ended up under a nearby shrub, part of the hedge that separated schoolyard from street. I took the jar it had once attached to, an organic peanut butter brand that still used glass, and I waited a second and then clapped it down atop the lid and screwed the two pieces together.

I could feel the vibration of something moving around inside. I took the jar back to my van and dug around until I found some stakes that I used when I needed to put bird netting over the beds. They were iron, more or less. I placed them in a square around the jar to show I meant business and waited.

The little sprite beating their fists against the inside of the jar consented to reveal themselves to me. I crouched on the curb and looked through the van door, so the jar hit at my eye level. I waited until they calmed down.

"Did you like the cinnamon bun?" I asked.

They crossed their arms sullenly but, after a long moment, nodded.

"I'll give you another one, but you've gotta take a message to my sister for me," I told them.

I got a phone call that night, from the number my cell can't recognize and won't let me save as a contact, the one that I never set a ringtone for but always plays a hauntingly familiar song. I picked it up immediately.

Jenny said, "I'm trying to help you know."

I said, "I hear you. I understand. You're not helping."

"I thought you might be having trouble with rent," she continued.

"I'm not," I told her.

"It all seems so tawdry," she said. "Don't you want to come home?"

I tried again. I had to try. "Jenny, I don't. I know it's not glamorous, but I like my job. It's mine, okay? Today I got twenty kids to try radishes for the first time. They screamed. Some of them are going to ask their parents to buy radishes at the grocery store now."

Silence at the end of the line.

"Please call off your boys," I continued. "It's hard enough trying to garden in the city without the sprites causing mischief. I'm happy and I'm getting by; if I need you to save me from banal mortal troubles I'll ask, I promise."

My sister sighed heavily. She'll never really get where I'm coming from, I suppose; she's the trueborn daughter and not the changeling child. But she understands a promise.

"Please?" I finished.

"If you're sure," she said, and then plaintively, "I miss you."

I rolled my eyes so hard I had to sit down on the couch.

Silence. Finally I said, "*You* could come visit *me*."

“Really?” she asked. It was the first time I’d extended an invitation to anyone in the family; anyone underhill at all.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yes, anytime. As long as it’s not on a Friday.”



H.E. BERGERON is an escapee of the world of tech start-ups who now works in urban agriculture in New England, where you may also find them writing, crafting, or playing far too many games of Dungeons & Dragons.

NIGHT MARE

SUSAN TAITEL

Short story: 500 words

“Mama,” a child’s voice slices into my dreams. I open an eye and fumble for my phone. It’s 2:19 AM. “Junie, it’s nighttime. Nighttime is for sleeping,” I recite and burrow deeper under the covers.

“Mama!”

If I don’t respond, she may go back to bed. Yes, I’m playing chicken with a preschooler. It’s not the first time, and it won’t be the last.

“Brrrrrrlllllp,” comes a throaty whicker that could not have come from a three-and-a-half-year-old. I sit up. The room is lit by a soft glow. It’s coming from June, or rather the animal she’s sitting astride.

“Look, Mama, Pony!”

“I see. What a pretty... horse-like-thing.” It’s as much a horse as Hello Kitty is a house cat.

Its coat is iridescent white, like abalone, or cheap doll

clothes. Even in the dark, its magenta mane is eye-searing. Preposterously thick eyelashes flutter in my direction.

“Junie? Sweetheart? Did you make a wish?”

“Her name is Crystal Dewdrop,” she coos, stroking its velvet fur.

“Of course it is.” I haul myself to my feet.

“Here, Mama, she came with this.” June hands me a crumpled booklet with the words “Care and Maintenance” emblazoned on the cover.

I lead June and her *freaking magic-pony* to the kitchen and start a pot of coffee. Hopefully, it will counter the animal’s scent; an unholy mix of peach cobbler and manure.

The family curse strikes again! I text my cousin Heather in Australia along with a photo of Crystal Dewdrop and June.

Heather responds a few seconds later with a string of laughing emojis and a GIF of a unicorn farting rainbows.

An ancestor of ours once did a service for a faerie queen and was rewarded with a boon. I’m sure said ancestor meant well when she asked that all her female descendants be granted one wish per lifetime. If only she’d thought to set a minimum-age requirement.

I knew a wish was on the horizon but I hoped I’d have more time to prepare. Most wishes are granted between the ages of four and seven. Whenever the girl-child is old enough to speak, understand the concept of wishing, and want something with her entire soul. Sadly, little girls aren’t known for their pragmatic desires.

Crystal Dewdrop burps a cascade of soap bubbles. June giggles. I fight the urge to cry.

It could be worse, my great-aunt Sylvia wished for her brother’s head to switch places with his butt.

My hand goes to a smooth path of skin on my stomach, a memento of my own wish; a giant amethyst where my belly

button should be. Troll dolls were especially popular when I was six. At least June's wish doesn't require cosmetic surgery.

Eventually, I get kid and creature to bed but I'm having trouble falling back to sleep. I flip through the instruction booklet. A few key phrases jump out at me: "cotton-candy diet," "bathe twice daily," "all wishes final."

I give up on sleep, boot up my computer, and begin drafting an ad for Crystal and June's Ponyrific Party Rentals.



SUSAN TAITEL GREW up making foolish wishes on eyelashes and dandelions. These days she mostly wishes for more books or more yarn. She live in Minnesota where both come in handy during the long winters. Her fiction has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Cast of Wonders*, and *Baffling Magazine*, among others. She can be found online at susantaitel.com.

INHERITANCE IN SIX PARTS

NADINE AURORA TABING

Short story: 842 words

First, my eyes. They're from my mother, who inherited them from her mother, who received them from *her* mother, and so on, and so on — a matriarchal tradition, extended to me when everyone realized I was actually a girl. To be honest, I've always wanted eyes with violet irises, or at least an object recognition algorithm. I'm always losing things. These eyes are capable of perceiving only the typical human frequencies — and, my mother insists, ghosts. I didn't really believe her. Like, come on. Seeing Lola Carmy again thanks to a couple of ancient, made-in-Taiwan Retukan67s? But years ago, when I was driving home from an all-nighter before my thesis presentation, I got blinded by this *huge* aura, a halo of light colored every color. I had to pull over, and 2.534 seconds later, the big quake hit. So...you can't program everything, you know?

Second, my right arm. This one is from my father. Military-grade alloy, every inch inlaid with synthetic neurons, a gyro-

scope humming in the elbow, the fingers warm with processors running precision algorithms and the whole thing rated to lift around 330lbs on its own. He was on the frontlines, before. The trigger finger is so worn it's shorter than the other fingers by two and a half millimeters. When my old arm finally gave out, he gave me this one — *"Just to keep you safe."* Anyway, that's why I was able to pay for my tuition; I was the only one at Tempura Ama who could deep-fry slippery figs and matsu-take perfectly, every weeknight happy hour. That's also why the only other thing I do with this arm is write poetry.

Third, my left arm. It's the only limb I've had since birth, with all the scars to prove it. You can see our brown skin here, though I've covered most of it with ink. Tattoos look *so* good on flesh — it's how they're supposed to look, I think — stretching and breathing when you move, and taking the same hits you do, even if it's just stretchmarks, or scarring. I always wish this art could outlive me, that maybe I could pass it down, but at least I won't go by myself into the earth one day: I'll have my suns and rivers and sampaguita.

Fourth, my legs. They were scavenged by Auntie, from before. They were made in one of the first mass production facilities after the war — it's mostly worn off now, but see that last little bit of barcode, on the heel? One leg's stiffer than the other, and cracked, but they're pretty hardy, and easy to fix whenever the kneecap jogs out of place. The thighs store a lot, though the right door's dented and needs some coaxing to open. You wouldn't believe everything Auntie brought here in them, photos and seeds and handfuls of tamarind candy she said she slipped me to quiet my fussing on the ship. Legs have always been expensive, but when I was twenty-four I'd long outgrown the too-short pair I'd stumbled around with since high school, and she wouldn't let me refuse. She said it was a graduation gift, that she didn't need them anymore, that they

were too heavy for her, that she was moving to a ground-floor apartment anyway. That was the same day she gave me the pearl necklace she'd tucked inside her toe, in case of emergencies, or daughters. She always said she was glad that I happened, and not the other.

Finally, my heart. It was the one thing I almost didn't get at all, palmed together with meat and wire and steel ventricle and hard, harsh hope. During blackouts my parents kept it warm in their mouths, and whenever the muscles atrophied, they cut their blood and marrow into vials again and again, regrowing sinew to peel out and reweave. The hardest thing, they said, was to start it — they clasped their hands together, rubbed, prayed to seed the static in its atria. None of it worked, and then one day, it suddenly began to beat — the same morning they heard about their visas.

They wanted me so badly. They gave so much of themselves to me, so that I could live, so that I could have something different than what they had. And I'm thankful. *I am* thankful, even though every gift came with pressure, with expectation, with the burden of proving I was worthy of the math and mass of all these heavy sacrifices.

So, I want you to know: you can have all of the gifts I've inherited, but only if you want them. If you don't — if you want state-of-the-art eyes rather than haunted ones, if you don't want to carry limbs heavy with weld-patched steel and old sins, or even if you'd rather not allocate memory for Tagalog para makausap ka with your elders who aren't compatible with all the newest English dictionaries — it's alright. It is.

The only thing I really want to pass down to you is my love: it weighs nothing, and is indestructible.



INHERITANCE IN SIX PARTS

NADINE AURORA TABING IS A WRITER, artist, and shiba inu enthusiast whose short fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Reckoning*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Worlds of Possibility*, and others. Her writing has been a finalist for the Bram Stoker Award, and nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She can be found online at suchnadine.com.

SILVER TRACINGS IN STARLIT SKIES

REED MINGAULT

Short story: 936 words

The hum of the ECLS filled the small room, her brother's support devices loud against the scratch of her pencil as she worked out her thesis. She had a plan, but working to make it viable — and more importantly, defensible to advisor and panel — was taking a little more work.

The blankets rustled as her brother leaned over to look. It was a bad day, and he'd spent most of it in bed plugged in. Sleeping, or listening to a book — things that didn't require much from him.

"Thesis plans still? Any spiders in this version, Torrie?" Kiram rasped.

"Sorry, pal. Only code and chemicals, as usual." Torani set her pencil down. "Did you need something?"

"Not yet. Finish what you're working on," he said. But she knew him almost as well as she knew herself, the tightness around his eyes, and got up to get his pain meds.



THE BROWNOUTS BEGAN in her third year. Kiram was safe — the power commission prioritized medical necessity — but it couldn't last. People had argued about the inevitability of grid failure, of power storage and generation deficiencies, and how current methods needed to change — but it had never amounted to more than talk. No one could agree on actions.

They started rationing electricity. Only so many kilowatt-hours a week at the lab. Torani saved her heavy computing tasks and matter-printer usage for low-demand hours, when she could stretch her allowance.

Kiram carried on. He'd dropped out of university years ago, when his condition progressed past what medication alone could mitigate. But he still tended his passion: ranks of small naturalistic enclosures holding spiders of all shapes and sizes. Torani's favorite was *Typhochlaena seladonia* — the jewel tarantula. It looked like someone had made it from electro-plated titanium.

Kiram never got a formal degree, but the research he did with his collection had contributed to just as many journals as her work with AI-directed nanomaterials. (If she and Ariadne, the AI, could just come up with a viable nerve-fiber replacement for him...)

"Torrie," he said, as they sat on their balcony and stared at the stars. Rationing made it dark enough at night in the city to see them. "Think we'll ever get off this rock?"

"You mean, go to space?"

"Yeah. Travel to some other planet, describe new arachnids."

Torani squinted at the dark skyline, then back down to the simulation spinning slowly on her screen. It wasn't quite

nerve-fiber. But the conductance was promising. “I hope so. But I doubt it. Not in our lifetime.”



IN HER SIXTH YEAR, she dropped to part-time. Between the blackouts (even at home now), and taking on another job to support Kiram, her doctorate took a back seat.

The support equipment would have kept him more comfortable, let him do what he wanted — but they had to ration its use. It took so much power. And Kiram’s condition worsened the longer he went without.

Kiram sold off all his spiders. Torani held back tears as the last one — the jewel tarantula — went off with its new caretaker. She knew Kiram was preparing for the time when he could no longer care for them — for his own passing — as gently as he could.

If only the grid was still working — if the support equipment was able to do its job—

He couldn’t leave so young. Maybe if she’d gone into neurology, instead of materials engineering—

But her thesis was on nanomaterials. Nanomaterials that would transmit nerve impulses... could also transmit power. Nerve impulses were just electricity, after all. She had enough physics to figure this out. And Ariadne had more.

“Ariadne, you awake?” she whispered to her AI partner in the small hours, while Kiram slept. Modern AIs didn’t use as much power as their predecessors, but they still used some. With the rationing, Ariadne often “slept” in low-power mode when Torani did.

“I am now. The nerve-fiber tests?”

“Something else. That last conductance test, with the carbon-silver nanostrands?”

“Yes, I remember. I will bring it up for review.”

Torani burnt the rest of her month’s kilowatt-hours in computation and simulation. Ariadne sighed through the speakers when they finished, like a fellow grad student pushing back from the lab bench after an intense session. “That... will work. The equations balance. You can harvest ionospheric energy via silver-silk and a space-tether with these constructs, and reinforce the grid.”

“Print them. We’re not waiting on the advisory panel.” Torani said.

She let the constructs loose at the power station, where Ariadne would direct them. The last one she took home with her, waiting for when her AI partner said all was ready.

“Kiram. Come out to the balcony with me, please?”

He hesitated, and Torani saw the weariness etched in his features. It had not been a good day, and the night was not shaping up to be any better. “Just for a little while?”

The stars were brilliant. She pulled the construct from her pocket and put it in his lap. The tiny spiderbot in electroplated titanium, the size of Kiram’s absent jewel tarantula, unfolded and skittered up his outstretched hands. He stroked its head, and it patted his fingers.

With a bow, the tiny spiderbot flicked out its legs. It spun silvery strands into the night air and floated away, to join its siblings at the power station. At the space tether they had built.

“They’ll give you more time. More power. Watch.”

Silver tracings crossed the starlit skies.

In the room behind them, Kiram’s ECLS hummed to life. Across the city, lights flickered on. And the stars faded in their glow.



REED MINGAULT is the daughter of a Marine and hasn't spent more than a few years in one place in her life. Her formative years, when not moving cross country and across oceans, were spent on horseback and handling birds of prey, and she'll happily tell you more than you wanted to know about either. She draws, paints, dabbles in illuminated calligraphy, and is fascinated by pre-industrial handicrafts. Reed lives with her geneticist husband, precocious daughter, and a small menagerie of furred, scaled, and exoskeleton-ed critters.

CASSIE DALEY is a writer and illustrator living in Northern California. Her nonfiction has been published by Unnerving Magazine, and her short fiction has appeared in several horror anthologies. Her first YA horror novella, *Brutal Hearts*, was published in 2022. She is also the creator of *Rosie Paints With Ghosts*, the first book in an illustrated horror series for kids. You can find Cassie on Instagram and Twitter as @ctrlaltcassie, and you can find her portfolio and more at ctrlaltcassie.com.

SO, YOUR CHILD
TURNED OUT TO BE
A PHOENIX: A FEW
WORDS OF ADVICE
AND RESPONSES TO
COMMON CONCERNS
EXPRESSED BY
PARENTS, FROM DR.
V. GOLDFINCH, PHD

STEPHANIE BURGIS

Short story: 600 words

Look, my darlings, of course you're concerned by this discovery. You thought you were raising an ordinary brown sparrow, just like all of your friends, only to see your chick's soft baby fluff replaced by tell-tale, flame-colored feathers. Now, a hot, cinnamon scent, like the fires of possibility, fills your nest, and your child is revealed to be a glorious creature from legend. How could you not be caught off guard?

Just remember: it's a gift.

"How can you call it a gift? They will burn, again and again. It's unbearable to imagine!"

It is true that with those feathers, they'll never blend in like you and your siblings did. And in the end, no matter how hard

SO, YOUR CHILD TURNED OUT TO BE A PHOENIX: A FEW ...

you fight to protect them, they *will* have to burn to survive. That's simply part of the immortal package.

But none of us can shield our children from all pain — and each time they burn, they'll be reborn more magical than ever.

“But I don't want them to be different. What if I don't recognize them in their new forms?”

Darlings. Did you first know your chicks by the patterns of the feathers that they hadn't even grown when they first stumbled, cheeping, from their eggs? Or did you know them as your own even before they hatched, as they chirped back and forth to you through their shells and you shielded them with the warmth of your body against harm?

“But what will the other birds say?”

Here's something I already know about you, worried parent, because your child survived this far. You must have learned, during the long, hard wait of incubation, how to fight against the elements and the predators who menaced your unhatched young. Your instincts told you exactly what to do when a weasel's eyes glowed in the darkness nearby or a human stomped too close to your nest.

So I'm telling you: draw on that fierce strength again now — even if the latest threat to your child wears the face of neighborly concern as she pecks uncomfortably close to your tailfeathers and claims to be “only asking questions” for the safety of the flock.

“But I had so many plans for their future.”

What parent doesn't? But the most ancient proverb pecked into petrified wood reads: ‘A plan is a wish tossed into the wind. Don't be swept away with it!’

If you spend your time flapping frantically, trying to catch seeds already blown away in this morning's breeze, you'll never spot the fresh, new fruit before your claws.

Your chick's future may look different than you'd imagined.

They may not be happy, once they're grown, to settle for the safety of your flock. That flock may not even represent safety to them, as it does to you.

Instead, they may choose to fly off on fairytale adventures, leading younger sons to unexpected fortunes and teaching desperate princesses how to fly. Their exploits will go down in legend.

Won't you love listening to the stories they bring back?

"But what if they forget us in their new incarnations?"

Well, my love, there's only one way to ensure they won't. We all know that every time they burn, they'll be reborn...

So be certain to be there, waiting to greet them as they emerge, offering them fresh seeds to restore their energy and grooming their shining new feathers to remove every last, lingering touch of ash.

Let them see your wonder and your awe, and remember:

Phoenixes are immortal. Love can be, too.

But only you can make that happen.



STEPHANIE BURGIS GREW up in Michigan but now lives in Wales with her husband and two kids, surrounded by mountains, castles and coffee shops. She writes sparkling fantasy rom-coms, including *Wooing the Witch Queen* (the first in the Queens of Villainy trilogy), the Regency Dragons series, the Harwood Spellbook series, and more. She has also had eight MG fantasy novels published, including the Kat, Incurable trilogy, the Dragon with a Chocolate Heart trilogy, and the Raven Crown duology. A graduate of the Clarion West workshop, she has had over forty short stories published in various magazines and anthologies, and many of them are included in

SO, YOUR CHILD TURNED OUT TO BE A PHOENIX: A FEW ...

her collection *Touchstones*. You can find excerpts from all of her novels and novellas (and links to many of her short stories) at her website: stephanieburgis.com

ANSWERING THE CALL

JULIE BRYDON

Short story: 100 words

Azalea's fairy godmother appeared with a poof and sighed. "What is it this time?"
"Well..."

"Is the step-family cranky? Are you overwhelmed by chores? Have the mice gone on sewing strike? Do you need to become a mermaid for love? Was anyone cursed? Eaten by a wolf? Kidnapped by dragons?" The fairy godmother tapped her chin. "Wait. I've got it—there's a royal ball you simply must attend. Am I getting warm?"

Azalea flushed. "I ... I just missed you."

"Oh!" Her fairy godmother's expression softened, and she embraced Azalea. "I missed you too, dear."



JULIE BRYDON (SHE/HER) is proudly bisexual and writes sapphic fantasy. Her short fiction has appeared in the anthologies

ANSWERING THE CALL

SapphFic Eclectic Volume Four and *The Pull of the Tide*. When she's not writing, she can be found drinking too much tea with her nose buried in a book or three. For more info, visit <https://www.juliebrydon.com>

A REFUGEE FROM FAIRYLAND

KEYAN BOWES

The child evicted from fairyland sat silent in his overlarge new clothes, his brown skin pallid.

“Munna?” I said. “Let’s go.”

He glanced up with huge brown eyes, but didn’t speak -- or move.

This was my first time working with a kid refugee, and I wondered if I was doing something wrong. I popped into Nisha’s office for help.

The Borderlands Refuge Director looked tired. She’s used to a trickle of dimensionally misplaced adult refugees, rather than an influx of confused children. I’d been volunteering with her for a year, initially for transport through the PonyCart network, then handling individual cases when the need arose.

“Munna’s very withdrawn,” Nisha said. “He learned English quickly, but doesn’t say much. His DNA test suggests he’s originally from India. Something’s wrong in fairyland. They’re randomly sending back kids, some barely of age.”

“Which is what, around eight?” I asked incredulously. “And why send an Indian kid to California?”

“Maybe they don’t understand human geography or aging. Or don’t care.”

She came out with me to where the boy was sitting. “Come, Munna,” she said. “Latasha will take you to Mama Marree. She’ll look after you.”

Silently, he rose, but stiffened when I put my arm around him.

“We’ll try to find your human folks,” I said, trying to reassure him.

Fairyland refugees panic in automobiles, hence the Pony-Cart network. Munna’s eyes brightened when he saw my pony, Dapple. He stroked her nose, and she nickered.



THE REFUGE WAS a cluster of homes sprawled amid acres of woodland. The air smelled fresh and green. We found the other changelings in the main house, eating honeycakes at the kitchen table.

The children started chattering with Munna in the fluting tones of Fae lingo. I’d tried to learn when I started volunteering with Nisha’s group, but only caught a few words... queen, king, fight. Ti-Tanya. Oba-Ron.

Wait. Could Munna be *that* changeling? Then he was displaced in time as well, by at least 400 years. Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in... (a quick online check)...1595 or so.

So much for finding Munna’s folks.

Marree thanked me, offered Munna a honeycake, and deputed another kid to show him around. All the children took off, like a flight of butterflies, with a shimmering illusion of wings.



THE DNA TEST that confirmed Munna was from India, matched him with some distant relatives – including one Kumar in Sunnyvale.

Kumar turned out to be a programmer in his twenties, who arrived in Silicon Valley a few years earlier. Over coffee at Starbucks, I explained about Munna, who might have been taken hundreds of years ago.

“There’s a family story,” Kumar said thoughtfully. “My distant ancestor was a Raja. His youngest wife Lavanya returned to her paternal home for childbirth, but she died. Not so uncommon in the old days. But reason for the story is the baby, the Raja’s first son. He vanished. The birth-attendants said an unearthly lady took the child.”

“And — the baby’s name?”

Kumar took a sip of coffee. “The story didn’t say. Probably he was too young. In India we usually wait to give babies names.”

“So, not Munna?”

“Munna just means boy, like Chico. The birth-attendants could have called him that.”

“Want to meet him?”

“Well... sure. But to be clear: I’m in no position to adopt him.”

“Would others of your family?”

“An eight-years boy from fairyland?” he said doubtfully. “I can ask on our FamilyApp. But it’s not so likely.”

Well, that was a dead end.



MARREE SYMPATHIZED. “DNA databases have helped us in locating many families. But we get few placements, and even fewer work that work out.”

“I’ll keep trying,” I said. “Munna deserves a family. But it’s been hard to find someone related who’s looking to adopt.”

Marree nodded. “The Fae connection unnerves potential parents. The Refuge is a long-term arrangement for most of these kids. Wish I could get some help, though. Nisha’s fundraising.”

“I’ll volunteer a few hours every week,” I offered. I came to see Munna quite often anyway. Somehow, I couldn’t get him out of my mind. He was such an appealing child!

Soon, I was there every weekend. The kids called me Mama Latasha.

“Why don’t you move here, Latasha?” offered Marree one Saturday. “There’s a couple of cottages open. Leave your car in the shed near the entrance.”

“Dayjob,” I said wryly. “Long Commute.”



WHEN, six months later, I had to report I’d failed to find any interested relatives, I expected Munna to be disappointed. Instead, he looked thrilled. When I hugged him, he didn’t stiffen, but melted right into my arms. I held him close, inhaling his sweet boyish smell.

Soon afterward, my company went remote to save costs. I took Marree’s offer and relocated to the cottage. It even had a stable for Dapple.

One evening, Munna moved in with me, and chose a new name.

And just like that, some paperwork and a court appearance later, he was my son.



LATE ONE NIGHT, I awoke to realize I wasn't alone.

A fairy glowed in my desk-chair, looking ethereal and ghostly, as though moonlight had taken a humanoid form. Her diadem sparkled as she swiveled to look at me.

"Latasha. You have my Munna."

"He's called Raj now," I said, sitting up. "And he's mine."

"I promised his mother I'd care for him. Fairies don't break promises."

"Someone threw him out of Fairyland. And other kids as well."

Her face darkened. "My consort's a jackass. He attempted a coup, making factions in our land. Some of which started evicting our human wards, as though our two worlds are not forever intertwined."

"Raj is thriving here. Maybe your promise is better kept by leaving him with me rather than embroiling him in fairy politics and marital ... discord?"

"Squabbles."

Raj ran into the room and onto the bed. "Mom!"

I grabbed hold of him and held him close.



“Give me the boy,” said the fairy.

“Mom, don’t!” Raj whispered urgently.

Moving so my body shielded Raj, I strengthened my hold on him.

“Nope,” I told the fairy. “Not happening.”

“Mom, let me go...” Raj wriggled free of my grip and got off the bed.

What? He wanted to go back? I was floundering.

He knelt to the fairy queen. “Lady!” he said.

“Munna! Come home!”

“No, my Lady. May I stay here?” They spoke Fae, but I’d learned enough to follow. Ohh. He did want to remain with me.

“Won’t you return to the beautiful place?”

“No, my Lady. May I stay?”

“You would learn magic and wonder!”

I held my breath. That sounded so enticing, even to me.

“No, my Lady.”

“Thrice! You refused thrice!” She glared at me. “He stays, then. But I keep my promise. I’ll be watching over him.”

Great. Just what I needed. Co-parenting with a powerful fairy queen.

But what I said was, “So, my son’s got a fairy godmother.”

She laughed like the tinkling of bells as she shimmered into invisibility.



A PERIPATETIC WRITER of short fiction, **KEYAN BOWES** grew up in India and currently calls the West Coast of the US home. She's had around forty-five stories published, some more than once. Her stories have been translated into Italian, Spanish and Polish. Keyan's work can be found online in magazines such as *Escape Pod*, *Fireside*, and of course *Worlds of Possibility*; and on paper in twenty print anthologies. She's a Clarion graduate and a SFWA member. Website: www.keyanbowes.org

TETIANA HUT CREATED the illustration for this story. You can commission her on Fiverr at <https://www.fiverr.com/tanyagut>.

THE LAST ITEMS OF THE FORGOTTEN HERO, OR, THE GRANDCHILD'S FIRST DRAGON

GUAN UN

Short story: 1,010 words

Thirty years after the War of Broken Crowns and the fall of the White-Gold King: Sun-Li had a new adversary to face.

“So what do you like to do?” he asked his granddaughter, Antha.

Antha had been riding on horseback all day with her mother (his daughter) and wisps of hair were sweat-stuck to her small, round cheeks. Instead of answering, she scowled and dashed past him into the house.

Sun-Li sighed and turned to follow, wishing for a little of her speed. He battled another enemy now, invisible, near invincible: age.

Inside, she was frowning at the food—congee, youtiao, pickled vegetables—arranged on the table.

“You can eat, if you’d like?” he began.

“I don’t wanna. I wanna play. Why did my mother leave again?”

"Well, you were both on the way to visit me, but she heard news of some bandits. So she dropped you with me and she'll be back soon."

"Will she cut off their heads?" Antha asked eagerly.

If there was an appropriate age for stories about beheadings, Sun-Li couldn't remember it. "She will, ah, do what is right."

Antha glared at him—the look of a child who can smell a diplomatic answer.

"Maybe she'll catch them and smack their bottoms," Sun-Li said lightly.

She giggled at the joy of a grown-up saying a forbidden word. Then she remembered she was trying to be sulky, scowled again, and scuttled into his bedroom.

When she emerged, Antha had found a robe and was busy trying to wrap herself in it.

No, not just a robe.

The Robe Invincible. The one he had worn when he had captured the White-Gold King.

Sun-Li entered the throne room.

The White-Gold King on his throne, looking down. "But how did you get through the traps?" And then he saw the Robe and he glared. "Not even that can protect you forever."

Antha's little hands lifted the edge of the robe as she ran outside.

"There's something wrong," she said, when he caught up to her. "The robe is broken. It's too heavy."

He laughed. "No, not broken, little one. It's Crafted. Magical. It doesn't let things get close."

She looked at him like this was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. "Why?"

"So you can't be hurt."

"But you can't get hugs."

"That's a fair point," he conceded.

"Lemme try," she said, then before he could catch her, she backed up two paces and hurled herself at the katsura tree that bloomed crimson up and over his house. The robe bounced her back from the tree unhurt, and she rolled on the ground.

She looked wide-eyed at him.

"Did you know it could do that?"

"I ... I did not," he said.

"Do you have any other toys?"

The White-Gold King gripped his blade, half-astonished, half-anguished as Sun-Li deflected another spell.

"Do you truly believe these toys can defeat me?"

Sun-Li grinned back, cocky. "Yes, I think they can."

He led her into his storeroom.

"It's a little dusty," he said.

She looked around wide-eyed at the assembled things. Each one had a story from his adventures—

"There's lots of junk," she said.

"Would any of this be okay to play with?" he asked.

And then her eyes lit up. She reached over to the bottom of a stack and pulled, sending the rest clattering to the ground.

He winced then helped her to unearth it. It was the Shield.

He had never quite been sure if it was Crafted. Its reputation was that every blow that it took split open reality like a melon, and the Shield led you to the best outcome, the best world. Had it worked? It was difficult to tell.

The girl pushed her sleeves up, and with an intent look, lifted the Shield with both hands. He helped her with the other side.

"What do we need a Shield for?"

She gave him another look. "It's not a shield."

"It's not?"

"Help me outside and I'll show you."

Outside, she put it onto the grassy hill and then plomped herself down upon it.

"See? It's a dragon slaying sled. Now I just need a lance to slay the dragon."

"Hm."

Her eyes narrowed again. "Have you ever even slayed a dragon?"

The White-Gold King on the floor, his helmet shattered. Spitting blood at him. "What next after you defeat me? You can only become what I've become. Then you will see."

He blinked himself back to the present. "I ... haven't, I admit."

"Well you obviously need a lance."

"Obviously. One moment, little mistress."

Sun-Li went back to the storeroom and took the Spear of Sorrow. He unscrewed the spearhead, then took it the staff in his hands. For a moment muscle memory took over and it windmilled through his hands, spinning end over end. And then memory faltered and it fell, clattering to the floor.

He chuckled to himself and took it outside to his granddaughter.

She took it, dubious.

"Are you sure this will work?"

"I thought we could try."

"It looks too old."

"Are you talking about me or the staff?" She looked at him, unsure if he was joking.

He let it go. "But aren't we still missing one thing?"

She furrowed her brow.

"Where is the dragon?" he asked.

"Oh, that's just pretend."

"But we could use my dragon."

“What?” For a moment, her jaw dropped, and then suspicion crept up her face. “Wait, that’s not true.”

“Yes, it’s just down here.” He walked to the bottom of the hill, and pretended to look one way and then the other, his back towards her.

“Well, where is it?” Suspicion gave way to a haughty pretense.

“It’s right ... here.” Sun-Li turned and growled as loud as he could, hands outstretched into claws, robe pulled over his head.

Despite herself, Antha gave a shriek that turned into a giggle, and kicked off the ground and slid on the sled down the hill towards him, the staff pointed at his heart and her laughter reaching to the sky.



GUAN UN is an Asian-Australian writer who lives in Sydney, Australia, with his family and a dog named after a tiger. His work has been featured in *Strange Horizons*, *khōréō*, *Levar Burton Reads*, *Year’s Best Fantasy Vol 2*, and more. He is a sentence enthusiast, dumplingmancer and is probably thinking about (fictional) heists. He can be found at guanun.com.

PART FIVE
COMMUNITY

PRINCESS MILDRED AND THE DRAGON

R. J. HOWELL

Short Story: 1450 words

The time came for Princess Mildred to choose her quest.

“Dragonslaying,” she announced over dinner one early evening.

Her father, the queen’s consort, nearly choked on his wine. “*Dragonslaying*? You don’t think you could, um, pick a quest a little ... you know ... more ... how do I say it? Um. Less...”

The queen rolled her eyes. “What your father is *trying* to say is couldn’t you pick something a little less dangerous?”

“Robert went to Uswor for the summer campaign.”

“Yes, but—” her mother began.

“We *lost*,” Princess Mildred said. “He’s the crown prince and was stranded there for eight months!”

Her father buried his face in his hand and groaned, “Oh, gods. Don’t remind me.”

“Why was it all right for *him* to choose campaigning, but not for me to choose dragonslaying?” Even to her ears, that sounded whiny. She fell back on Plan B. “There’s talk amongst the courtiers of a need for a winter campaign to even the score...”

Her father glanced at the queen, who closed her eyes in silent resignation, then waved his hands as if dropping an unexpectedly hot bread roll. “Fine, fine! Dragonslaying it is!”

“Just ... dear, could you *please* restrict yourself to dragons in Treydan? And if there isn’t one, wait a season?”

With some reluctance, she agreed. A shame that dragonslaying tended to be such a *common* chosen quest in the small country of Treydan. The dragon population was a bit sparse and of those, most were the size of a large goat.

But one dragon might lead to more dragons. Specifically, to more dragon hoards, for dragon hoards were considered more a sort of *lottery* than stolen property. And with enough dragon hoards ... she’d be able to fund all of her *many* social projects.

First on that list: city-wide literacy.



AFTER FOUR MONTHS of sifting through rumor, Princess Mildred tracked her dragon down to the caves near the town of Brack-lewhyte.

It was a reclusive beast, reportedly the size of a middling barn, and had, so far, abstained from either robbing or eating the village folk. Wherever it was getting its gold and jewels, it wasn’t from its neighbors.

Princess Mildred’s main theory was that the caves themselves were rich in gold or silver, and the raw ore was sating the dragon’s hoarding appetites. If that were true, not only would she achieve her quest and fill the palace coffers with the

dragon's hoard, but a mine near Bracklewhyte would do wonders to bolster the failing agricultural economy of the region.

In her full suit of plate, her family's ancestral blade in her hand, the specially-tempered shield — cleverly designed by a metalsmith from Ochain to diffuse the heat of dragon-fire — strapped to her arm, she crept and clanked into the largest entry of the cave system.

She tapped the light-crystal mounted to her headband and a soft blue-white glow lit her way.

Deeper and deeper and deeper she clambered, squeezing through gaps in the stone and stalagmites, until she came to a wide cavern with a sluggish stream coiling through the space. The light of her crystal glittered off the water's surface, the slick and dripping stalactites, and a single, opalescent oval orb in the center of a mass of shadow.

The dragon blinked.

Princess Mildred readied her blade, her shield. The dragon's lips parted, showing a slice of pointed teeth the length of Princess Mildred's arm, and she mentally upgraded it from the "middling barn" category to the "large" one. Its scaled hide was a burnished gray streaked with deep green and silver, and its wings scraped the cavern's walls.

The light of the crystal also gave substance to the shadow of the dragon's hoard of...

"Books?" Princess Mildred said, somewhat aghast. "You hoard books?"

The dragon shuffled deeper down in its nest of old crinkly paper, gold-embossed leather, and cheap board bindings. The tip of its tail flicked like a cat's. "So? They're precious, aren't they?"

Setting aside the fact that it could *talk* — she'd heard legends, but didn't actually *believe* them — she replied, "Of

course they are but ... dragons are supposed to hoard gold. Or jewels. Or ... shiny things?" Things that could, say, pay for tutors' wages on a city-wide scale. Or the installation of halfway reliable plumbing.

The dragon snorted a tiny jet of flame from one nostril, and Princess Mildred took that as a draconic scoff. "Only because those are the most precious things the first human a dragon encounters has. Dragons don't pick their hoards, humans do."

That was the first she'd ever heard of it. "Explain?"

The dragon huffed in a deep, bellowing breath. "When I was newly hatched from the shell, the first human I met was an old woman on the path not far from my hatching cave. I demanded her greatest treasure, as a young dragon is meant to do, and she gave me her book, saying that it was more precious than all the jewels in the land. So I gathered my hoard, though for some reason, humans seem more willing to part with their books than their gold, and now I'm starting to wonder if the woman lied to me, all those years ago."

That ... might explain why such a large dragon was able to live in relative peace for so long in a cave system so close to human settlement. A gold-hoarding dragon would be reported by the land's tax collectors — they being the first victims of pillaging — but a book-hoarding dragon?

"Oh, but the *best* haul I ever did find was a caravan from some far land crammed full of all the books I could ever want. Never have I seen so many books in one place that wasn't my cave. My hoard has grown and grown, but I've come to realize that, perhaps, my choice of lair was ill-advised. It's the damp, see," the dragon said, and for a two-ton winged lizard, sounded incredibly morose. "It gets to the pages and fills the books with mold. They've started to fall apart, and I still don't understand *why*."

Princess Mildred's lips twisted. "Um, because they're made of paper?"

"No, no, not the *mold*. I meant, why the woman said they were so precious. The paper makes a nice sound if you ruffle through them, and sometimes, the light glints off the gold on the covers in a pleasing way, but ... they don't feel precious anymore."

"Dragon..." Princess Mildred said slowly, tentatively feeling her way through the next question. "Do you know how to read?"

"Do I what?"

"Know how to read. The letters in the books. They make words and sentences. Like ... talking? But for your eyes?"

"They *do*!? Why I never..."

"Here. Let me, um, show you."

And so Princess Mildred did. She sat on the least moldy pile of books she could find, opened the least damp book she could lay her hands on — an old traveler's copy of Fyodar's Guide to the Felja Realms — and began to read.

"That's in there?" the dragon gasped. "All of that? You're not making it up?"

"Nope, couldn't if I tried. This is some ... dry reading. Definitely not my first choice."

"Do it again! No, wait — teach me how to do it!"

"Um, all right." Well, it was a step toward literacy, though teaching a dragon to read hadn't been part of her plan. "You know, the best thing you can do is give a favorite book to someone else. It's nice to have it for you, but it's even better to give it away and let someone else enjoy it just as much."

The dragon's opalescent eyes gleamed. "It is?"



THE PLAQUE on Princess Mildred's statue in the Royal Square commemorating her life and works reads as thus:

Princess Isadora Mildred Bree Lettley née Ferton.

Beloved of the people, of scribes and scholars and teachers.

Founded the first public lending library in the great city of Ensgate.

Her partner in social reform is known to visit her old friend's statue — one of the few places in Ensgate large enough to accommodate a two-ton dragon with a wingspan of forty feet — and read from the newest of the library's acquisi-

tions. The dragon gathers a crowd, usually uneducated street urchins or the occasional tourist, all to listen to the words the dragon reads.

Sometimes, the dragon is known to teach a willing few to have the words for themselves and, even rarer still, gift a book from the library's hoard.

For the best way to honor a good book is to share it with someone else.



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FIX IT, REMEMBER IT, UNDO IT

ANAMARIA CURTIS

Short story: 1,200 words

When Katherine was just starting with Saturday magic classes, she liked to go online and find people to help. The month they learned *fix it*, she created a free store to repair stuffed animals, told herself she was recreating childhood dreams with every toy she mended.

Now, as she finds herself remembering that her half of rent is due in a week, she thinks about the internet again.

Her laptop doesn't really work anymore, so used to *fix it* that it's basically immune, but it gets her online. She sets up a seller account on Fixerr, settles under the Lifestyle → Relationship Advice tag. *I can spell your problems away!* She writes. *Let me change your life.*



WHEN SELENE ASKS why she's quitting classes, Katherine shrugs.

"I got fired, so I can't afford it for a while. I think I can get by on what I've learned already."

Selene looks like a witch — it's one of the reasons Katherine signed up to learn magic from her — and frowning she looks even more like one. Her straight black brows draw together, and she sighs through her nose ring.

"You're not ready," she says. "There are rules, ethical codes. You need to finish the set of courses before you can practice."

"Selene, I don't have the time! My rent is due in five days."

Selene twists her immaculately red lips. "Katherine, if I could use *undo it* on capitalism, I would. In the meantime, please come back. You need to take your gift seriously."



KATHERINE SENDS someone a love potion in a tiny bottle that used to hold her roommate's medication. She uses *remember it* on someone's ex, a girl called Lillian. In a picture Katherine finds on Facebook, Lillian is holding a sunflower, and her brown hair is shot through with light. Katherine thinks they'll be happy together, Lillian and her customer.

Katherine finds someone's eyeglasses from 4,000 miles away, cleans a nasty brown stain off a pale blue rug, tells someone exactly how his boyfriend has always dreamed of being proposed to. She turns some people down, but most of the requests she gets are simple and well-meaning, and the money comes fast enough. She has half enough for rent, plus groceries. She likes helping people.



THE REQUEST COMES in late at night: *Can you make me better, please?* All the information Katherine asks for about the object of the spell is there: Jason Hilman, living in Omaha, Nebraska, seventeen years old.

Katherine considers her available spells. She can't *fix it* because there's nothing physically broken. She briefly considers trying to tweak *remember it*, the spell she usually uses to make exes think fondly of past lovers, but that might have weird side effects. There is no *improve it*, and she's not clever enough to come up with a spell like that herself. Fixing what is cleanly broken is one thing, but the threads required by revision or improvement are too complicated.

But Katherine is here to solve problems.

She types a follow-up message, staring intently at the tiny screen.

Hi! She writes. Can you tell me a little bit more about what you want to improve? Would you like to be better at a sport or at school or at making friends? Just lmk!



THE RESPONSE COMES MIDWAY through the next day. *It doesn't really matter. There's just so much wrong with me. I want to be scooped open and cleaned out and made better. Do you have a spell for that?*

Katherine doesn't have a spell for that, but she does have a tight, clean ache in her chest when she reads the message, so she responds quickly. *I can't rewire whole people (and I'm sure you're fine as you are), but I can make you remember old hobbies or interests, things you used to love. Maybe focusing on those will help? Feel free to cancel the transaction if you're not interested.*

He responds almost immediately: he'll try anything. He sends a list of things he used to like.

Katherine spends half the day tweaking her *remember it*, drawing threads of interest. She doesn't know much about Jason, but she makes assumptions around the list he sent. Drawing and tennis and books. It's complicated; she feels like she has to approach it sideways. She can't afford to stare this spell in the face.

Katherine spends half a day on the spell and gives up. She can't quite finish it. She wants to help — so much — but she doesn't know how.



WHEN KATHERINE SCROLLS through her reviews later, beset by a dread she can't shake, she sees it all at once. *Excellent! Boyfriend is obsessed with me again*, one review reads. *Helped so much! Girlfriend doesn't want to hang out with her friends anymore*, says another. Katherine scrolls and scrolls. Her heart drops to somewhere in her lower intestine.

This was what Selene meant. Not taking her gift seriously enough. She's powerful, and she's been throwing that power anywhere. She's been hurting people.

She meant to help. But there are people out there who are drawn back to their exes — who maybe weren't good for them, or *to* them — or who don't know why they suddenly dislike spending time with their friends, and it's her fault.

It's really all her fault.



"I NEED YOUR HELP," Katherine says when Selene opens her door the next morning. She sets her laptop on Selene's kitchen table, shows her all the completed orders.

The space between Selene's eyebrows folds delicately as she reads. She turns pale. "Kat," she starts.

"I know," Katherine says. "Please, if you can, help me fix it. I'm ready to listen."



BEFORE KATHERINE CLOSES her Fixerr account, she spends two hours staring at Jason's message. She thinks about her first girlfriend, from a tiny town in Iowa, about her roommate who leaves his bottles of T lying around and comes from a family that doesn't know his name, about the way she doesn't remember high school, not really — just Tumblr and the ceiling at 4am.

Carefully, she folds the tiniest bit of magic into *remember it*, into the hobby he listed last, and sends it to Omaha. *I'm closing up shop*, she writes eventually. *Sending you a tiny spark of memory. There's nothing wrong with you. I promise. Let me know if you ever want to talk. My email is katherine.the.witchiest@spellsend.com.*



ON SATURDAY, Selene and Katherine sit across from each other at a coffee shop, the picture of productivity. They are weaving the hardest spell: *undo it*.

They will keep casting this spell until everyone Katherine's ever hurt is free. It could take months. It could take years. It's probably impossible. By the time they're done, they might be practiced enough to undo capitalism after all.

After that, Katherine is taking classes again, starting with ethics, and probably ending with ethics again. She could quit, could swear off magic forever, but she has an email in her

inbox from Jason saying he tried drawing for the first time in years, and he hated it, and the sketch sucks, but it exists, and he attached a picture. So Katherine wants to try again. She wants to do it all right this time.



ANAMARIA CURTIS is from the part of Illinois that is very much not Chicago. She's the winner of the LeVar Burton Reads Origins & Encounters Writing Contest and the 2019 Dell Magazines Award, and her work has been published in magazines including *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. In her free time, AnaMaria enjoys starting fights about 19th century British literature and getting distracted by dogs. You can get in touch or find more of her work at anamariacurtis.com, on Twitter at [@AnaMCurtis](https://twitter.com/AnaMCurtis), or on Bluesky at [@anamariacurtis](https://bsky.app/profile/anamariacurtis).

THE CASE AGAINST RAVEN MAIL

WEN WEN YANG

Short story: 800 words

I had set off on this petition of the Imperial Prince to remove Duke Muptus because the Duke poisoned the rivers, then demanded half my fields' harvest. I doubted if he had ever rotated his crops in his life, and yet he wanted to eat what my land produced despite his careless use of fertilizer. Blessed by the Goddesses, I could still spend a day in the saddle at thirty-five years old.

My eldest niece accompanied me, but in the fifth town we crossed, she stayed behind. That blacksmith did have impressive arms. I could hardly blame her. My brother would have something to say about it when I eventually made it home. Honestly, he had been trying to marry her off for years. He just hadn't realized he should have been pairing her with women instead of men, but he always failed to see what was right in front of his face.

Once we crossed into the next city, the Baroness agreed to join our petition against the Duke. He had delayed timber and

food when the historic floods came twice under succeeding full moons. Instead of farms, they lived in animal skin homes and fished. She brought five riders, as her husband was still managing repairs.

After crossing the dry Three Rivers Gorge, we suffered sandstorms in lands that had not seen rain in decades. How the fires wanted our hair, our breath. The Baroness' riders saved me twice when my sleeping tent went airborne. I smothered the embers on their shoulders as I kept up the rear during our rides.

We collected a menagerie of traveling merchants. The Duke had driven up the costs of their goods, demanding that their supplies only come from his dukedom, though the fields of Dashguar bore better flax for linen. Our shores never had shells that could produce the vibrant purples our people favored. The Baroness admired a fine bolt of silk, but her riders were not impressed with trinkets.

Our group argued over the campfires, growing weary of the same company until we finally crossed the mountain pass with local guides. We paid with what we could convince the merchants to part with, including that fine silk.

Finally, we reached the Imperial Prince's modest fortress of bureaucracy. Officials checked us in, handed us a number, and provided tea. In less than an hour, he granted us an audience, bemused. He listened to our complaints, read our documentation of the Duke's improper management. How he would promise one noble the sea and the stars, and then a governor would have that same sea with the moon instead. The Baroness was eloquent. One of her riders nearly applauded when she was done. The look they exchanged made me wonder why she had truly left her husband behind.

"Yes, but, tell me," he laughed as he pointed at the raven entering through a window. On its claw, it carried a small tube

with a message for the Prince. "Why not simply send me raven mail?"

Everyone looked at each other before they finally settled on me, the one who started the journey.

Was I certain the Prince would have listened to us if we had not come, nearly a hundred, to his royal offices? I had feared the Baroness would laugh at her neighbors' plight, but she took our struggle along with her own to the Prince's door. Over the campfire, we had learned the merchants' tricks, who was honest and who had the best suppliers.

"My ravens didn't have your address," I mustered.

The Prince laughed, and that broke the tension spun like spider webs. We cackled for ages before he invited all of us to dinner. I sat beside him through the meal, then walked with him through the gardens. I finally noticed his attendants had fallen away during our discussion of crop rotation.

"I am so glad for the company. My first wife grew homesick and returned to her people. I was also a poor husband in my youth." There was earnestness in those venerable eyes.

"What would you have your wife do?" I ask. "I am not interested in carrying heirs or pageantry."

"Then what are you interested in?"

I considered, imagining my future. I had brought the neighboring clans together, uniting over their woes. But how could I ensure the Duke or the next did not abuse his power? The mantle was right there.

I asked for it.

When the Prince summoned the Duke and stripped him of his office, he set the crown on my head, and proclaimed me duchess. The soil of my land no longer darkened my nails, but I knew its strength. I had the Imperial Prince's ear. The Baroness, the merchants, the people who ate and slept in my realm, they knew how to reach me.



WEN WEN YANG is a Chinese American from the Bronx, New York. She graduated from Barnard College of Columbia University with a degree in English and creative writing. You can find her short fiction in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Apex*, *Cast of Wonders* and more. An up-to-date bibliography is on WenWenWrites.com.

DIARY OF A HIGH SCHOOL NECROMANCER

SPENCER OREY

Short Story: 3,700 words

April 10th

Arrived at school on the giant bone dragon, ready to win back Sterling's love. Found her on the steps near the main doors, surrounded by her posse of smart-in-a-good-at-standardized-tests-kind-of-way friends. Other students rushed over to see the dragon, probably thinking this was an ask-Sterling-to-prom necromantic thing.

So, had to be brave. Declared my everlasting enduring love to Sterling. Then climbed down dragon's giant bone spikes and offered her the reins. Dragon gave proud scratchy roar of excitement and swished its bone tail a few times.

Long awkward moment.

Sterling: Gretchen, you can't keep doing this. I'm not your girlfriend anymore. You need to move on too.

Me: But—

Sterling: And your dragon is a mess. No wings, so it can't

fly, unless you finally fixed your levitation spells. Doesn't look like it can breathe fire. And why are its legs so wobbly? Honestly, unimpressive. Actually, no, worse than that, it's a big stupid risk. Giant necro projects like this attract trouble.

Ouch.

School bell rang. Sterling headed inside with friend posse.

Not me. Stood there panicking for a while, not sure what to do. Then heard pawing on the concrete behind me and realized dragon was sad/confused too. Dragon didn't understand why it hadn't been good enough for Sterling.

Gave dragon some not-your-fault pats between its head spikes. Then, skipped school. Returned to sanctum to rethink how to impress Sterling.



April 11th

FIGURED IT OUT! Of course Sterling wouldn't want a dragon. Started designs for a bone horse.

Went outside to start transforming dragon into horse, but got sentimental. Decided it's better to build anew. Maybe the dragon and horse can be friends. Either way, dragon was too giant, accidentally snapping low-hanging branches in the backyard. Shrunk dragon by removing hardest-to-find bones. Aimed for rad squirrel-sized dragon but got sentimental again and stopped at golden-retriever size.

Dragon had a hard time adjusting to new body size. Skittered around clacking on sanctum kitchen floor, then somehow got bone hindleg stuck under refrigerator.

Realized the problem was leg wobbles (i.e., Sterling was correct, as usual). Worked past midnight to make sure dragon

could better run and hop. Then took dragon on practice walk to cemetery to find bones for horse project.

Cemetery security guard must have been upset about all the bones taken for dragon project. Lots of new paper signs taped to old headstones: “No digging!” “Stop exhuming!” Nice vocab, sec. guard. Kudos.

Dragon showed me trail of body fluids leading to corpses half-pulled out of their graves. The corpses were totally deboned. Possible sign of a wannabe-lich, or just a rookie necromancer? Either way, looks like new necro in town, whether friend or archrival.

Located freshest grave and left a bone rose encoded with friendly message. Anyone ghoul-trained like me or Sterling will decipher it in a flash, but if it’s a rookie, then should be a nice little skill-growth puzzle. So, even if bone rose goes unanswered, it’ll provide info about new necro.

Dug up a good-sized femur and enough tarsals to fill a shopping bag. Also left a handful of candies for sec. guard as a sorry-for-exhuming-anyway gift.

Dragon seems v. intrigued by horse project. Likes to paw the scattered bones, as if pondering deep thoughts at origins of undeath.



April 12th

WALKED dragon back to cemetery for better femur (first one too brittle). Found bone rose destroyed. Evil answer left smoldering in blue flames: I WILL DRAIN YOU.

Super rude. Could have just ignored bone rose message, didn’t need to threaten me.

Archrival then.

Evidence of sec. guard trying to sweep up creepy blue flames, then giving up, not paid enough for scary stuff like that.



April 13th

BONE HORSE PROJECT taking longer than expected. So far, just another set of wobbly legs, even though a horse needs sturdiness to trot and canter, etc.

Got frustrated and decided to take a break. Went to school.

Found Sterling, studying alone under a tree in the sun. Told her about hard work on new surprise.

Sterling: (pretending not to care/pretending not to have survived the ghoul lands together while our parents sickened into power-hungry ghouls) Wanted you to hear this from me. The soccer captain asked me to prom, and I said yes. She's smart and kind and isn't obsessed with bones. You could still find a date too, if you try.

Me: But... (flailing) remember when you went through that Aladdin phase, so I made a bone carpet to fly you above the ghoul canyons? Then, when my levitation spell failed, remember how you cast a spell to soften the ground so we survived? Can you still teach me that?

Sterling: No. Get a handle on your own spells first. Or actually, don't. Actually, give up on our old nightmares. Focus on how to live now.

Me: (not sure what to say)

Sterling: I think we should stop talking for a while, okay?

School bell rang.

Stood heartbroken and alone. Thought about going home but was worried would just end up crying on sanctum futon.

Instead, headed to Honors English. Immediately got sent to vice-principal's office.

V.P.: Attendance, a key to success for young women like you. Tests, the preparation for a society that can, in truth, be the grand test of a productive life. But homework, the most important of all, is currently lacking from you.

Patiently explained how homework used to be regularly sent in via overly-independent non-flying bone pigeon before it waddled away for good.

Me: Got carried away with other projects but will create a new courier a.s.a.p. Still a good student with solid test scores who benefits most from independent learning time. Sorry. Sorry again.

V.P.: Incorrect. Absent student in big trouble. Want to help you prepare for a good future, kid. Do your homework.

Returned to sanctum to find bone dragon hiding under bed. Evidence of malicious activity in backyard. Sharp bone fragments scattered under the trees. Maybe a spy minion from archrival?

Watched new leaves sway in the afternoon breeze and thought about how archrival might attack. Then raised some wards.



April 13th (cont.)

WARDS ACTIVATED AT NIGHT! Defensive ice wards flash-froze leaves and branches. More ice deployed over back patio.

Had hoped to freeze/capture archrival's spy minion, but only found sharp bone slivers jutting out of lawn.

Dragon: Hiding again, skull tucked behind foreclaws in fear/shame.

Me: First time facing a scary threat. Believe in you.

Dragon: Leaned against my leg for comfort.

Thinking about how to boost dragon's confidence. Maybe dragon needs a name. Not anything corny, like "Boney." Dragons deserve reverence. Maybe something rad/Greek? (Ladon? Not quite right.).



April 14th

ANSWERED door in the morning and found Elderly Neighbor Keith, complaining about the night ice/noise.

Elderly Neighbor Keith: Was it rat related? Big rat problem lately in neighborhood. Pellets don't work, but getting results with this if you need any (raised a canister of liquid rat poison).

Me: Life should be treasured, not poisoned.

E.N.K.: (lowered canister) Huh. Listen, haven't seen your parents around in a long time. Seems dangerous for a young woman to be alone so much.

Me: (slowly closing door) Parents are grinding away at the office. They def. didn't open any now-sealed portals to the ghoul lands and then vanish forever. Bye!

Worried he's going to report me or bring other trouble.

Later in afternoon, started noticing lots of rats around. Found dragon (Bone Wing?) watching too, little bone-butt wiggling whenever rats ran by.

Worried about archrival's next attack.

Got an idea.



April 14th (cont.)

WAITED UNTIL E.N.K.'s lights were off, then snuck over our backyard fence.

E.N.K.'s yard simple but tasteful. Plum tree. Carrot patch. Bench where he probably sits alone in afternoon sun.

Expected to find a pile of dead rats in the compost, but of course no. Found the poison canister next to recycle bins. Ten rigid rats in the trash. Sad way to die.

Took the rats back to sanctum garage. Spread out a plastic tarp.

First, incantation. Rat bones burst out of bodies in sprays of squirty fluids infused with E.N.K.'s poison.

Then, reanimation! Welcome to your new afterlife, bone rats! Dragon (Fire Claw?) super excited too, nuzzled them in welcome.

Asked rats if they'd help as home protectors. Made them rudimentary little bone gear. Helmets, shields, swords.

Sent one rat to Sterling as new friend.



April 15th

WARRIOR RATS TAKING job v. seriously. Even set up perimeter rotations, riding around on dragon (Death Tooth?), swiping swords at backyard ivy.

No word from Sterling. Probably unimpressed again.

Finally solved wobbly leg problem! Bone legs hereby ready to run free across the bone-dry ghoulish grasslands and/or prom.

Next step: horse torso. Back to graveyard!



April 15th (cont.)

OPENED THREE COFFINS. No bones inside.

Dragon (Spike Terror?) grabbed my pant-leg and urgently pulled me to follow.

On cemetery path, found sec. guard's corpse deboned, skin flaking away ashy, drained of all life. Murdered. Absolute sign that archrival is becoming a lich.

Fled back to sanctum, panicking. Warded trees, back patio, back door. Warded driveway and garage door. Warded front steps and front door. Even mail slot. Still not enough. Still in danger. Where else? Have to close all weak points before archrival attacks.

Used horse project bones to add defensive tail spikes to dragon (Khal Droko?).

Expecting attack any minute.



April 16th

COULDN'T REST. Felt too guilty about sec. guard.

Sec. guard was working underpaid job in graveyard plagued by friendly necromancer. Probably saw someone digging, thought it was me, and went to say a friendly, "Stop exhuming!" only to get drained. My fault.

If archrival really is becoming lich, then eternal festering hunger from process of attaching own soul essence to object will only get worse. More murders to come.

Worried that Sterling was right, that big necro projects attract trouble. As in, dragon project brought a lich to town.

Archrival will come to drain me. And then Sterling.

Looks like it's up to me to stop the lich.

First step: searching spell to locate archrival's lair.



April 17th

SEARCHING SPELL INCONCLUSIVE. Must be strongly warded hideout.

Sent out two rat scouts. Wish there was a good way to ward afterliving things to protect rats and Khal Droko from getting drained.

Realized I keep hoping archrival is Sterling, even though no chance of that. Sterling wouldn't murder anyone. Plus, she knows my wards well enough to deactivate them. She wouldn't have triggered them. She would have swirled up out of backyard dirt.

Missing her. Freaked out to be battling a maybe-lich on my own.



April 18th

ONLY ONE RAT SCOUT RETURNED, carrying a single drained bone from other scout.

Khal Droko nuzzled the drained bone, v. upset that skeletal afterlife can be taken away so easily. Other rats held a quiet vigil for fallen scout, with swords out and heads bowed, but seem less disturbed. Maybe already used to the concept of a second and final death, because of their warrior path.

Surviving scout scratched intel into backyard dirt. Archrival's HQ is old brick mausoleum in private graveyard outside city limits. Like, pretty standard, even basic. Honestly expected

better from archrival. Wondering whether to downgrade them to just rival.

Fashioned rudimentary armor for me and more spikes for K.D. and assembled the rats.

Leaving three rats behind as home-guard.

Next step: show of strength to force archrival to stop murdering and leave town.



April 19th

ON DIRT ROAD TO MAUSOLEUM, big old trees rained an onslaught of bone bats.

Yelled for them to yield for a necro parley, but they sliced at me, then swarmed K.D.

Grabbed a fallen tree branch and tried to strike them away.

Exactly what archrival wanted.

Bone bat exploded from impact, then triggered others. Sharp bone shards shredded into my armor. Some stuck like arrows, others sliced my face and arms.

More and more bats crashed down, exploding.

Spun around to escape, only to see my rats get blasted apart. Horrible. Then tripped on my own tree branch. Screamed for K.D to flee without me, covered my head, and waited to die.

But K.D. didn't flee. K.D. could have made it to safety, but too good of a dragon friend to leave me behind. Leapt fiercely with his spiked tail, knocking bone bats away from me. Pushed me down into safety over and over, defending me, then simply covering me, until only sound was the hush of wind.

K.D. was shattered, unrepairable, dead again because of me. Warrior rats too.

No point in continuing to mausoleum. Fled back to sanctum.

Home-guard rats saluted, eager for mission report.

Apologized for everything over and over. Cried myself to sleep.



April 20th

COULDN'T GET out of bed. Keep thinking about my awful naïve mistakes. Feels like when my parents chose to become ghouls instead of my parents, and I followed them into ghoulish lands to bring them back, only to make everything worse.



April 22nd

MADE it out of bed and onto sanctum futon.

New letter from V.P., asking why still no homework being sent in.

Three remaining rats have formed a vigil around me, in respectful kneeling pose with weapons drawn. Message clear: avenge K.D. and fallen warriors.



April 23rd

LOUD KNOCKING AT FRONT DOOR. Elderly Neighbor Keith outside.

E.N.K.: It's been quiet, so—whoa, did you lose a fight?

Me: Yes.

E.N.K.: Been thinking about what you said. Decided I'm done poisoning. After Joel died, my whole life turned poisonous, and I kept poisoning too. Now here I am, old and bald and alone. Keep thinking about getting a pet to chase rats away. Except, I used to have a dog, and his death wrecked me all over again.

Me: Know how that last part feels.

E.N.K.: (deep breath) Listen, I know your parents aren't at work. Not going to report you or anything like that. Just, got worried you went quiet because you were sick or in trouble. Came to check on you. Even made a batch of get-well chowder (offered a big bowl).

Me: (genuinely grateful) Wow, thanks. Promise it isn't poisoned? Ha ha.

E.N.K.: One last thing. Been seeing weird pale bats at night, circling neighborhood like they're searching, or getting ready for something big. Should we be worried?



April 24th

BACK TO WORK. Have to stop archrival before people like E.N.K. and Sterling get hurt. No excuses. No more miscalculations.

Retooling bone horse project. Can create new horse for Sterling if/when/after.

Warrior rats watch with little swords clutched close. Have to keep reminding them that second death is final, that there's no necro art to reclaim what's lost, only to start over again and again.

Gave them a quest: bring back bones. Collect dead rats. Try trash cans, sewers, anywhere.

Rats scampered into action



April 26th

RATS RETURNED WITH EXCESSIVE SUCCESS. Huge pile of dead rats.

Accepted the bodies in gratitude, then reanimated all of them, whole sanctum garage writhing with new afterlife.



April 27th

RAT SQUADS ENGAGING in combat drills. Some scamper up backyard trees and throw down sharp nails, etc. Rats below deflect projectiles, then stab, stab, stab. Other rats made throwing spears. Honestly, looks like a video game out there. Didn't expect bone rats to be so innovative/coordinated.

Original rats serving as wise mentors. Hard to distinguish them in form, but clear in accorded respect. Bone creations can't speak, but still seems like mentor rats are somehow communicating legend of K.D. and fallen rats to new rats. Wondering if they're developing a hive mind. Worth investigating, later.

Back to work. Starting levitation trials. Sending out scouts.



April 29th

RECEIVED LETTER FROM V.P.: Submit all homework now or get ready to repeat 11th grade.

Almost wrote back: Need to solve the lich problem, then will make time for educational busywork.

Instead, let it go. Refocused.

Scouts returned at dawn. One casualty.

Rats held mourning ceremony for fallen scout. Gathered swaying in concentric circles, heads bowed, weapons out. V. gallant, my bone rats.

Then, surviving scouts scratched intel into dirt for the rest of us. Fresh wards layered above and around mausoleum. Fresh bone bats in trees, plus what looks like bone tentacles sweeping ground.

Rats: (weapons raised, ready for glory)

Me: Freaked out, then realized two tasks could help me mentally prepare for big battle.

First, sent rats on another fetch quest.

Second, created bone rose for Sterling. Really opened up. Told her about missing our soulmate days of survival/collaboration, about loneliness without her, about how she's always in my heart and on my mind. Then kept writing, with full explanation of evil lich scenario and plan for battle. Know she won't respond, but felt good to be honest.

Bone rats returned with dog skeleton.

Reanimated it, left a thanks-for-the-chowder note tucked in its ribs, and sent it next-door to E.N.K.

Ready.



April 30th

DONNED bone armor and gave rats inspirational speech. Rats raised their weapons and took their places.

Me: (fist pumping) Fly, K.D. 2.0!

Gigantic mega bone dragon levitated with my whole

valiant army of warrior rats holding on tight. Cloudless clear night.

Near archrival's mausoleum, bone bats rose in massive swarm.

Waited until last second... then, K.D. 2.0 blasted out bone-fire! Green churning torrent melted first bat swarm before they could explode.

K.D. 2.0 lurched in air from expending power, then flew strong.

When next wave of bats launched, rats leapt to battle for the treetops. Raddest of rats somehow disarmed bone-bat exploding mechanisms, then harnessed bats as tiny mounts. Rat-bat riders twirled forward to clear the way.

Everywhere, bats exploding. Below, bone tentacles raking up at us from road.

Slowed K.D. 2.0 to hover-speed, then launched bone-fire torrent onto archrival's mausoleum. Thick green flames weakened the warded walls.

Landed K.D. 2.0.

Me: Ramming speed!

Accelerated to full gallop and slammed into mausoleum. With a scraping groan, whole building burst apart.

When dust cleared, found a spooky staircase down into a secret crypt.

Me: Not arrogant enough to go into a lich crypt, not even with mega-dragon and rat army. Better to bring the lich outside.

Blasted bone fire down the crypt stairs. More wards popped underground. K.D. 2.0 started shaking badly.

Bravest rat-bat riders swirled downstairs to clear the way.

Me: Rats, wait!

Evil blue light flared from crypt stairs. Terrible crunch of bones being drained.

Then, from the stairs, Archrival emerged, wearing shiny metal mask plus flowing lichy robe.

Me (ready to avenge everyone, even the whole necro art itself): Surrender!

Archrival Evil Lich: I will drain your pathetic corpse.

K.D. 2.0 launched more bone fire! Direct hit on lich! Then, fire fizzled. K.D. 2.0 lurched, too weakened already, then thumped hard onto ground, cracking a few ribs.

Had horrible flashback memory of original K.D. fighting to keep me safe. Refused to do that again to anything.

Me: (dismounted) K.D. 2.0, no more bone fire or you'll fall apart. Get to safety.

Lich strode free from smoke, robe trails burning. Mask removed, revealing decomposing half-skull face. No eyes, only empty all-seeing holes.

A.E.L.: You've reached the limit of your power.

Me: Maybe? Actually, yeah, pretty much.

A.E.L.: Take me to the ghoulish lands. We can grow powerful together.

Me: Umm... no. My parents are there. Even though they're ghouls now, I can't let you drain them.

A.E.L.: (scary blue light building around shoulders) Then, Rat Princess—

STERLING, WHO CHOSE PERFECT MOMENT TO RISE OUT OF EARTH: Eat crap and die, lich!

Whirlpool of mud pulled lich halfway down and then froze to stone, slicing lich in two. Lichy body halves crumbled to dust, but blue lich essence wafted like an evil little cloud down crypt stairs to hide in its soul-object.

Sterling: (dark hair tucked into bone-chain mail) You alright, Gretchen?

Me: Holy crap yes.

Sterling: Good work breaking the lich wards. Easy to sneak in after that.

Me: You're totally amazing.

Sterling: (awkward pause) Please don't get the wrong idea.

Me: Oh.

Sterling: Breakups are hard. Not romantic with you anymore, but still your friend. And, seriously, needs to be okay to take break from necro arts. Haunted by our ghoulish years and the steady howl from the portal calling us back.

Me: (let that sink in fully) Just, missed you. We came back from the ghoulish lands and you stopped loving me. And what to even say to others who haven't seen the pale hills of unrest?

Sterling: I can help you make friends. We can be friends. Only, please, no more love declarations at school.

Me: Promise. Sorry. Must have made soccer captain girlfriend v. uncomfortable.

Sterling: She isn't girlfriend. Just a good friend now. Not sure I'm romantic with anyone anymore, and I'm finding how to be okay with that. Also, soccer captain adores the rat you sent me. Make one for her?

Movement from Sterling's shoulder. Rat friend I sent her poked out its head! Scampered down to where my rat army cheered silent hurrahs of redemption-beyond death.

Then, huge bone rat celebration dance! Looked pre-planned? Never saw rehearsals.

K.D. 2.0, still shaky, approached with head lowered in respect. Sterling gave friendly head pat, then examined stable legs with interest (!!).

Nice long night with Sterling, scouring mausoleum crypt. Found big treasure stash of bones and jewels, then found lich's soul-object: sinister looking top hat. Pretty standard choice, but still cool.



May 4th

BUSY FEW DAYS!

Hauled lich's bone hoard back to sanctum. Sent lich's jewels to sec. guard's living family. Patched/enhanced K.D. 2.0 and rats. Studying how to transform lich-contamination, to see if lich can be helped and restored into something new. Lich's hat keeps hopping around sanctum, maybe in support of project.

Watched E.N.K. playing fetch with bone dog in not-as-poisoned yard. Even saw them take a snuggle break on the little bench.

Made levitating bone pigeon and sent in huge pile of homework, plus plan for finishing the rest, plus general apology note to V.P.

Next, party at Sterling's house, to make friends.



SPENCER OREY (he/him) has a PhD in cultural anthropology and is a graduate of Taos Toolbox and the Odyssey Writing Workshop. He grew up in dry New Mexico and California and now lives in rainy Denmark. His stories have been published by Cursed Morsels, Flame Tree, and more. You can find him and more of his stories online at spencerorey.com and @spencerorey on Bluesky.

STORIES NEVER DIE BUT LIVE FOREVER ON THE WINDS

JO MILES

Short story: 1,325 words

It was a chill, dark day when the book bans turned to book burnings.

Despite the protesters gathered outside the school grounds — or perhaps because of them — a festival atmosphere reigned on the exercise field at Hope Springs Middle School. Claudia Campbell, the mom who'd instigated the whole thing, greeted everyone personally, handing out fresh popcorn and beer to the adults, root beer to the kids, while her husband started the fire. The core of their small town was in attendance: the principal, the mayor, most of the town council, plus the people she would call “the good upstanding moral citizens” and their families. Crucially, with their kids.

Claudia's daughter Harper stood at her side, murmuring polite greetings on cue. Mostly, though, she stared into the distance. Beyond the fence, the protest signs blurred in her vision. A few school friends were out there, but mostly strangers from nearby towns.

“What a good kid. She’s so lucky to have you, Claudia,” the mayor said, patting Harper’s shoulder.

“She’s my everything,” Claudia beamed. “That’s why we’re here: keep kids like her safe.”

Claudia’s crusade had started after she caught Harper reading some awful book with lesbians in it. She and a handful of concerned moms had petitioned the council and, over the vehement protests of the school librarian, won permission to comb through the school library and pull out all the books that needed culling. Better to err on the side of caution than let their kids be exposed to filth, Claudia always said.

When the fire was high, Claudia nudged her daughter forward.

“Go on, honey,” she told Harper. “Kick us off. Isn’t this exciting?”

Harper’s fingers closed automatically around the book her mom pressed into her hands. She avoided looking at the cover as she tossed it in.

A louder chant went up from the protesters, but it was lost under the crackling flames. The bonfire smelled good, like a camping trip, and Harper hated that. She hated its beckoning warmth. She backed away again, unbuttoning the neck of her coat even as she shivered. She would rather embrace the winter chill.



“BABE, COME LOOK AT THIS.”

“Please, not more book burnings. I can’t.” Three days after the protest, Kiley’s heart was still heavy and aching. All those books. All those kids, cut off and alone.

She’d been those kids, flailing for a lifeline of paper and ink. Kiley had found hers in the library, and it had been her

compass: away from her home town, to opening a bookstore, to Janelle. These kids wouldn't get that.

"This is different. Come here!"

Kiley squeezed in with Janelle behind the counter of their shop, leaning over her shoulder to watch the video.

Then they watched it again. And again. Kiley started to laugh.

A hundred miles east of Hope Springs in the small town of Canton, books were falling from the sky.

They fell on yards and parking lots, streets and roofs, all over town and especially around the school. The best video showed an irate mom running around with a garbage bag, shouting at kids and teens who were scooping up books like Easter eggs. Within a few hours the books had all disappeared into people's homes, there to be devoured, whether openly or in secret.

An indie journalist had compiled the reports from social media, and discovered something unbelievable: the mysteriously raining books were all the same titles that had burned in Hope Springs.

"It's amazing ... but how is that possible?" Janelle shook her head.

"Does it matter?" Kiley asked, grinning. And then, "I have a wild idea."



THE STORY CAUGHT ON, a conflagration of its own. More book burnings followed across the country — and within days of each, matching books rained onto downwind towns. The glee of social media channels was rivaled only by the vitriol at town hall meetings in the affected communities.

"Hope Springs must pay for property damage and moral

damage inflicted on our town,” the representative from Canton insisted.

“We haven’t done a thing wrong,” Claudia shouted. “You should be looking for who’s really at fault, not harassing good parents who are working so hard to do right by their kids! Have you questioned your librarians? Don’t blame us for the problems in your own backyard!”

“These were your books, Mrs. Campbell. Council members, we’re prepared to sue Claudia Campbell and Mayor Barnes for pornography distribution.”

At that, Claudia flushed bright red. “All we’ve done is protect our children! And I would do it again! Everything I’ve done, I’ve done it for my little girl.” She hauled Harper to her feet, one arm around her daughter as the cameras zoomed in.

In the car on the way home, Harper said, “Mom ... do I have to keep going to these meetings?”

“Yes, you do. I know it’s not ‘cool,’ but it’s important, honey. You’re learning about community engagement. If we don’t stick up for this town, no one will.” Claudia squeezed her daughter’s hand. “You know I’d do anything in the world for you, sweet pea.”

Harper scrunched down in her seat, and didn’t answer.



“THIS FEELS WRONG,” Janelle said as she hoisted a box of books on her hip.

“For me too,” admitted Kiley. “We’re subverting a negative ritual, and that’s bound to feel uncomfortable. But we’re doing this out of love, not hate. And ... how can we not?”

From the moment she saw those videos, the possibility that they could beat the book-burners at their own game,

using their own tactics against them, had been too tempting to ignore. Wrong on one level, but delicious in its irony.

“You know what this means to me, love,” Kiley said softly. In 9th grade, she’d met her first openly gay person inside a book handed to her by her school librarian, and it had opened up her world. She’d tried to do the same for other kids with the bookstore, but what about all the kids who could never even walk in their doors?

Janelle nodded and kissed her forehead. “I know. I’m with you, love.”

As booksellers and book lovers, they’d taken pains to do this right. These books were from queer and brown authors they knew personally, authors who’d been banned before. All had agreed the plan — most of them with something like glee. They were getting paid their royalties for these copies — Kiley and Janelle made sure of that — and they were writers, they loved a good trope reversal.

Besides, what better chance to get their books directly to people who needed them most? Because the bookstore happened to be directly upwind from Kiley’s hometown of Hope Springs.

Janelle lit the fire, a small, crackling circle of hope. With each reverently added book, Kiley intoned, “Take flight, and go where you’re needed.”

They put their arms around each other and watched as paper turned to ash, and stories took to the winds.



CLAUDIA CAMPBELL PACED HER HOUSE, shouting into her phone. “Gather them up, all of them! Get that filth off the streets! What do you mean people are taking them already? Go, move!”

Hanging up, she rubbed her temples and groaned. “What a disaster.”

“I know, Mom,” Harper answered dutifully. Her eyes were fixed on something out the window, a bright spot in their backyard.

“I’m going to fix this. For you, sweetie.”

“I didn’t ask you to.” Harper stiffened, shocked at her own daring. She didn’t defy her mother, not ever.

Maybe she was learning something from this after all.

Distracted, Claudia only smiled. “Oh, honey, you didn’t have to.”

When the phone rang again, Harper slipped outside. Cradled in the azaleas, she found a YA rom-com with two women on the cover, one white, one brown. Harper hid it under her shirt and hurried back to her bedroom, where she stuffed it deep in the back of her closet.

Late that night, under the sheets with a flashlight, she read.



Jo Miles writes optimistic science fiction and fantasy, including the Gifted of Brennex space opera trilogy and the Infinite Pantry cozy fantasy series.. Their short stories have appeared in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Lightspeed*, *Uncanny*, and more. Jo lives in Maryland, where they help nonprofits use the internet to save the world, but mostly serve the whims of their two cats. You can find them online at www.jomiles.com.

RECIPES FOR THE COURSE OF LIVING

JEANÉ D. RIDGES

Story: 4,440 words



You haphazardly park in your floatlodge's dock. Bout kick open your glider's door in frustration, fidgeting till it finishes unfolding. Thankfully, your neighbors' are empty because you know the Abdellah flock would gripe, Mx. Wuti would fuss, and you're exhausted with communing to others even if it's out of concern for you.

Due to the flashes of the sinking moon, your lodge's vapor-panels — mimicking it and its abutting roofs' moss — sparkle throughout the rigid foam of its exterior. Unlocking the door

and sliding it aside, you are greeted by its commons: blueberry walls — speckled with planters luminating in the expanding dark — that verge a coiled rug inhabited by foraged wool cushions and, in the rear corner by your room's entry, a short benchtable.

You sit hard on your plushiest cushion, drained out of yourself, and through the sky-portal above you track sea shard deepening to an evergreen brown as starbursts flicker into view. From where you are, you also have a direct sight line into the kitchen.

Photosensitive slats are embossed perpendicular to a membranous brick-encased oven, which faces a hottop contained by two stone counters and a porcelain convertpurifier mounted over the titanium washing basin behind it. Underneath, a composter centered and flanked on its left by an ice-receptacle and on its right by a coldstorage cabinet.

Your eyes rove it repeatedly, eventually fixating on the nearest counter and its residing recipe rolladeck.



Officially Missing You, Apple Pies | For any time truly, but especially for those when you feel distant from yourself or distracted.

Special Equipment: Roller, Leaf Mat, Something to Cut a Midsize Circle, Muffin Tin — ungreased (the crust got it like we got us); Ingredients:

Crust requires 2 cups versatile flour, a stick of unsalted butter (8 tablespoons) + 2 tbsps and a smidge (~2 teaspoons) of another straight-out-of-coldstorage and roughly diced, ~ a tsp salt, just a bit > than 1/4 cup water /

Filling 3-5 (less depending on size) *crisp* tart or clement apples peeled and diced, < a cup fine nectasuc, a couple

RECIPES FOR THE COURSE OF LIVING

teaspoons cinnamon, 6 tbsps of flour, and have a bit more of that butter chopped to put on pies once assembled;

Preheat oven to 425° & eye but should take bout 15 minute to bake*



ONCE YOU HAND MIX the filling in an aluminum bowl, you scooch your stool and get a big ceramic one from another storage drawer then throw in the flour, butter, and salt working it together with a sturdy fork till it's more grainy than pebbly.

You take a heavy breath and get a quarter cup saucer from the utensil rack. *This crust ain't try your nerve.* At the convertpurifier's tap, you fill a glass-fiber bottle by it to soothe your throat and temper then the saucer to sprinkle over the crust and ease it into shape breathing. *This is within your power.*

You lay a leaf mat and flour it to set the dough. Using a roller, you smooth it out into a thick but thin rectangle. You flour one of your found form molds and make as many circles as you can before re-clumping and rolling the dough to cut the last four making twelve. Pressing each into a muffin tin — making sure they're flush and go completely up the sides — you honestly reflect on touay.

As you were blissfully consumed by your harvesting in the Imagination Repository's Garden of Savor, El'undu came over and informed you that a conversation about the next vegetable crop rotation was happening.

You wiped your brow and clap-drummed, "Give these ramps a chance to say their goodbyes."

El let out a rumbling laugh and helped you lug your loaded

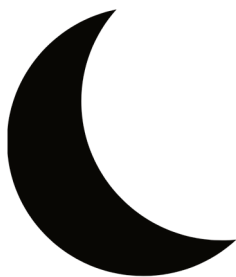
* Recipe adapted from Sarah in New York's on Food.com. And, of course, shout-out to Tamia.

down baskets to the processing station at the row's end. You and El approached the conservatory's gazebo with your fellow coimagineers.

Like all their routine strategizing sessions, they got right to evaluating soil quality and seed inventory along with what would need to be started in time for planting. Then out of nowhere Baki, Zyer, and Qos raised up — a clique of triplets curvy and mud toned like El but with none of El's sense. You accumulated proof of this as they began rattling off insincere accusations that everyone, except them of course, was not being attentive enough to their assignments. Those overseeing irrigation were transforming the garden into an indoor bog. Those responsible for propagation were wasting viable specimens. Community engagement? More like community abandonment . . .

The din of your justly enraged coimagineers smothered their words' leavings absent any mention of the back-to-back harvests with high yields or the numerous who came here to tend their craft after interacting with its caretakers. You attempted to reestablish calm and ground in what was meant to be discussed. The triplets attempted to single you and your "shortcomings" out when things quieted.

Equally doling out the filling in the tins, you inhale and make crosshatch then spiral toppers from residual tendrils of dough. Exhale, chopped butter for each and into the oven. Inhale, apple scraps and floury remnants to the composter. Exhale, washing dishes, wiping counters, and sweep-moping floor. Inhale, tender, umami, golden delight. Exhale, a plan for touaymo with a message to someone that can get your mind right further — and would curse your figurative granbabies if denied a taste of this.



At the rocky and sandy verdite shores of Wimaya, you lounge on a bamboo mat with Nat following a back cracking hug and proper brag bout our fineness. Ze has finally achieved close waves similar to the clouds that sprawl overhead and which harmonize with zer slight but round figure adorned in a beet shorts-suit. While you have managed knots and color coordination.

We linger in devouring the picnic orchestrated. Nat's still piping hot collards — giving under your teeth's faint pressure with a punchy yet supple zing — accentuate zer hashnests' turmeric-chili starch and fried tempeh's resolute crackle. They precede your apple pies warmed from proximity to the latter and possessing a cinna-tang that melds with the lush crust on the tongue.

Satiated, you unscrew your necklace's brass chickadee pendant — tinkling against an onyx cardinal and tufted titmouse on ambered rope — and sip a bottle of Nat's chicha morada to take your meds: a chalky yellow triangle with one and a half oblong beige.

Subsequently, you begin reading the newest thrilling and thought-provoking stories from Diaspace on your sharboard. Nat trading off with you for the ones where ze get to portray tricky dispositions or dynamic communication styles.

Only after adequately plumbing their nuances and debriefing on what's what in our own lives, do we hug again in

farewell; though we carry on even as we break onto divergent routes.

As you stroll up, your glider — modeled on a papyrus crane — unfurls registering your biofob's odor indicators. You walk up the door of its glazed octagonal core, climb inside, and shut your bag in the underside compartment. While the door seals, you fit yourself into the spherical pilot harness and squeeze its handles. This triggers your glider's panoramic scope and a digital bar of system, setting, and control statuses.

You fly up, up, and away to cruise your home. The coast merging into delta, where cows, coats identical to algae for disguise, suck in invisible particles of perma-aerial carbon and buoyant lilies while stubby legs flit them to-and-fro; river, cleaving hilly bogs with scruffy leas, integrated agridomes, and enviro-adapted floatlodges between; then, in the direction of the knolls becoming forested mountains and the Repository, assorted llamas soaring with egrets and larks beside you.

Pivoting toward your lodge, you happen upon a meandering Swapmart — basically an elongated one — with glittery crystalline panes to look in on its neatly sectioned wares and a wide pool occupied by a swath of aquafungi. Conical and shimmering caps interspersed with coralish wreaths whose ridges brim with the milk of an impending shedding.

As expected, inside you locate cheese and butter in addition to other musts on your restock list the agridomes or Repository Gardens don't supply. You weigh your exchanges — what survives of the spices you brought for Nat to peruse as well as excess compost and panel replacement spray. Stepping toward checkout, you discover a rare find outside the Gardens these last flourishing spans and are happy calculating there's plenty to barter for a bundle and the rest.



It's Been a Luay Lentil Soup | Whether it's been fulfilling and you're prepared to wrap with something delicious, it's been some sheepshit, or you just hungry.

No special equipment but gonna need a pot that can support all this →

Ingredients: oil, ½ an onion minced, 4 chopped carrots, a diced sweet pepper, 2 cups of any lentils rinsed and sorted, 2 containers of broth, cumin, sumac, mild chili (supplement with salt depending on broth); if you want, make rice or potatoes.



YOU HAUL your large cast iron pot onto the hottop. The veggies are already portioned in coldstorage, but, when you go to your spices, you realize all your ground cumin was exchanged and choose to make do with what else you usually employ plus coriander and sans onion because of your special ingredient: leek.

In the pot, a glug of avocado oil accompanied by carrots and leek greens tossed with some of the seasoning. Once it's popping with aroma, you tip the broth in steadily. When it boils, you scatter freckled black lentils and the remaining seasoning into the tumult.

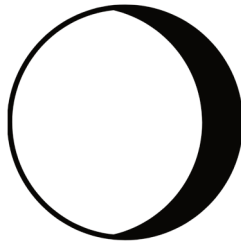
After reducing the heat and setting the lid on, you put what you took out away — except a saucer with the sweet pepper and hefty pinch of leek whites — and crank your timer with the soup's mellow fragrance trailing you into the commons where you laze on the floor.

Your shard pings and you grip it to liberate its glinting silhouette from the front of your overalls. A window with a message from Nat drifts out:

{A gentle nudge for your spirit's sake (*def since they bellying the consequences*) to not trip on these fools cause they can only extract if you give them the opportunity. Snuff that! K? Now, to what I actually wanted to tell you . . . As you should be well aware, it always nourishes me to be near you 😊.}

You go into the kitchen to assess the lentils and grace them with peppers. Turning off the heat, you let everything stew for a couple minute then ladle an abundant serving into a mug inlaid with tourmaline and dust it with the whites.

At the table, you prompt your shard to narrate Nat's message. Such as the soup, it fills you with its cozy flavors: the leek shy but inviting to the peppers' charge and sumac's lemon mimicry mingling with the earthy percussion of lentil, carrot, coriander, and chili.



The beams penetrating your room's sky-portal wake you from your nap. Opposite its accordion entry and suspended organizer — sole furnishing besides your bed generous with pillows and blankets — you press a foot to the beveled spot of the wall it's by causing it to descend as the bath vanity emerges.

You extend the shelf above its basin and scoop out a dollop of shea from its tray to massage in your palms then over your

arms and shoulder blades where dryness tingles. *Is there anything else you want to do to relax?*

You head to the kitchen and flip through the deck, eyes shut.



Onion & Smoked Paprika Cheese Crackers | For when you really wanna ignite your senses with gloriously simple wonder and are willing to trade a couple chunks of the luay in or by the kitchen for it.

Special Equipment: Roller, Cooking Papyrus, Baking Steel, Wheel Cutter, Leaf Mat, Grater; (Put these single batch measurements here, but you and I both know we're gonna double this to freeze for later so ensure dough to store is packaged well)

Ingredients: a hearty cup of freshly grated cheese (extra sharp), ½ a *stick* of cold unsalted butter diced, ½ to a whole teaspoon salt, a heaping tsp of onion powder as well as smoked paprika, 1 cup versatile flour (or do a mix with a quarter cup less whole spiq than versatile), < 3 tablespoons ice water;

Preheat oven to 375° & eye but should take bout 10-12 minute to get puffed up and golden*



WHILE YOUR PLAYLIST BOOTS, you gather everything. When it's done and you're set up, you snap and the lit speaker orbs Blaze

* Recipe adapted from Brown Eyed Baker's. | Tip: If butter too soft or firm for fork to work, use fingers to knead ingredients till right consistency.

recently bestowed on you bounce about the commons generating a twinkle from the table's opal.

In a bowl, your tried-and-true fork combines the butter with the cheese, powdered onion, and smoked paprika then cuts the flour with it till you reach that tiny pellet-like consistency. You dip your tablespoon into the cup of ice water four times to douse the mixture then add another one and a bit more creating a ball with your hands.

You split the dough, and your taste buds prickle due to the persistence of its seasoning as you coax the halves into disks rather unassuming to the eye if not for the flecks of paprika. You slip one into a glass-fiber container and the ice-receptacle and envelope the other in a leaf mat for coldstorage.

Kitchen clean and hands rewashed, you fling your arms around yourself. Then, since the dough won't be firm enough for a chunk, you let your body loose in the music accentuated with lyricism; which is distinctly redolent of meeting Blaze, Nat, and Trin at the Repository's Dance Hall.

In the flow of a regular boogie, blasting tracks shuffled by a visitor log, the meditative beat of Kehlani's "melt" was crooned away by Mates2Besties's "I Miss Your Love More than Your Warmth" and the shadow then hand of someone hinting at your rich sepia snuck into yours.

Over your shoulder, you anxiously glanced at a smile that said, "I'm Nat, no ref. My friends and I haven't beheld a constellation whirl accomplishing orbit in series, so wished to complement you and perhaps be acquainted."

You gave your name and Nat signaled to someone nutty with cornrows and ample hips — Trin — and another, tar slick, steering a flame-studded walker — Blaze.

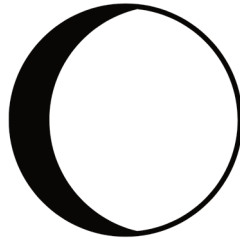
Introductions spilled over to the floor when your intro to Haint No Way Outta This Bog, the feverish "E Great Flight,"

lobbed the mic to Kiboris's Revolt and your specifyin favorite of kis: "Luay Waxing in Whispers."

The outro chorus of which tugs you here. K.R. blowing by "Shrubs" while you level dough near flimsy to trim and divide with your wheel cutter before poking each teeny square with a blunted needle, for venting and to transfer them to your awaiting lined steel. Chock-full, you ease it into the midst of the oven's ardor as Denai Moore implores you to "Let It Happen."

After swinging the door closed, you transition to knocking the chill off the last of a cannellini and pinto soup. That, once roiled, you upgrade with sheer sweet potato noodles and verdant carrot tops.

You thank the sources of this meal's aspects, the agristewards, and yourself for this bounty reaped with care. You pace yourself through its individual components then unite the crackers' zested crunch and soup's soft boldness.*



You review your to-dos: aid Garden of Requiem and Nurture in their seed storage rearrangement, preserve G.S.'s

* Music: Alas you cannot discover and savor the tunes of Mates2Besties, Haint No Way Outta This Bog, and Kiboris's Revolt. However, Kehlani's "melt" can be experienced here on Earth from their album *blue water road*. Denai Moore's "Let It Happen" can be as well on her album *We Used to Bloom*.

trending recipe plots, sift compost, and have fun — don't cuss anyone out — at the strikely Sinodi of Imagineers.

It's gonna be a hectic one, so swiftly you lunge into various stretches; moisturize, comb out, pick your cottony mane into a fro; drape yourself in a mauve tunic with waning-tinged capris and substitute slippers clogged with wool for metamorfs that reconfigure to sleekers based on the sopping weather.



Some grit can go a long way | You know what it is and what to do, but a truth don't hurt. ❤️*



LIFTING out your little iron pot, you coat the bottom with a miniscule layer more salt than pepper and fill it with a teeming two cups of water. Once it's bubbly, you slant the lid to shield your fingers and swish a spoon laden with whipped leek butter as you shake in half a cup of grits like granules of starbursts.

While it finishes, you alternate between checking that your bag has what you need and stirring the grits so they're not lumpy, and, when the delicacies of your palate aren't at risk, you eat, allowing the velvety sal-eeek-pep to enliven you, and down your meds.

You don a sumac poncho. Careen to your glider and to the sky. Swivel lamps slice through the haze, and droplets plink

* Gratitude to Akwaeke Emezi for writing, "The world can be a grit that sands away at us, and love can be a shelter from that," which was the foundation of this recipe's naming (p. 68, *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir*). | Tip: Add a little avocado or olive oil with seasoning — salt, pepper, and onion powder are my go-to — in bottom of pot if don't use butter just to help the grits not stick so much while cooking.

against its hull, till you arrive at the Repository — a row of sluggishly bobbing pyramids concocted from panels interwoven with silicon blended foam cord.

In the Gardens' docking bay, you clip with a wet shink into a slot. Their facade seems to be rendering as it gets drenched with you. Entering its mossy reception chamber is a stark contrast.

Behind you, the slider suddenly ceases closing and whirs reactivating.

Muedel comes in — an ink-dabbled poncho slung across eis tripod teal form — and eis pores shutter as the chamber's hidden fans gauge the presence of any banned organic or inorganic matter, bleep, then leach the water inundating you both.

You remove your poncho's hood and drum, "Didn't think you'd be in need of coverage."

Eis matte foundational column angles toward you and gurgles, "Even so, I struggle to resist a statement piece."

"Haha. How are you and the flock?"

"Depends on the luay and squabble. Though my barin's jubilee this conclus has elevated the mood tremendously."

"As it should."

Dryer, you move to the unbolting exit slider and ei blocks you. "Thank you for offering to help us with rearrangement touay. Why if ever reinforcement is needed, you should know it is here . . . You should also know your consistency and sensitivity allow those of us caring, in the majority, to perceive boons where an envious, troubled rarity would fabricate faults."

Eyes welling, you rap over your heart then the notches at the pinnacle of eis foundational, and, with eim, go to your craft.



Staring out from your clover courtyard, you observe the starbursts surfacing and Abdellah playing tag in theirs. Mx. Wuti appears to your left, terracotta skin glistening with perspiration.

Astride the ledge of the vine net you share with xim, xi wave to you and shout, “Haven’t seen you at my classes. You alright? Eksaren not dealing you out?”

You shout back, “That’s been steady. In a period though where stuff at the Repository amps up, so just do what I can for me when I’m not there — An ain’t everybody meant to be as ripped as you, Mx. Wuti.”

They brush their cascade of nickel coils out of their tawny eyes, smirking and flexing nonchalantly. “What you talkin bout, chil. Anyhow, I’m sure glad to hear you are cause wooh.” Xi rub xir chin. “How bout we plan for supper sheaf’s limit?”

“Yeah! Message me when.”

You wave and slouch inside ready for bed. But, should you leave the grumbling in your stomach untended, you are certain to wake in the depths of night hangry.



When You *Gotta* Eat but Don’t Wanna Cook Cook

No special equipment but gonna need a pot or pan that can support all this→

RECIPES FOR THE COURSE OF LIVING

Ingredients: 1 ½ cups uncooked couscous or round 3 cups leftover rice, prepped pound of shrimp or 2 cups rinsed precooked beans, aromatic spices/sauces to your desire, possible veggies: spinach, peas, broccoli, &/or sweet peppers. (If doing couscous: 1. Cook or warm protein with seasonings/2. Add 1 cup + 10 tablespoons water or broth and bring to boil/3. Stir in cc/4. Lidded, let sit off heat several minute to steam; fluff out biggest clumps when done so everything equally dispersed.)*

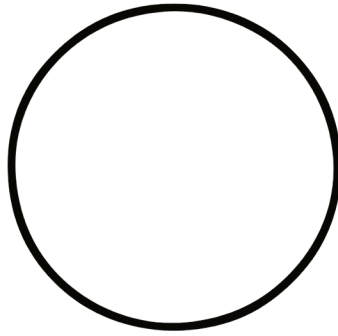


WITH BOTH HANDS, you lower your stool and drag the skillet from beneath the hottop onto it. At strike's genesis, you made a red pesto couscous with spinach — and, you remind yourself, there is that unprocessed blue rice Blaze and Trin made way too much of surprising you for dinner the strike prior.

Decided, you first pour oil into the skillet with minced garlic. Second, as it sizzles, you add prepped shrimp. Third, you wield your root spatula to distribute the peas, broccoli, and a drizzle of liquid aminos while the shrimp finish. Finally, as the broccoli nears the ideal bite, a tad more of the aminos with the rice.

When its sapidness is not tongue scalding, you don't even bother with a plate. Your sleep-beckoning brain can't draw up the language for its flavor, but you're full.

* Fonio is another great grain alternative that is prepared like couscous.



You send out notice you won't be in because with the onset of your random cycle of aches comes lethargy. Carefully rocking your wrists and ankles for relief, you ponder the sensation. Its honey viscosity: ambling, pointedly sweet, trapping.

You breathe and chant to yourself, "It is difficult to be here. Here is also life."

You settle.



Cinnamon Cookies | For when you really wanna ignite your senses with gloriously simple wonder and don't got but a chunk to spare.

Special Equipment: Cooking Papyrus, Baking Steel;

Ingredients: ¾-a cup of fine nectasuc, a stick of butter room temp, a large egg, a generous teaspoon of vanilla as well as cinnamon, 1 ½ cups versatile flour, a tsp baking powder, a couple dashes of salt (~¼ tsp), some cinnamon and nectasuc shaken not stirred;

Preheat oven to 350° & eye but should take bout 11 minute to bake — can check by poking centers with tester*

* Instructions: Mix or sift dry ingredients in medium bowl. In large one,

RECIPES FOR THE COURSE OF LIVING

(Freeze already rolled w/ extra cinnamon-nectasuc; If making cavits, can sans cinnamon entirely and press a morsel of bittersweet chocolate into their focals; Pending experiment: exchanging a portion of versatile with pecan meal, or go all in.)



AT THE KITCHEN'S THRESHOLD, you remember making a batch for the ice-receptacle a sheaf ago. So, with grateful and weary breaths you energize the oven tapping in the necessary temp, lay papyrus on your steel to position the cookies before putting them in, and swallow your meds with water and spoonfuls of stir fry.

You slump over a cushion.

Abruptly, your ringer trumpets and a familiar recording of voices hollers, "We decree a Sick Hangout!"

Exerting stamina you thought lost, you jog to the door and unlatch-shove it open. All at once: Nat salutes and Trin, throwing an arm up, squats to bolster a posed Blaze's leg over the guard of a glide-chair echoing zer black.

There's this jovial display appended by their sweatshirts — virid as the sky — that Trin and Blaze designed specifically for y'all way back of a doodled truwi'beara under jagged font warning, "I'M FAB AND FIERCE SO NO TOUCH." Then, there's Blaze using a chair instead of zer signature walker; Trin's moth

cream butter and sugar then stir in vanilla and egg. Then, stir dry combo with wet until all ingredients incorporate into dough and shape cookies — by rolling about a tbsp dough between palms to form a ball — then swish about in set aside cinnamon-sugar; if your dough is real sticky/messy to work with, chill till firmer then shape ← rubbing your palms together with a sprinkling of flour also aids smooth rolling. | Another Tip: For those without a blunted needle to repurp — raises hand — a toothpick will do as a tester. | Recipe adapted from PetesNina's on Food.com.

rash, evident despite their peat complexion; and Nat masking though you are all practiced in detecting the subtleties of zer gaze, where the aloofness is desolate and squint is twinge.

The smell of toasting buttery cinnamon wafts out of your lodge. You plod to your cookies in case they require rescuing.

Out of the oven, you examine them and pump your fists as a “We’re okay.”

Leaning against a counter, Trin adjusts their cooler fanny pack with bunches of carrot-purple allium embroidered.

They drum out, palm switching, “One luay, we bound to mutate into mushrooms much butter we be eatin.”

With Blaze’s gaping cue, you feed zer a cookie. You nibble on another, contently sighing in tandem with zer as the pleasant spice crumbles in our mouths, and ze drums back on zer chair’s guard, “Can’t wait.”

We laugh. Nat groans what sounds like one.

A saucer piled with cookies in hand, you go to zer — supine on the commons’ rug with knees collapsed inward and trembling.

You set it near zer and ask, “Shall I fetch you a heating pad, Miz, and water, or my fantastic ginger tea?”

Ze chuckles through a grimace and retorts, “Tea, but you rogues better put honey in mine.”

You inquire through a still considerate but more percussive drum if Trin and Blaze know where everything is. They clap in the affirmative.

In your room, you change into your sweatshirt and are brought round to considering honey’s nature again. Akin to the ginger engulfing your senses, it possesses the capacity to moor and assuage.

You nab a blanket along with your broadest pad and rejoin your kin. After assisting Trin in applying pressure to a finicky autoinjector, you tuck it into their pack’s sharps pocket and

procure a bandage from the fronting mesh before cuddling together with your mugs. A small cushion situated in zer lap, Blaze flicks on the pad and guides Nat to repose on zer legs so it performs double duty while they enjoy theirs.



THE POETIC STORYTELLING of **JEANÉ D. RIDGES** is bound and manifested by abundant melanin, Southernness, good eatin', breath, ill living, and care for our whole ecosystem's thriving. They've had a dozen and counting short-form works published. How to connect: jeanedridges.carrd.co | [@jdridges](https://twitter.com/jdridges) (bsky).

THE REGRETTABLE LONELINESS OF THE GREAT WIZARD GRAVEBLOSSOM'S DOOR

MICHAEL M. JONES

Short story: 1,500 words

It had been two hundred and forty-six years, eight months, and three days since the Great Wizard Graveblossom stepped out to run some errands, and Door was both bored and lonely. It seemed no one wanted to visit a secret magical vault at the end of a deadly labyrinth bordered by a monster-filled forest. From the occasional growls and screams in the distance, Door suspected the guardian creatures were having a grand old time and was quite jealous. He'd spent decades working on myriad knock-knock jokes, but his test audience left much to be desired. Case in point: the troll he'd workshopped against just last month.

"Knock knock," Door had said.

"Who that?"

Door let the improper response slide; it's not like he could be terribly picky. "Warrior," he said.

"Warrior? Where? Rockface SMASH!"

Door sighed as the troll turned and crashed off into the

distance. “Warrior who,” he muttered to empty air. “Don’t warrior, be happy.” He decided that one needed more work.

Then the strangers arrived. Two women — one tall, sturdy, wearing well-worn armor, a sword at her hip, the other short and curvy, wearing practical traveling robes and carrying an ornately carved wizard’s staff.

“Holy shit,” Door said, too surprised to watch his language.

The tall one arched an eyebrow. “Do magic doors usually curse?” she asked her companion.

The one Door presumed to be a wizard laughed, shaking her head. “Not in my experience. Not unless their creator was terribly powerful and had a weird sense of humor.”

The two looked at each other and simultaneously sighed. “Graveblossom.”

Door perked up. They had word of his master! Better yet, he could finally do his job! He dredged up the old protocols from the depths of his memory and embraced his true purpose at long last. With all the pomp and ceremony he could muster, he intoned *“If you wish to pass through me, you must answer the questions three....”*

“The answers would be...” said the wizard, “man, nothing, and a banana. Now be a good door and let us in. We’re in a hurry.”

Door mentally frowned. What ... how ... He mentally ran through the riddles he was supposed to issue and — well, damn. Three for three, in perfect order. “How?” he blurted.

“How long have you been alone?” asked the tall one. Door told her, right down to the hour. “Yes, well, I’m sorry to inform you that the Great Wizard Graveblossom died in a tavern brawl about a day after leaving here. And his secrets died with him.”

“Well, except for his diary, which was stolen and lost and found and — look, it’s a very long story, and tracking it down was a mess unto itself,” added the wizard. “To keep it short:

I'm Starling and this is my wife, Grace. We need access to Graveblossom's vault so we can save the world by retrieving a magical artifact."

"And now that we've given you your 'answers three,'" said Grace, "let us through. You seem like a nice door and I'd hate to destroy you." She flexed her fingers as if itching to unleash some mayhem and destruction.

Door paused, reeling with the flood of information. Graveblossom dead, all this time? These two adventurers, on a quest? They had the correct answers to his riddles but ... Door wasn't ready to end this quite so soon. Not the first intelligent conversation he'd had in centuries. "Knock knock..." he said.

Starling and Grace stared at him. "What?" asked Starling.

"Knock knock," Door repeated. "Secondary protocol for strangers," he added, lying through his metaphorical teeth. "I'm sure you understand."

"Oh for..." grumbled Grace. "What kind of magical door tells jokes..." She held up a hand to Starling. "No, no, I know ... *Graveblossom*. This is like the mynahtaur all over again. Hours being chased by a giant bird imitating a bull. Why are wizards so *weird*?"

"If you could alter reality on a whim, you'd be weird too. You love me for it, though," Starling said sweetly. To Door, "okay, I'll bite. Who's there?"

"Novice wizard!"

Starling's brow furrowed. "Novice wizard who?"

"Novice wizard clearly hasn't learned Knock spell yet!" Door giggled despite himself.

"That's it, I'm smashing you to bits," Grace growled. "Starling, find me something blunt and heavy."

Starling put a hand on Grace's arm. "Hold on, love. Remember, not everything can be solved by wanton destruction."

"This from the woman who set half the woods on fire because of a little spider?"

"That little spider was the size of a horse! It deserved the fire!"

The two realized they were arguing in front of a talking magical door and settled down. "It's been a long quest," Starling admitted, sheepishly. "That was a very ... nice joke. Will you let us through, please?"

Door considered. "On one condition. *Please* tell me what I've been guarding all the years. Not knowing has about driven me crazy! Graveblossom only constructed me to face the outside, never thinking I might be interested in what's going on behind me! I've spent centuries wondering what he thought was so important it needed so much protection." If Door had possessed eyes, he'd have given these two the biggest, most pleading expression possible.

"Is that all?" Grace asked. "Oh, apparently, he had the world's greatest collection of wine corks. Not the bottles, no. Just the corks. Thousands of them. Seems he liked to sniff them. Didn't drink a lick. When he died, he was on another hunt for some rare vintage out of Meridian." She shook her head, ruefully. "Freaking wizards. The problem is, he also collected the Cork of Divine Containment, and we need it to permanently seal away a very angry genie before it escapes its current, regrettably temporary, situation."

"...wine corks? WINE CORKS? That's what I've been safeguarding all on my own for centuries? I expected mounds of treasure, magical artifacts, unspeakable secrets. But *wine corks*?" Door gave in to his centuries of loneliness with the brief tirade, swinging open, radiating disappointment and defeat. "Go on, then. Save the world. Have a blast. I won't delay you. Angry genie and all that."

The two adventurers exchanged glances, a mixture of pity,

sorrow, and guilt flashing between them. “Thanks,” Grace said awkwardly, before the two darted through the palpably sulking Door.

“*Wine corks...*” Door muttered in disgust. “I was better off not knowing.”

They returned after a little while, radiating triumph. “Mission accomplished,” said Starling, holding up a golden glowing cork before tucking it into a belt pouch. “Now to head home before it’s too late.”

“Yay for you,” said Door, shutting behind them with a resigned clunk. “I don’t suppose there was anything else exciting in there? Maybe some gold? Cursed armor? Preserved heart of an immortal giant? You know, maybe the object of another quest someday?”

Grace and Starling exchanged looks before the latter replied, apologetically, “Just the wine cork collection. Um ... Graveblossom kept all that other crap elsewhere. Barely protected at all. He didn’t consider it important. We checked there first.”

“And you know? That trove didn’t have a talking door,” added Grace.

“Or a mynahtaur,” said Starling dryly.

“Just a few routine curses and traps. Hardly worth discussing.”

Door sighed. “I know you’re trying to help, but ... thanks anyway. Nice meeting you. Safe travels. Visit if you’re ever in the area.” Maybe that troll would come back and Door could try out a different joke...

The warrior and the wizard looked at one another again, holding an entire silent conversation. Door tried to follow the fast-paced interchange of shrugs, eye rolls, sighs and final nods of agreement, but he’d never been attuned to physical

subtleties. For all he knew, they were debating what to do for dinner.

Grace cleared her throat. “Um. So. We were thinking ... would you like to come with us?”

“I — what?”

“There’s no real need for you to stay here where your unique nature is wasted,” said Starling. “I could extract your essence, and we can find you a much better door to inhabit. One where you won’t be so lonely.” She smiled at Door. “Unless you’re happy here.”

Door didn’t even pause to think about it. “I’d take an outhouse door on a farm, as long as there were people to talk to!”

“I think we can do better than that,” Starling laughed. “Okay, hold still, this won’t hurt a bit, but it might feel funny.”

With the application of some tricky magic, Starling soon transplanted Door’s essence into a well-worn book of poetry. “Don’t you dare laugh,” she ordered. It would do until they decided on something more permanent. “Our front door, perhaps.”

“Hell no,” replied Grace. “The neighbors already think we’re weird.”

“We *are* weird. Maybe the Ducal Library...”

As the trio entered the labyrinth, Door spoke up. “Knock knock...”





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BRIGHTER THAN ANYTHING ON EARTH

ANNIKA BARRANTI KLEIN

Story: 4,240 words

Jenny emailed me twice a year about the reunions, but I never went. My past could stay in the past as far as I was concerned.

She started in on me early about the 25-year reunion and was more relentless than ever before. It was a subtle change, since she was always persistent. This was ... a lot. Husband didn't understand why I kept in touch with her.

"Why not just block her number?" he asked me after I complained that she'd sent me yet another text to ask if I got her email.

"I don't want her out of my life entirely," I told him. "She's my oldest friend! I just want to be able to complain for two seconds." He'd never really understood why getting the annoyance off my chest helps me, but he had the decency to leave it alone after that. I think he knew that I only kept him around because it takes two of us to keep up with the kids' eating habits. If he couldn't cook, he'd be out of here.

I spoke too soon. He got in one more barb. "I guess it's hard to end a friendship with someone who was in the same cult as you."

The kid answered before I had the chance. "Dad. It was not a cult. Don't be a dick. It was like gifted and talented, but for kids with a prophecy about them."

I couldn't believe they'd managed to sum it up so aptly but also so offensively. Ten-year-olds, am I right?

Jenny called me just as I started typing a response, and my thumb accidentally hit accept before I could decide whether to send her to voicemail. Her face filled the screen of my phone instantly. She looked amazing, like always.

"I know you're busy," she said quickly. I don't think she did it on purpose, but whenever she said that — which was every time we talked — I instantly felt guilty, sure that I was not nearly busy enough for her to excuse me from chosen one stuff because of my overfull life.

I wasn't nearly as busy as I was tired.

The teen burst in just then. "Mom, what's for dinner?"

I rolled my eyes and Jenny laughed.

"I'm on the phone and your father is literally at the stove. Why don't you ask him?"

"Dad never knows anything. Hi Aunt Jenny!" In one move the teen waved at Jenny, spun around, reached past her dad, and swiped a handful of carrots from the cutting board on her way out of the kitchen.

Husband looked at me like "???" and I shrugged. This was not a me problem.

"At least she's eating her vegetables," I said, and Jenny cracked up. It was just great for my parenting self-esteem to have a witness laughing at my every move. On the other hand, it was Jenny who taught me that parents can't control their

children, back when the teen was the toddler, a tiny hurricane of chaos who I once had to carry three blocks in a laundry basket while she screamed bloody murder. I mean, asserted her individuality.

Come to think of it, I guess that wasn't the first time she taught me that. That would have been sixth grade, after we both scored over the 99th percentile on the CUT test and ended up in the program. All of our parents were invited in for a conference with Gail, the program director. And by parents, I mean moms. That's another reason I keep Husband around — the kids' school is his department. Every autumn I have to train a new crop of teachers and administrators to call him first.

My mom was skeptical about the program, verging on hostile. What's it going to cost, it takes up *how* much of their time, what will it *cost*? It was the eighties, so no one was particularly concerned that it might be a cult, because we were all convinced we'd be too smart to join one. We weren't like those poor *Jonestown* people. In hindsight I can't believe we were so callous, but in my defense I was eleven.

I don't remember how the rest of the conversation went, or meeting any of the other parents — the room was full of fun kid stuff and we all started playing and getting to know one another — but ultimately my mom agreed to let me go.

Jenny's mom did not.

We exchanged phone numbers, and Jenny made me swear I would call her after every program meeting. She always answered on the first ring. "Maxwell residence, this is Jennifer." After three weeks her mom gave in, and I remember realizing that she could control what Jenny was allowed to *do*, but she couldn't control what she *loved*, and maybe she had decided to pick her battles.

“Earth to Meerkat.”

“Sorry. I was just thinking about your mom.”

“She says hi. Anyway, listen—”

I interrupted her. Old habit. “Jen, I just don’t want to relive it.”

“Mare, *listen*. Gail died.”

Oh.

I had to sit down.

“Shit” was the only word I could get out.

“I know. I didn’t think she *could* die, to be honest.”

“I still don’t want—”

“The reunion is canceled. Obviously. But there’s a memorial service out in the desert, and we’re invited.”

“Everyone?”

“Yeah, but you know most of them won’t come.”

“What, they’re okay partying together twice a year but can’t take the time to celebrate the woman who brought us together?” I was surprised by how mad I suddenly was.

“The thing is...reunion attendance has dropped off a lot.”

“It has?”

“We’re in our forties. I’m the only one who doesn’t have anything else.”

“That’s not true, you have—”

“I have what? You?”

“Well, yeah. You have me.”

“But I wouldn’t even have you if it wasn’t for the chosen one stuff. And that’s why I kept up with the reunions.”

“When’s the service?”

“You’ll come?” She sounded shocked.

“Of course I’ll come.”

“Can I see my nibblings?”

“Sure, they can come with. We’ll get a nice Airbnb and make a weekend of it.”



So JENNY FLEW DOWN to L.A. on Friday evening, and after I took her to her favorite taco stand so she could eat a real burrito — she hates the San Francisco style for reasons I am unclear on — we stayed up late drinking wine and talking about anything but Gail. By the bottom of the second bottle, I couldn't remember why I wanted to keep her at arm's length or further.

"You're my person," I told her, leaning against her shoulder.

"I know," she said, but her voice hitched a little. We sat in silence for a long time after that.

The next morning we herded the kids into my truck, stopped at Trader Joe's for supplies, and drove out past Barstow. The kids didn't say they were bored even once, and their phones stayed in their pockets as they played "I spy" type games with Jenny. I don't know how, but she enchanted them every time.

It was too early to check in at the house, so we drove straight to the weird not-a-church where the memorial was being held. It was the second of two days of what I guess would be called a viewing at a traditional funeral, but this was more like a wake since she'd been cremated. A very empty wake.

I was a little hungover. It seemed like a good idea to pay my respects, so I went up to the weird little not-an-altar and awkwardly arranged my legs in the kneeling chair. I was glad I had left my purse in the car and didn't have to figure out where to put it.

The table held a framed photograph of Gail, a two-handled engraved urn that I assumed contained Gail's remains, and a stack of what I guessed were programs, or whatever you give

out at not-funerals in not-churches. I picked one up and immediately started giggling.

"Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness," it began. It was Keats. I'd forgotten how Gail loved the Romantics. She had tried, unsuccessfully, to get us interested in poetry, too. We were all much more enthusiastic about mummies at the time, as I recall.

"Mom!" the teen hissed. "Why are you *laughing*?"

"It's a normal part of grief," I told her, hoping that was true. "Go play with Ellis."

"Ugh, mom. They won't stop talking about Pokémon."

"Must I remind you that you talked about Minecraft every day of your life for at least five years?"

"Fine! I'll go."

I watched her walk outside. Jenny was in the corner by the door with a young woman who I assumed was the not-funeral director. She had a clipboard and was talking animatedly.

I tried to ignore the fact that they were clearly talking about me. Jenny literally pointed. I closed my eyes and did yoga breathing until I didn't care.

I had thought I would have a lot I needed to say to Gail, but I ended up just sitting there quietly for a few minutes, until Jenny came over and stood a respectful distance away.

I extricated myself from the terrible chair.

"These things should be illegal," I grumbled.

"Gail left you something," she told me.

"She what?" I was confused. I hadn't seen Gail in more than twenty years. I didn't even invite her to my wedding.

The girl Jenny had been talking to appeared next to me.

"You're Mary K. Stone?" she asked brightly.

"It's Stone-Bradley now, but yes?"

"I'm Avery. Another one of Gail's kids. Sign this, please!" She extended her clipboard and I looked at the paper she was

asking me to sign. It wasn't very long — basically just stated that I was who I said I was.

I signed it and she handed me a small square box. I held it awkwardly, not sure what to do with it.

"If you don't open that, I will," Jenny threatened.

I opened it. Inside was—

"Gail's sea witch necklace!" I said out loud, totally unnecessarily.

Gail had worn a gold nautilus shell necklace for as long as we had known her, which was since before Disney's *Little Mermaid* came out. Once we saw it, we started calling it her sea witch necklace, because it was uncannily like the one Ursula wears in the movie. She pretended to be mad about it, but it was obvious that she secretly loved it.

"What did you get?" I asked Jenny, and the instant the words left my mouth I knew the answer and was sorry I'd asked.

"Nothing," she said, shrugging like she didn't care.

"Do you want to try to play it?" I offered, a thin attempt at compensation for still being the favorite despite never wanting it as much as she did.

She shook her head no. I closed the box and stepped away to give her space. I thought she would sit down with Gail, but she walked outside instead.

I thanked the girl with the clipboard — Avery — and asked her a question I wasn't sure I wanted the answer to: "Are we the only ones who came?"

"You two, a man named Blake, and me. Just us."

I thought I remembered Blake. He was younger than Jenny and me, older than Avery. Gail had kept looking for the chosen one for so long.

I thanked Avery again and followed Jenny outside.

Gail used to make a game of having everyone try to blow

into the shell to make music. She could produce a beautiful sound like you might get from a conch shell. No one else ever managed it, though the occasional attempt resulted in an accidental whistle. We only played when we were younger; by the time we were high school there was a younger cohort, and they were all blowing into it with no consideration for their propensity to drool. Besides, we were all too cool to blow into a fake shell.

Except Jenny. She kept trying. The necklace really should have gone to her.

She was sitting on a bench outside the not-church. Beyond her, surrounded by a chain-link fence, was an art installation of bottle trees made of wire and real glass bottles. The gate was open and I wandered inside. I walked past the first row of bottle trees and discovered that it was an entire garden made of metal and glass. At one side, glass pipes were arranged like an organ, and a small sign contained an invitation to play them by blowing into a tube.

I opened the box in my hands and looked at the shell, admiring the logarithmic spiral. I took it out of the box and held it up by the chain. I was certain I remembered it being on a leather cord, but memory is a funny thing. And even if mine was accurate, leather might have disintegrated over the years, or needed to be replaced for any number of reasons.

I put it on. The chain was long enough to go over my head without undoing the clasp. In fact, it didn't appear that there *was* a clasp.

It was heavier than I remembered, and it hung so it grazed my breastbone. I felt a whooshing sound echo through my chest.

No.

That made no sense. I must have been more hungover than I thought.

Not really certain what I was doing, I lifted the shell to my lips. Unlike a conch, there was no mouthpiece, but a flat area at the end of a closed spiral. I held it in front of my mouth and blew as you might blow into a bottle to make a tone. As you would blow into a flute.

A clear note sounded.

I thought I could hear someone saying something from far away, but I couldn't make out the words. As I moved the shell away from my mouth, I saw a dark *something*, like a fog, stream out of the spiral and form into something person shaped.

Impossibly, Gail was standing in front of me.

I stared at her in disbelief. "You died."

"And yet," she replied, gesturing at her very much alive body.

"So, what happens now?" I asked, stepping sideways toward the chain link fence, holding my hand out to feel for it.

"You know," she said, ignoring my question, "I always hoped it would be you."

Fuck.

I was the chosen one, after all. What a waste.

"I don't want it," I told her. I touched the fence with my left hand.

"Too bad," she said, and I suddenly understood what none of us had seen for all these years: Gail was not the good guy.

With my right hand I grabbed my keys from my pocket and turned, hurtling them over the fence.

"Jenny!" I screamed. "Get the kids to the house!"

She stood up from the bench and froze, gape-mouthed, for one terrifying second. Then she grabbed my keys from the dirt at her feet and ran. I trusted that she would figure out my iPad passcode to find the check-in information for the Airbnb. The kids would help her.

I turned back to face Gail.

Like any good villain, she was waiting. If she was smart, she would have killed me while my back was turned. Instead she had waited so she could tell me her dastardly plan, or whatever.

Little did she know, I had my kids to live for. And that was enough for me to be well and truly annoyed with her.

"Listen," I told her. "Naomi just started liking me again after a rough puberty. I am not giving that up easily."

"Who's Naomi?" she asked, motioning with her hands like she was patting a ball of clay. Small sparks ignited where the clay would have touched her hands if it was real.

"She's my teenager, and I am not letting you orphan her *or* her sibling."

"You should have known better than to form...attachments." Her voice dripped with seething hatred. I had always been her favorite.

"What am I, a *Jedi*?" I retorted. I felt like a teenager myself just then, employing sarcasm against authority.

"You're the chosen one," she said.

"Yeah, well, I'm afraid I must decline."

"It isn't *optional*, Mary Katherine."

"No one calls me that anymore."

"It's a beautiful name. You can make them use it."

"No, thank you."

"You were always stubborn. Headstrong."

"That's what you liked about me."

"Yes, it is. My stubborn, headstrong, chosen girl."

"Chosen for what?"

"Excuse me?"

"What was I chosen for, exactly? You were always so vague about it."

"I had to be sure it was you first," she answered, the sparks

getting stronger and forming a glowing orb between her hands.

“Well, now you know. It’s me. So what the fuck was I chosen for?”

“That depends on you, doesn’t it? There’s so much I couldn’t tell you sooner, Mary Katherine. The world is run by power systems you’ve never dreamed of; systems I found the way to conquer, but it requires two people. I’ve been looking for my equal a long time. What were you chosen for? Chosen to join me, I hope.”

“Absolutely the fuck not.”

“Then I suppose you were chosen to fight me to the death.”

“Sorry, I don’t have time for that.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ellis has band practice three times a week, Naomi has soccer, I have a *job* and a *spouse* and a *life*. I’m *tired*. I can’t possibly fit in a fight to the death.”

She looked shaken, or at least confused. This definitely wasn’t how she thought this would all go down.

I recklessly continued. “You seem to think that you’re Darth Vader and I’m Luke Skywalker, but you failed to consider that I have my own Han Solo.”

“I’m sure your husband—”

I interrupted her for the first time in my entire life. “*Jenny* is my Han Solo.”

She looked ... horrified. “*Jenny Maxwell*? That little whiner? All she ever talked about was how much she wanted to be chosen. Thank *whomever* she wasn’t.”

“She is my *best friend*, and she’s too good to be your chosen one.”

“I don’t see her here now,” Gail said. She probably thought she was taunting me. In reality, I was just relieved to have confirmation that Jenny got Naomi and Ellis away from there.

“Yeah, well, that’s because she’s taking care of my family while I deal with your absolute *nonsense*.”

Gail threw the orb of energy directly at my face. I sidestepped it like some kind of fucking ninja. Or a Jedi.

“Is that the best you’ve got?” I taunted back.

She summoned the second orb much faster, and this time I planted my feet and exhaled, ready to play dodgeball with her.

She threw it. I caught it.

“You’re out,” I said.

“What?”

“You’re out. I caught it.”

“This isn’t soccer,” she said, and I rolled my eyes.

“Maybe you should have included more sports in our curriculum. You might have learned something,” I told her.

I threw the orb at her and it caught her on the shoulder. She was out again.

I half expected her to whine, “I wasn’t ready,” but she just formed a new orb. This was getting very old, very fast.

I felt the nautilus humming against my chest again.

She threw the orb and I sidestepped again. She threw another orb. I plucked it out of the air and held the energy in one hand as I grabbed the shell with the other and crushed it between my fingers. It crumbled easily for solid gold, and even more easily for a nautilus shell. Those things are *solid*.

Gail stumbled, and appeared to choke for a moment.

“What did you—” she croaked.

“I destroyed you like the sea witch that you are,” I told her.

She faded away before my eyes.

I waited to make sure she wouldn’t re-form. Nothing happened. I turned back toward the not-church.

Avery stood near the gate to the bottle garden, her jaw practically on her knees. She dropped her clipboard.

“Did that really just happen?” she asked me, unable to trust her own eyes.

“Yeah. Do you think you could give me a ride?”

It was getting dark outside. I had no idea how long I’d been in the bottle garden. I pulled my phone out of my pocket to see where I needed to go.

“Of course,” she said, and we walked to her car.



I COULD HAVE SLEPT A MONTH, but Ellis woke me up at 5 a.m.

“I brought you into this world and I can take you back out of it,” I muttered into my pillow.

“We’re driving out to see the sunrise,” they said, climbing into my bed and snuggling up. “Do you want to come?”

“Okay, but I’m not putting on real clothes.”

“Jenny said we can all wear our pajamas.”

“Oh, she did, did she?”

Jenny had always acted like she was their third parent. It didn’t bother me so much now.

I put on my shoes and my bra, pulled my hair into something resembling a bun, and stumbled out to the truck.

“I hope you’re driving,” I said to Jenny.

“Good morning to you, too,” she said with a smirk. “I thought Naomi could drive.”

“She’s fifteen.”

“So?”

“So she doesn’t have a driver’s license.”

“It’s okay,” Ellis said. “Jenny took her out yesterday to practice. While we waited for you.”

My instinct was to be mad — that they used my truck, that Jenny usurped my authority, that I missed out on another

milestone — but honestly, I just felt grateful. If I hadn't made it back...they'd be okay.

I looked at Naomi and grinned. "I hope you're up for a drive-thru. I need coffee."

She squealed and got in the driver's seat.

There was construction and the drive-thru was closed. Naomi parked the truck and Jenny went inside to get coffee. I was surprised the dining room was open at that hour, but I guess they had to be. She came out ten minutes later carrying a drink tray with four large coffee cups and a bag full of breakfast sandwiches. The kids divvied up the food and I took the lid off a large coffee and drank without stopping until it was empty.

Jenny silently handed me a second one, which I drank at a slightly less intense speed.

"Did you save me a hash brown?" I asked the kid, and they passed me two, with an egg and cheese biscuit. I was touched that Jenny remembered I don't do meat.

Naomi drove while I ate. Fast food had literally never tasted so good.

The sky turned purple and orange around us. We were still too close to civilization. I wanted to tell Naomi to hurry, drive faster, don't miss it! I didn't say anything. She turned onto Route 66 and the sky started to get lighter.

Jenny leaned forward from the backseat and touched my shoulder. "There's still twenty minutes to sunrise," she said softly. "More coffee?"

"I already had two," I told her.

"I know. There's one more."

I turned in my seat and looked at her. Is this what it's like to have someone who takes care of you? She handed me the third coffee, then lifted her own and we tapped cups.

"Chee!" she said, the way Ellis used to say "cheers" when

they were a toddler. Sometimes it seemed like Jenny knew my family better than I did.

Ten minutes later, Naomi pulled off the road at a turn-off that might have been intended for turning around or might have been for what we were using it for: looking at the view.

We got out of the truck and Naomi and Ellis immediately ran off toward some rocks. Jenny and I climbed up onto the gate of the truck bed and waited for sunrise.

"You never did appreciate your gift," she said ruefully.

"What gift?"

"Being chosen."

"It isn't a gift. It's a burden."

She looked away from me like she couldn't stand to be near me. I couldn't blame her. This was all she ever wanted, and instead I was stuck with it and we were both unhappy.

Then she looked back and reached out to hold my hand.

"I'm really glad..." She trailed off and was quiet for a moment. "I don't..." She was having trouble getting words out, which wasn't a problem I'd ever seen Jenny struggle with before. "I love you," she finally said.

"I love you, too."

She scooted closer to me and we sat, hip against hip, shoulder against shoulder. She leaned her head against mine.

The sun broke the horizon, a rounded sliver of orange like an egg yolk, brighter than anything on earth. The sky was a warm pink above it, and pale blue over our heads.

The day was starting like any other day, and I was here to see it. I looked over at Naomi and Ellis, who had stopped goofing off and were watching silently. Ellis had their phone out to photograph it. I didn't need to. I would never forget.

I leaned back against Jenny.



The Cat Distribution System knows where **ANNIKA BARRANTI KLEIN** LIVES — in a tiny apartment in Los Angeles with her family and more books than she can possibly read in one lifetime. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in *Asimov's*, *CRAFT*, *Fireside*, *Fusion Fragment*, *The Future Fire*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Weird Horror*, *Worlds of Possibility*, and more; her novels are represented by Kate McKean at Howard Morhaim Literary Agency. She was the guest editor for *Interstellar Flight Magazine's* 2024 flash fiction series.

PART SIX
MAGIC BUSINESS

BONE AND MARROW, ROOT AND STEM

A.Z. LOUISE

Short story: 3,910 words

Without a doubt, an elven architect was involved in the design of the Hazel Fork Mall. The huge building is more cavernous than airy, with naturalistic, textured shapes and pillars that evoke stalactites. An echo returns every one of my footsteps. I touch the antler hilt of the elven sword strapped over my jacket, fingering its soft longitudinal grooves. Every changeling comes back from the fey with something precious, something of their second life, and the quick touch centers me, cocoons me in a sense of safety I'm not sure is real. I hope I don't need it; the place *appears* to be completely empty, scheduled to be demolished soon. But someone or something summoned me, and elves are excellent at seeming one way and being entirely different.

The fickle hand of the fey is visible all around me, just like it was last night when I came home to find a message written on the leaves of my small jungle of houseplants: *Need help. Hazel Fork.* The greenery that decorated the mall in its heyday has flourished, outgrowing planters and climbing everywhere it can, touched by the power of the fey, but I turn one massive peace lily leaf over to see no instructions waiting for me. No answers to my questions. I've spent years drawn to abandoned places like this one, hoping for answers about the life I had in the fey and have since forgotten. The changeling memories began to fade almost as soon as I came home as a scared and confused teenager who'd been gone for a decade.

Sometimes I hate the fey, sometimes I miss it without knowing what I miss, but I always wish I knew who I'd been. I get glimpses of that Jessenia, a version of me who curls in my chest like a flower bud, asleep and dreaming, but after six years, more and more of her wilts every day. I fear she'll fade away soon without ever blooming.

"You came."

I know that voice better than I know my own, but my hand goes to my sword without asking my permission, as simultaneously tight and flexible as a vine. I turn to face the most beautiful person I've seen in my life, human or elf. Aesthetically, she's the elf equivalent of Black, though there's little genetic resemblance between she and I. She has luminous brown skin and waist length hair that falls in luscious dark coils around long, pointed ears. Her figure is slender but in no way weak, and she wears an aubergine ball gown that exposes broad shoulders. I lower my hand from my sword hilt. You can never be sure of an elf, but her posture is friendly. In fact, it's too friendly, coming at me with arms outstretched.

"Did I know you?" I dodge her as gracefully as I can.

"You knew me, and I still know you." Instead of embracing me, she touches my sleeve. "I called for you, Jess."

Her voice makes my name sound like a prayer of dark soil and fresh new growth, a pastoral poem, a sonnet, and for a few moments I'm overwhelmed. When I return to myself, her eyes linger over my shoulder, fixed on my sword. She doesn't seem likely to say anything else, and the silence quickly grows stifling.

"Do you live here?" I ask. She has to.

"I'm the Pactholder for this place," the elf says.

"So the plants are your doing?" Dread begins to simmer at the back of my mind.

"Yes. Aren't they lovely?"

"But the place is being demolished." My voice comes out high and nervous. The elf looks at me with a kind of soft amusement.

"I know. That's why I called you here. The Pact is in question. I'm more worried about Redeemers than demolition."

I can't help but look around us, take in the natural world eating the crumbling corpse of human engineering plastered over with elven aesthetics. Instead of slowly decomposing in its Pactholder's care the way it's done for years, the Redeemers will speed up the decay, growing trees and even rock to stymie the real estate developer's plan for condos in just hours. In the process, they'll break the Pact and sever the elf's connection to her land. At best, she'll be emotionally shattered, left to grieve the loss forever. At worst, she'll die in agony. The thought makes all the blood in my body run into my stomach, preparing for a fight I would lose.

"So you remember the Redeemers," the elf says. I try to make my face and voice still before I speak. A truck engine brakes on the highway beyond the sound wall, a distant judder that feels as faint as my heartbeat.

"Every human knows about them."

"But you remember what a Breaking is like, or your lips wouldn't have gone so pale." She knows me, knows my tells.

"Tell me your name." My throat is rough, and my voice is rougher. I have to clear my throat before I speak again. "Please."

"Abeille," she says, like I haven't just barked at her. If anything, she looks happy I asked.

"You called me here because of the Redeemers? If you know me, you know I'd die before I could draw my sword."

"I also know you're too modest," Abeille says. Only by elven standards. I can't even remember the number of times I've been called arrogant. Mostly by white people, but still.

"I can't get involved. The Pact doesn't have anything to do with me, as much as it would wreck me to see a Breaking." I bite my tongue, knowing I've said too much. It would wreck her so much worse, and I have to be sensitive to that, and I also don't want her to know how the thought makes me feel like the ground is breaking open under my feet. I have no right to any feelings on it in the first place.

"I'll die, Jess. I've already had my Pact broken once."

I look into Abeille's eyes. It's not as if I think she's lying, but I'm still searching for something. A memory, something sensed like distant smoke in clear air, a storm in a blue sky. There's something in those dark irises that scares me. Familiarity. Pain. My body recoils at the thought of her being hurt, the muscles in my gut cramping. I don't want to care about land I've never been entitled to being fought over by rich humans and the well-intentioned elves. The elves always recede back to the fey and leave the rest of it for humans to fix, and the humans never, ever fix it.

I care about her. The realization washes over me like a

sudden summer storm, the kind that's over and done so fast you could believe it never happened except for the puddles. I'm left feeling like I've stumbled on some long-lost purposed buried deep in my bones. I'll do anything for her, and the reasons are lost to me beyond the veil of fey.

"I'll never accept another Pact. I swear it," Abeille says, like she's been listening in on my thoughts. "I just want to hurry this one up, so the Redeemers leave me alone."

"I don't think I have the right. To help, to decide, to..." Anything. I have no right to the human world, and none to the fey. I'm a frog who can't survive without water but needs to come up for air. A frog that's slowly boiling every day it has to go to work and pretend to be a mammal.

"You probably don't," Abeille says. "The longer I understand the history of this world, the more sure I am that I don't, either. I want to go somewhere else, leave everything else behind." The pain in her eyes is deeper now, and I can see she's snared as bad as I am.

"What do you need me to do?"

"I need blood. Mine, and that of someone I'm connected to. I could think of no one I care more about than you," Abeille says. Something in my heart cracks open, and I wish it were a memory, even a tiny one.

"I wish I knew you," I say, barely aloud.

"Don't worry. You do. Come with me." She turns away from me, gliding deeper into the mall with her dress trailing behind her. She's created a train with a matching fabric that looks suspiciously like she found it in the housewares section of a department store. It should look terrible, but she carries herself with such grace that it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I follow, though my fingers itch to wrap around leather and

antler and steel. My sword arm isn't what she needs. Abeille leads me to the center of the mall, where a fountain takes up a fifty-foot diameter circle of the tiled floor. Above, two more stories ring us like fungus on a hollowed-out tree trunk, light flowing in from a massive skylight. All the glass is gone, leaving behind a steel spiderweb through which rain and snow can fall. Birds chirp all around us, and the fountain is home to water lilies and cattails.

"Look." She draws me toward the basin, and I peer into the remarkably clear water. Tadpoles swim there, darting around as they look for insect larvae to eat.

"They're perfect," I say.

"Soon this whole place will be singing," Abeille says. We smile at each other for a moment, but those doelike dark eyes are pools built to hold all the bittersweetness of nature's cruel beauty. She reaches for my sword. I instinctively reach for her hand in return, but her dark eyes, locked on mine, stop me short of stopping her. She pulls the short blade free of its sheath and, with one smooth movement, slices open her right forearm. Heedless of the blood running onto her gown, she hands me the sword and steps into the fountain.

I stare into the blade of my sword. The metal is a fae material akin to Damascus steel, folded over and over until it looks like an iridescent beetle elytron, unable to hold a reflection in which I can talk myself into or out of anything. There's only a thin line of red along the cutting edge. I wipe it off on my jeans and roll up the sleeve of my jacket to lay the flat of the blade against the inside of my forearm, just below the elbow. I have no memory of my time in the fey, but my body has scars. I have fought and bled on the other side of the barrier between worlds, and I'm not scared at all. The sensation that settles in the hole where fear should be is unfamiliar but comforting.

The blade traces a searing line of pain across my skin, and I open and close my fist to make the blood flow. It trickles down my arm and between my fingers as I wipe and sheathe my sword, leaving it and the sheath lying on the edge of the fountain as I climb inside.

Though the water isn't cold, it's deeper than I expect, tiles breaking off under my feet after a few steps and forcing me to suddenly tread water. My mouth fills with water and a couple of tadpoles, and when I spit them out, Abeille laughs, a true smile flashing across her face. Her front teeth have a gap, an imperfection that makes her more beautiful. I can feel myself falling for her already, or maybe again. What was I to her?

The smile fades from her face, and the only sound is the gentle swish of my arms as I tread water. Abeille is still, as if the water itself is cradling her, and I have a building desire to do the same. But when she swims to the edge of the fountain, it's clear that time is short. She sits, dripping, on the edge, tadpoles swimming around her ankles, and gathers herself.

"It wasn't enough," I say. Uselessly. She looks up at me, her eyes boring into mine. Her long, coily hair sheds crystalline drops of water.

"No. It's too late."

The hiss of steel against steel makes the hairs on my neck stand up, instinct putting my body on high alert. I take long, deep breaths as I swim and climb my way out of the fountain and slosh water all over the tile.

Four Redeemers, coming from the same direction we had. I pick up my sword and slip its baldric over my sopping jacket as calmly as I can, but Redeemers are always alert for danger. All eyes are on me as my arms settle at my sides. I force them to hang loose, and I know the Redeemers are doing the same. Redeemers always look relaxed, their uniform of blue-gray

tunic and trousers fitting just a little loose, with soft-soled buckskin boots and longswords worn at the hip. Under all that, they're flytrap-tense, ready to snap shut.

Abeille moves up behind me, her wet dress slopping against tile like a dead fish. Her hand barely brushes against my back, tension cutting between us like static shock as the Redeemers stop a good six paces from us.

"It is time, Abeille," says the Redeemer leading the small pack. Small but strong, her sword sheathed at her hip. Middle-aged, for an elf, which by my guess is something like a hundred. She'd be wily, hard to beat if I engage her.

"I'm not ready," Abeille said. Her voice, so steady, sounds small and young in comparison to the Redeemer's ancient timbre.

"You will never be ready. That is the way of wild Pacts." Her pale face is unyielding, unreadable.

"Please, Leva. This is my home."

"You can return when we're finished," Leva says. She steps closer, barely seeming to move at the same time that she closes the gap faster than a human could.

"Don't come any closer. I won't let you hurt her."

"Breaking doesn't hurt, changeling," Leva said. She knows who I am.

"You and I both know that's a lie." She might be a stranger to me, but broken elves are never the same. It's known.

Leva's lips quirk. I draw my blade in warning, and a nanosecond later steel strikes steel with a sound that drills into my ears. I taste bitten-tongue blood from the effort of not flinching. To flinch would be to die, for elves fight like mountain lions. The tiniest show of weakness is death, and so I return her strike fierce and fast. Sword catches in crossguard, and I kick her in the stomach without a pause, sending her to her knees. There isn't a microgram of adrenaline in my blood,

unknown years of practice keeping me cold as I steal Leva's weapon and fight to ignore the building pain in my gut. She's cut me good.

"Kill her," Leva says, a hair of fury making a vicious smile slash across my face. She thought she'd kill me fast. She doesn't know me that well after all.

The smile only lasts a second. I run for it, sheathing my sword to pull Abeille along behind me. Fear simmers in the back of my throat, my hands tingling and my feet clumsy. Abeille overtakes me with her longer, more graceful legs, calling for me to follow. It's like following a will o' the wisp, her dark dress vanishing into shadows as my vision grows weak. I trip and fall, pain instantly becoming agony. Everything is a watercolor blur for a minute, maybe two, until I'm somewhere dark and soft and still, Abeille's hands at my belly.

"I'm fine." The words come out like two coughs.

"She stabbed you. The good news is that she mostly missed. It's just a cut. A big one, but just a cut. I need light."

"One second." I pull out my phone to use as a flashlight, and wish I could turn it off again as soon as I see the wound. It's as long as my hand, and bleeding in slow pulses to feed the hungry Pactland. "Shit. They'll follow the trail."

"I know. I have to dress this wound before we can hide from them." Abeille works quickly, but it's long enough that the silence is unbearable.

"Maybe this will be enough," I say.

"Not likely" There's a smudge of scarlet on Abeille's temple. She must have brushed her hair out of her face, not knowing or caring that her hands are dirty. I reach up to wipe it away, and for an instant, both of us freeze. A memory shudders through me like a chill. A younger version of her face as she stands over me, cleaning a long cut on my arm while I tell her I don't need help. The smell of iron, the sound of chirping

birds. Ever since I came back from the fey, I've always wondered where that dark scar had come from. That curiosity had been idle until now. I have to know.

"I loved you," I whisper.

"You did," Abeille goes back to work, the pressure of her hands making my vision gray out. "There. That should help for a while, but you'll need a doctor sooner rather than later. I'll distract them while you escape. They'll be too busy severing me from this place to pay any attention to you."

"And leave you alone here? Not likely. I'll be the diversion, you hide."

"They'll kill you," Abeille says.

"Then I'm going with you. You shouldn't be alone." It's intensely painful to sit up, the wound tugging when I use any of the muscles in the area. Abeille gives me a sad, soft smile, and I'm overwhelmed with *déjà vu*.

"I don't want you to see me like that. You might not know me, but I know you, and I know what you would do," she says. "If you don't escape, I'll stab you again."

Her expression stays the same, but Abeille's voice is so fierce that I believe her. I can't do much more than nod and let her help me to my feet. I feel better standing, even though I'm a little woozy. I don't know what to say to her, so I touch her arm, gazing into her pretty face as it's lit from below with the sharp, unkind light of my phone flashlight. She looks ancient and youthful at once, freshly carved from age-darkened wood. I remember her laughing so hard tears squeezed from her eyes, and though I'm not sure if the memory is real or not, I fix it in my mind before I turn away. I'll need the determination when I give this Pactland what it wants.

I ghost through the mall, instinct forcing my weight over my toes and my body into a half-crouch. My boots are almost silent on the scuffed tile, but I still stop whenever I sense more

than hear a humanoid presence. The air changes even in this cavernous space when another being is nearby. Whether they let me pass or fail to notice me is unknown.

I climb up defunct escalators with weeds growing in the cracks until I'm at the top center of the mall, looking down at the fountain. That's the heart of the place, the water so deep that from above it's blue-black. It must reach down into the groundwater somehow. The thought of some unknown elven force eating its way into the bedrock below makes an uncomfortable pit yawn open in my wounded gut, like looking into the endless void of space. Of course the blood wasn't enough. A heart that size needs more than just blood, it needs bone and marrow instead of concrete and rebar.

A shiver hurries down my spine. I ignore it. The railing, thick cold metal, is hard to grasp as I climb over and look down at the five-story drop. I shove that fear down, too. The flat, dark surface of the water rises to meet me, and all thought is banished from my head except for one memory.

I know this one is real, because it hurts. I watch Abeille's lovely face, once so full of joy, fall as a little slice of meadow grays at the loss of her. It will spring back to life once the Redeemers take control, but there's nothing to speed her healing process after the connection to the Pact is cut through before she could see its will done. A dull secondary pain grows inside me as I watch someone I love be wounded in a way I can't bandage or kiss better. Anger sharpens that pain to fury, and I scream in frustration.

The mall no longer echoes. It drinks my voice as the Pact-land sucks down my broken bones and freshly opened, unseen wounds. For a moment I'm the land and the land is me, and I can feel Abeille and the Redeemers as sharp and clear as nails in my skin. It feels like I could pop like a balloon and let the bad air out, but instead I'm full of green. Every creeper, every speck

of duckweed and algae, every overgrown peace lily twists at my insides. For a moment, I'm being devoured. For a moment, I fight.

I'm too weak for more than a heartbeat or two of resistance. I give in to the plants, let them bloom in my chest, erupt with petals. Their scent fills my brain, pushing out everything else. No pain, no thoughts remain. The darkness behind my eyelids softens, fading into a purple blur, and I know I am awake. I don't know if I'm alive, and I wait for my vision to clear and make more sense, for the pain to hit. I watch stems and leaves sway in a breeze I couldn't feel. They twist, bend into elven form before me.

The touch of Abeille's hand is pure starlight. Her face is a blur, but her beautiful hair tickles my face and neck in a way that's so familiar I could cry. Her name instinctively tumbles from between my lips, turns to a hiss when she touches my wounded side and sparks of pain burst across my vision. Something crawls beneath my torn flesh, reaching for her.

"This is the will of the Pact," Abeille murmurs. The pain grows unbearable, honed to such a fine point that I'm torn to the bone before pure relief washes over me.

I'm alive. Just like the fey snatched me out of the human world and spat me back out all those years ago, death flung me away from its breast and into Abeille's arms.

When my vision clears, Abeille's face shines with moon-glow, hair spilling down over her chest, where an old, jagged scar lies dark as night against her skin. She smiles, a long-forgotten dimple appearing in her cheek. Her lips on mine make stars pop behind my eyelids, and when I open my eyes, the pinpoints of light are left behind. The Hazel Fork Mall crumbles around us in eerie silence, and above glitter the stars of the fey, so close it feels like they'll draw us into their gravity.

As long as I'm with her, I don't care. As long as I'm with her, I'll never be lost again.



A.Z. LOUISE is a lover of birds, a writer of words, and a believer in the healing powers of peppermint tea. They are the author of *Off-Time Jive* and *A Concrete Crown: MacBeth Retold*. Links to their work can be found at azlouise.com.

THE SHAPE OF THEM

Y. M. RESNIK

Short story: 1,000 words

Threads along the neckline of my dress demanded to show more cleavage as Rachel entered the shop. The waistline cinched tighter. I attempted to shut this down, but my outfit had a mind of its own.

Rachel probably didn't even remember me. It'd been four years. But I remembered them, which meant every swatch of fabric within a two-foot radius twitched in anticipation. I needed to reel it in. My customers suspected there was something special about Mimi's, my bespoke dressmakers' shop, but we tacitly agreed never to speak of it.

If the fabric broadcast my magic to the world, I'd be out of business in a week.

There were only two other customers. A middle-aged set designer for Broadway and a Hassidic woman picking up a modest wedding dress. Rachel waited for both to depart before approaching the counter, holding a garment bag aloft in their hands.

“I’m Rachel Engel.”

I walked over to the front door and flicked the sign to closed, taking my time on the trip back, reminding myself to breathe. In and out. In and out. Slow and steady.

“I know who you are.” It would take more than an undercut and a coat of red lipstick to make me forget the person I spent the best parts of my childhood with. “I hear you’re a famous singer now.”

They smiled and my heart stuttered, remembering a time when I lived for those smiles. So much for slow and steady.

My dress took advantage of my distraction to reshape itself. A few inches shorter on the hem. A little snuggler on my curves. I slid behind the counter to hide it, but Rachel raised an appreciative eyebrow.

“You always were the best dressed girl in Synagogue,” they said, laying the garment bag down on the table. “My stylist sent me because this won’t fit right.”

So this wasn’t a social call. My dress drooped. Rachel had plenty of time to seek me out on their own after they left our ultra-orthodox community, and they never had. Not until they needed clothing alterations. Everyone from brides to celebrities found me when they had a fashion emergency.

I unzipped the garment bag, focused on the job at hand, because I was a professional. Sitting before me was a low-cut silk blouse, a tweed vest and a matching pair of pants. It was a mash up of feminine and masculine that should have suited Rachel perfectly. But I could tell right away that it wouldn’t. The wrongness emanating from the ensemble assaulted me like a bullet to the lungs.

“You can’t wear those pants,” I told them matter-of-factly. A doctor diagnosing a patient.

They snatched the garment bag back. “Fuck you Mimi.

You're no better than the rest of the narrow-minded busy bodies we grew up with. I can wear pants if I want to."

My magic reacted before I could. Bolts of fabric barricaded the door so that Rachel could not pass. It would be harder to explain away than my ever-shifting clothes, but I'd be damned if they left my shop thinking I judged them.

"Sure, you can," I said, as Rachel stewed in front of the door. "Just not *those* pants. Wool linen blend."

"Shatnez?" Rachel's laughter as they used the term for the ancient Jewish custom of not mixing wool and linen did nothing to soothe my frazzled inseams. "I didn't think anybody kept that old superstition."

"I do." I placed my hands on my hips. I didn't need a lecture on modernity. I needed to fix those pants. Bad. Every ounce of my magic was straining to correct the offensive combination. "Leave the pants. Come back tomorrow. They'll fit perfectly."

I grabbed a seam ripper and stormed up the stairs to my small living space, calling an excuse over my shoulder.

It took over an hour to separate the threads. Plus, another two to weave the linen into a more functional fabric and create new pants. I didn't need Rachel's measurements. I'd always known the shape of them. Even before they did.

By the time I finished, I was panting for breath. Magic was seeping from my body like water from a sieve and I crumpled to the floor. I called for the rug, desperate to cushion my fall, but a strong pair of hands caught me before my buzzing head hit the floor.

Rachel.

I trembled in their grasp, shaking from exhaustion and fear. If they'd seen what I did with the pants there would be no way to explain it away.

"How long have you been there?"

"Long enough."

They silently deposited me onto my bed and the goddamn pillows fluffed themselves out towards Rachel enticingly, extending an invitation I was too mortified to think about.

They tucked a sweaty strand of hair behind my ear. “I always knew you were magic.”

Which is probably why they never answered any of my calls or responded to my messages of support after they left our community to find a more welcoming one. Magic was just as forbidden in Judasim as shatnez. I was a monstrosity. A direct affront to God.

I closed my eyes, so that I did not have to see the disgust on their face, and waited for them to leave.

Instead, they slid in next to me, their mouth warm against my neck as they burrowed in and confessed that their stylist hadn’t sent them. They’d sought me out because the way their clothes morphed when we were together - sometimes femme, sometimes masc, always completely and utterly Rachel - was what clued them in to the fact that they were genderfluid.

No outfit had felt right since.

I let my magic do the talking for me, sheets tucking us in together. My dress was still unravelling at the seams, but I found I no longer cared. Because unlike the wool and linen, we were meant to be together.



Y. M. RESNIK (she/her) is a writer living in the Tri-State area. her debut novel, *The Elysium Heist*, came out July 2025. When not writing, she can be found collecting tiaras and trying not to kill her houseplants. You can keep up with her at ymresnik.com.

FIRECRACKERS ON 28 MOTT STREET

ANGELA LIU

Short story: 1,082 words

The children wield firecrackers as they enter the old shop on Mott Street. Copper wind bells chime as the door closes behind them.

Inside, velvet curtains block all natural light. Here the glow of porcelain lamps and red paper lanterns light the space. Glass display cases line the walls like a dusty museum: enchanted ivory boxes carved with intricate beasts, voice-altering fox masks, curse paper, flutes for conjuring love songs. Behind the unmanned register, a grinning cat amulet dangles on the wall alongside framed photos of the neighborhood's most decorated magicians and standing next to each of them, in her signature tiger-print vest, is Miss Lin, the proud owner of 28 Mott Street, the last General Alchemy Shop in Chinatown.



Dino's the first one to walk up to the display cases.

"Is that it?" he says, pressing a finger to the glass.

Sally swats his hand away. "You know Miss Lin likes to keep everything spotless."

"Auntie says you can't get most of this stuff anymore since

they closed the Gate,” Morris says, peeking behind the bead curtain next to the register. “Something about not paying enough magic taxes. Hey, check it out, I think there’s a picture of young Miss Lin from before the Age of Dinosaurs...”

Sally clicks her tongue. “What the hell’re you—“

Morris stumbles back, nearly dropping his firecracker. A towering old woman ducks in through the bead curtain.

“Hi Miss Lin,” Sally squeaks, eyeing the old woman’s tiger-print vest and then the photos on the wall. “Um, we’d like to buy a Summoning Amulet.”

“I could turn you kids into rice porridge,” the old woman says.

Sally winces.

“What the hell do you runts need a Summoning Amulet for anyway?” Miss Lin says, eyeing Dino’s fingerprints on the glass. “I’ve got less than ten in the back and the Chinatown Council’s demanding at least one for the New Year’s parade. They want a real dragon this year to bring the crowds back. ‘More classical theatrics’ to combat the bad press from last year’s...overly interactive magic show,” she sighs, remembering how the magicians spent half a day searching for a stray cat in a city councilman’s suit.

“Her brother’s pet rabbit died last night,” Morris explains, pointing at Sally. “He’s been crying like it’s the end of the world. She wants to bring it back for him, a real Lunar New Year miracle, ma’am.”

“My Summoning Amulets can call upon Demon Kings, and you want to bring back a dead pet rabbit?” the old woman asks.

“We’ve brought payment,” Sally bites her lip, fighting her pride. “Auntie said you’ve got a ghost in your shop.”

“Ghosts,” the old woman corrects. The velvet curtains

flutter wildly as if in response. "And your Auntie is correct. What of it?"

"We'll get rid of them for you."

"Hoho, and what makes you think I want to get rid of them?"

"Because Auntie said she saw you having a fight with them in the doorway. Something about counterfeit immortality amulets and money-back guarantees."

"You've got a nosy Auntie," the old woman snorts, fixing a tree of good luck coins near the window. "And did your nosy Auntie tell you how to oust a team of contract-bound disgruntled spirits?"

The three hold up their firecrackers like fists.

The old woman smiles. "Get out of my shop, please."

"These aren't just ordinary firecrackers. They're the ghost-scaring kind," Dino explains, looking to Morris for back-up, but the older boy is eyeing a tray of white rabbit candies.

The old woman nods with understanding. "So you plan to blow out our ears and make a mess of my shop, just to prove you're all idiots?"

Sally sucks in a deep breath. "I made these at the Hex Workshop. We've imbued them with six different kinds of bad luck energy... Broken shards from Morris' mom's favorite plates, losing lottery tickets from Dino's uncle, sand from the baseball field where the Feral Squirrels lost 0-12 during their last home game ..." she continues, pleased when the old woman's expression changes. "Mama always told me about paying back your debts twofold. And when you can't, you smoke 'em out with everything you've got."

The old woman unwraps a half-melted mint from her pocket. She's impressed, even if she won't admit that to a trio of runs. "You must like your little weasel brother, but unfortu-

nately, you're one bad luck band short," she says, pointing at the black stripes on their firecrackers.

"Maybe I can get my dad's old company manual that always gives him these killer paper cuts—" Dino says, but the old woman holds up a hand.

"It's too late. The item needed to be mixed in when you made the firecracker. Last-minute add-ons need immense magical power, on the level of a generational curse, and even still they don't usually work. Too bad."

The curtains wave gleefully.

"Generational curse?" Sally smirks. "Then I think my little 'weasel brother' may already have us covered."



THE ADULTS GOSSIP in the living room like frenzying chickens, pecking at each other with their latest stories.

Sally's brother lies on his bed, pondering his mistakes for the two-hundredth time.

"I should have brought him into my room. It was too cold. He must've been so scared..." the boy buries his face into his pillow. Crying on New Year's is bad luck, his mother had told him, the worst kind, but he can't help it. His chest heaves, the tears staining his sleeves as he wipes and wipes. He'd even gotten his tears on his sister's fancy firecrackers from the Hex Workshop.

There's a loud pop down the street, followed by another and another. The crowds have started setting off their fireworks before the big parade, a swell of sound.

The boy goes over to the window and pushes it open. Confetti and glitter soar up, catching sunlight, a shimmering wave of color. He sticks his head out; the cold February air feels good against his wet face.

Then a voice comes like a firecracker going off.

He sees his sister dart out of Miss Lin's Alchemy Shop, the wind bells swinging wildly against the door.

She's waving at him with both arms, weaving around the crowd. Confetti swirls up and around her. She mouths something he can't quite make out, a huge grin on her face. Dino waves two empty firecracker tubes. Morris is holding a cardboard box, just large enough for a small dog. Or a miracle rabbit.



ANGELA LIU IS A CHINESE-AMERICAN WRITER/POET based in NYC and Tokyo. She is a two-time Nebula Award and 2025 Astounding Award Finalist. Her work has also been nominated for the Hugo, Locus, Ignyte, and Rhysling Awards. She previously researched mixed reality storytelling at Keio University in Japan. Her stories and poems are published/forthcoming in *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Lightspeed*, and *Logic(s)*, among others. Check out more of her work at liu-angela.com or find her on Instagram @liu_angela and on Bluesky @angelaliu.bsky.social

ROBBY FIRMANSYAH from Slidesignus created the illustration for this story. You can find more of his work and commission him for illustration or graphic design at <https://www.behance.net/slidesignus>.

GARAGE GHOST

JULIA LAFOND

Short story: 275 words

I had a bad feeling about this year's haunted "house." For one thing, having it in the abandoned parking garage — a glorified memorial to a way of life that nearly fried the planet — was tacky. Theming it around the accident was downright tasteless. Not that I believed in the Garage Ghost, but reenacting his tragic death for cheap thrills sounded like the setup for a horror movie where a vengeful spirit picks off students one by one.

It was only after I got volunteered to set up the laser displays that I realized what I *should* have been worried about: getting lost. The concrete walls were featureless even before my flashlight died on me. My feet ached and my heels were starting to blister, but there was no sign of the stairwell. I was going in circles.

Slumping against the wall, my thoughts also went in circles. Maybe I'd never find my way out. Maybe nobody else

would find me either, dooming me to be the next Garage Ghost.

That's when I broke down crying.

"Are you okay?"

Gasping, I looked up to find one of the "accident victims" already in costume (not that I could tell who it was beneath all that fake blood). It would have been embarrassing if I weren't so relieved someone came looking for me. Once I explained, he led me back to the stairwell, cheering me up with atrocious puns.

When we got back to the group, they all stared back at me in confusion, and I did a double-take. They were all here, and nobody was in costume. So who...?

Behind me, the stairwell was empty.



JULIA LAFOND GOT her master's in geoscience from Penn State University. She's had flash fic published in venues such as *Nunum*, *James Gunn's Ad Astra*, *Radon Journal*, and *Worlds of Possibility*, and she also writes TTRPG content under the brand Calenmir's RPGs. In her spare time, Julia enjoys reading and gaming. Website: <https://jklafondwriter.wordpress.com/>

THE LAST ADULT SUPERSTORE

JOHN WISWELL

Short story: 1,100 words

I was halfway between Boise and Buffalo when the porn beckoned me. On a stretch of beat-up interstate, where Spotify kept skipping struggling and reconnecting, where I could smell brine in the wind despite being in the middle of a timberland. There the conifers parted to reveal a forlorn billboard:

NEXT EXIT: THE LAST ADULT SUPERSTORE

Steel gray letters in a stiff font on a stark black background, like it was a law firm specializing in lube. The billboard was weathered, its colors washed out as though it'd been up and untouched for years. Sex toy shops were a dying breed. Now everybody had the internet.

Badly as I needed to get home, I was also dreading the face-

to-face with my boss and the mountain of travel laundry. Some days just doing chores around the house made me want to break down sobbing. Being on the road a little longer was an escape from the dual purgatories of work and home.

“Maybe they have a bathroom,” I told myself as I took the exit.

I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this. “The Last Adult Superstore” looked like a Costco, a football field-sized rectangle of a building with cheap white walls. If not for having their name emblazoned on the side of the building, I would never have thought this was the place. How much porn could they be warehousing in there? How many aisles had to be dedicated to leather handcuffs alone to justify this monster?

I actually got a little giddy as I sidled in. This was going to be a stadium of raunch.

What greeted me were boxes. So damned many boxes. Generic cardboard units as far as the eye could see, all lifeless recycled brown. No color. I went right over to the nearest shelf. Did they sell their sex toys in discreet packages so people could take them home without judgment?

The first box wasn’t the yeti-themed dildo I’d hoped for. Printed in the same generic professional font as their billboard, it promised:

GET OFF YOUR PHONE AND FALL ASLEEP AT A
DECENT HOUR

I turned the box over, expecting a view window to see what the heck that was describing. Was this packaging talking down to you as part of a subservient humiliation fetish or something? But there was no window or product explanation.

The next box over had the same bland font. It offered:

SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES WITH YOUR PARENTS NOW
THAT YOU'VE MOVED OUT (medium)

What the actual heck? Was this a mommy/daddy fetish thing? I actually shook one of those boxes. It was sturdy, like it was heavily insulated. In fact, all the boxes felt stiff like the packaging was meant to keep the contents safe. I didn't think I'd ever gotten a sex toy that was this firmly packaged.

All the product names were baffling. It was like baffling shoppers was their brand.

STOP CARING ABOUT RANDOM PERSON WHO'S WRONG ON
THE INTERNET

ACTUALLY START HOBBY INSTEAD OF JUST COMPLAINING
YOU WANT TO

MAKE NEW FRIENDS

I double-checked that one. That was all it said. 'Make new friends?' If I squinted, I could pretend that was about poly people and hook-up culture, but it didn't read like that next to everything else. I didn't get it. Was this a palace of hyper-specific fetishes? What was even in these boxes that had to be packed tight like nuclear launch codes?

There was nobody around me. No clerks and no leather daddies. I could mess up the whole aisle if I wanted.

I grabbed the next box I saw. At the very bottom of one side it read:

DO YOUR LAUNDRY

Unbelievable.

I clutched it in front of me and marched it to the checkout line. There had to be somebody on staff there.

Behind the register was six feet of slender white boy, with perfectly coiffed blonde hair, a sharp grey suit, and a cobalt tie that did not belong in a checkout aisle. He and his flawless complexion reminded me of the leads in the shows I'd grown up on. Those model adults who I was older than now, but because the show had been formative to me when I was a kid, would always feel like my senior. Thinking about why made me squirm.

I held this embarrassing box of DO YOUR LAUNDRY out to him. I asked, "What's in this thing?"

"Just what it says on the box," said this picture of obnoxiously functional masculinity. "I used to have a problem with laundry myself. Now I use that one all the time. You know if you buy the month-long set, it's cheaper."

"What does it... do?" I glanced at the box, feeling my cheeks heat up. I couldn't believe I was feeling bashful in an adult superstore. "Is it a laundromat-themed costume?"

"Ha! No," the clerk said. "I guess laundromats could use it. Although that's intended for use in cleaning your own clothes. Every adult needs a little help. We at the Adult Superstore try to provide what adults need."

"That can't be right."

He smiled, showing off uneven teeth that still looked perfect in his smile because of how comfortable he was with them. Like he never thought about them. "I'm not just a salesperson. I shop here myself when I'm feeling out of sorts."

I fiddled with the box, and thought about the others promising to MAKE NEW FRIENDS or GET OFF YOUR PHONE AND FALL ASLEEP AT A DECENT HOUR.

"You're saying this thing in here, in this box, will magically make me do my own laundry? That's ridiculous."

The man directed one long and fastidiously manicured fingernail at the package description. “It does a little bit more than that. Read the underside.”

I turned it over. There was a little more text in smaller front I’d missed.

I read, “Do your laundry... without crying?”



“Works for me every time. But if it seems too far-fetched for you—”

I slammed the box down on the checkout conveyor belt. “I’ll take it.”

“Yes, sir. Will this be all today?”

Scratching the back of my neck, I thought about the dreadful task sitting on the other side of doing my laundry. “Well, have you got any products for making meetings with your boss not feel like death spirals?”

The clerk snapped his fingers. “I needed something like that when I started here. I can show you where it is. Let’s get you a cart.”



JOHN WISWELL is a disabled writer who lives where New York keeps all its trees. He has won the Nebula Award for Best Short Story and Best Novel, and the Locus Award for Best Novelette and Best First Novel. He’s been a finalist for the Hugo, World Fantasy and British Fantasy Awards. His debut novel, *Someone You Can Build a Nest In*, was released from DAW Books on April 2, 2024. You can find him all over social media via this link: linktr.ee/johnwiswell

THE FORGE

DJ TYRER

Drabble: 100 words

Deep below the mountains, chambers echo with the sound of a smith's hammer.

The Dwarves are the world's premier metal craftsmen, whether you wish some mundane item or a beautiful trinket or a weapon that shakes the world.

In these halls were forged the enchanted swords that defeated the Dark Lord who held the northern continent in thrall, and the spear that slew the great wyrm of the west. Here too, enchanted rings were made to end wars.

Today, a cup of wondrous beauty is being shaped.

Apprentice ceases work, wipes his brow.

Master nods. "You're now a smith, lad."



DJ TYRER is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around

the world, such as *Insurgence: A Fae Rebellion* (Corrugated Sky), *Tales of the Black Arts* (Hazardous Press), *Troubadours and Space Princesses* (Hamlein Publications), and *Borne in the Blood, The Dragon's Hoard 2* and *Crunchy With Ketchup* (all WolfSinger), and issues of *Fantasia Divinity*, *Broadswords and Blasters*, *BFS Horizons*, *The Fifth Di...*, and *Tales from the Magician's Skull*, and in addition, has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

SO YOU WANT TO RUN A TEMPORAL COFFEE SHOP

R. P. SAND

Short story: 4,200 words

Believe you me, the work is harder than it looks. You still have time to decline this position, gather your things and leave.

But, if you're certain, take this apron of 15th century linen, embroidered with basilisk thread by the callused, experienced hands of a mermish seamstress, stained green with dye from the 20th, and listen closely, for this is what you must know.



NUMBER ONE. Listen to our customers, and I do not simply mean listen to what they say. Pay close heed to each breath, pulse, chirrup, twinkle, snort.

We are the caretakers of our patrons' hearts. All who tread through our amber-studded doors are equal, whether demonically or benevolently inclined, from oni to apsara to fairy

godmother, each swathed in their own triumphs and tribulations.

They enter, vulnerable and trusting — yes, even those with wild eyes and grim snarls (that manticore is a regular of ours, whose drink of choice is cold brew matcha peppered with beetle wings) — and it is our charge to make them feel at home. This means protecting the secrets they unfurl within these sylvan walls; their confidence is to be tucked safely within our hearts, away from prying eyes and ears and spores. This means deciphering from their gait whether they wish to chat or whether they wish to be left alone. This means remembering their usual orders, or, when they peer indecisively at the menu, matching the perfect beverage to their mood.

An anxious twitch in a rakshasa's third arm may call for a vanilla-infused hot chocolate. Creases of frustration in a griffin's fur-feathered brow may call for the soothing lineaments of peppermint and moonwinkle green tea. Silver-lit twinkles in a valkyrie's eyes may call for a jovial cappuccino, spiced with cinnamon and paprika.

I share now the example of Anisana the fauness, lady-in-waiting to Catherine of Aragon. Anisana has a proclivity for court politics, delighting in cunning maneuvers, betrayals, coups, and has a titanic sweet tooth. She inserts herself as minor courtier personas, most recently in 16th century England, and takes to giggling over heavily sugared beverages with a side of cake, regaling the latest (to her) gossip-worthy court occurrence.

There's always been a sheen of disconnect to her tales, indicating her to be no more than an impartial albeit voyeuristic observer. But, to my surprise, I've ascertained a subtle shift in her demeanor when she speaks of Catherine. Stars of affection bloom in her pale eyes as she talks, and no wonder, for this queen is skillful, crafty, a fierce warrior not

only on the battlefield, but in court, a relentless spirit, so unlike other women Anisana has known.

“God’s blood, that *Henry*,” Anisana will say, pounding a fist on the polished wooden bar, cake crumbs dancing on her plate. “And that preening, soggy fern—” followed by the name of whoever caught the king’s eye at the time. (On her last visit it was twilight plum cake and Anne. I could not, of course, tell her things were about to get worse, that Anne would proceed to supplant Catherine.) “If I could get my hands on their necks I would snap them both.”

And I have no doubt she would, but there is a reason she’s remained hidden so successfully, the same reason any of us do not draw attention to ourselves; magicals who walk among humans, no matter how oriented to good or chaos, are all agreed on one thing: that our world shall remain hidden from theirs. Humans have an insufferable tendency to ruin things.

I assess Anisana’s mood whenever she visits and if she appears particularly melancholic, I select masala chai with any number of soothing add-ons. I went so far as to add spider myrrh when she despaired that Bessie, once maid-of-honor to Catherine, had borne Henry VIII a son where Catherine could not; she took to wailing, a spine-piercing undulation that risked the chagrin of my other patrons, hence the particularly potent choice of ingredient. (Spider myrrh is the extent to which I’ll go; I do not allow alcohol on these premises, not after the Rhenish Incident.) It worked, of course, and she soon calmed to hiccupping and sniffing into her leaf-patterned mug, shoulders hunched. I slid over a slice of chocolate fudge cake on the house.

Thus you see the importance of listening.

But ... there is a caveat to the point I make. While, yes, we listen, I fear we cannot always give them what they desire. Anisana requested, numerous, that I break my own rules and

grant Catherine sanctuary from emotional mistreatment at the hands of her husband and king, in one of the three rooms we keep for weary travelers.

I declined, of course, but do not think me wholly bereft of compassion nor heart; a fondness for the queen seems to have bloomed within me as well — unbidden though not entirely unwelcome — from Anisana's tales. If one looks closely on the eve of Catherine's death, under a bristling-cold, cloud-heavy night in January 1536, a figure can be seen perched under her window, face shadowed by green shawl.

I whispered to her a gift: knowledge of Anne Boleyn's beheading to come, that she may greet Death with peace in her heart, a wry smirk on her lips.



NUMBER TWO. Ordinaries are not allowed here, as you may have surmised. Every year we must renew the threshold wards that keep non-magicals at bay. (Well, non-magical *humans*. My bitsy Augustus here is a perfectly ordinary cat — at least he began as one over fifty years ago.)

I consider this ground beyond the primary dimensionals to be sacred, neutral, a harborage for all magicals in need of respite and a hot cuppa. An untarnished retreat where people can lounge before latticed fireplaces whilst listening to bards, or seek quiet in a solitary booth, or browse reading nooks primed with leather-bound titles I plucked from across time against the criteria they be both entertaining and carry minimal spoilage risk.

The last thing our customers need is a human strutting in only to gawk at horns or extra limbs or lavender skin... These wards prevent our doors from appearing for ordinaries, though I regret to say they were erected only once I'd learned

my lesson from two unfortunate events in the shop's early days.

Event number one. A drunken soldier from Byzantium stumbled in on a particularly bustling evening, plume wilting to one side, mud tracking on the cobblestone. He took one gaze about with beady, greedy eyes and, in his inebriety, fancied himself a centurion of old, promptly attempting to revive the glory of a united, undiminished Rome by subjugating the magicals present.

Now, I consider myself an equanimous sort, but I raged then, hotly, hen-like, for I recognized his sneer (the expression is the same whether worn by a vanquish-hungry soldier or an egomaniacal capitalist) and saw how my patrons shifted uncomfortably under his advances. I proceeded to do something I rarely do; I whipped out my twined bloodwood wand and turned him into a frog. It was common spellwork, hardly to my taste (my bones always ache so after quotidian spells), but it had to be done.

This sowed the initial seed of my idea for wards, but event number two sealed the deal. Shortly after the Ribbity Centurion Circumstance, while I was still a doe-eyed, naive shopkeeper of the 8th, I optimistically thought to invite a few select non-magical humans.

My first invite became my last, extended to a man named Fujiwara no Tomoyuki from the same century's Nara, the second son of a minor noble. At first glance he was perfectly unremarkable, yet on one sunbaked day he visited where his family lay foundations for a temple. Something within him clicked when he saw the freshly churned earth, like a bee to pollen, and in his inspired state he made aesthetic changes to the plans. The resulting pagodas and gardens were breathtaking.

So skilled was he in conjuring perfect asymmetry, in

nurturing flora to adorn the temple grounds, that I could sense in him one of those potent, raw, artistic buds that would blossom into poetry and arts and gardens galore down his bloodlines. When I found him, his reputation for a brilliantly green eye hadn't yet stretched beyond his immediate family, but I had no doubt of his potential to be great.

The hope was to garner his advice for my decor: vines webbed against wood-stone walls and studded with cascades of wisteria, lilies and hyacinths and orchids blooming into table centerpieces, rivulets set in the cobblestone and curling around booths to meet at ponds filled with koi and lotuses, rock gardens underlying each fireplace, on and on and on to reach the striking verdant harmony I envisioned. (I am a green witch, yes, but even I must nod to raw talent such as his.)

In return, I thought to introduce Tomoyuki to an amiable woodland dryad called Rei who loved espresso and whose talent for treesong could enhance his family's temple grounds. And to give him a taste of chocolate.

It did not go the way I planned at all.

"This this this!" he cried, eyes bulging in red-veined terror. "What is this evil you entice me with?" And at first it wasn't to Rei he referred. It was the chocolate. Apparently such a delicacy could only be wrought by diabolic fingers.

But when he did turn his attention to her, lips stained with brown, he pointed and gawked and sputtered, as if the sweet dryad were a wretched exhibit to be leered at from a safe distance behind glass; he clawed at his chest and died.

Thorns sprouted from where Rei had backed into the wall, horrified, and it took me a week to dispel the stench of human urine and decay from the air. (It was how I discovered corpses decompose more rapidly out here.)

I never saw Rei again after that, though I did search for her extensively, dispatching countless feelers and ravens and owls.

To this very day I carry a guilt in her shape that eclipses my regret at the premature loss of Tomoyuki's green potential.

I thought then: no more invitations, no accidental visitors. No siree.

(I did, of course, manage to decorate to my satisfaction, but it took at least a quarter century for me to tweak and prod and nudge these interiors into what you see now.)



NUMBER THREE. We must be vigilant to preserve the sanctity of the gilded timeline. To this effect, there is another spell in place, as potent as the threshold wards.

But in order to appreciate what this spell does, you must first understand there is always risk when people from different times interact. Conversations may unravel, quick and devastating as viper rot, and we must skillfully divert attentions before this happens. (I usually dispatch Augustus to the contending parties, whose purrs and insistence on head rubs can tame any wildfire heart.)

Our patrons have free rein to roam about and enjoy one another's company knowing full well they may be consorting with someone from the future, but most have the good sense to avoid awkward questions and leave their occasionally-inexorable loyalties for human-made borders at the door. We are all brethren, in a way, us magic folk.

But, in the off chance two souls cross paths at an unfortunate moment, or a conversation veers into dangerous terrain, the parties are at once doused in a lambent, purple cloud, visible only to my eyes.

The Temporal Peace Alert, so named by its inventor, my paternal great grandmama. ("It is a perfectly valid descriptor," she huffed any time I offered a more creative alternative.)

These days I call it Purple Pinocchio, for, like a growing, twiggy nose, an emergent purple cloud is a sure tell that something is awry.

(My great grandma was not a green witch like my maternal line but one of timecurling descent, whose blood in me makes this entire establishment possible. But where she lacked in imaginative nomenclature, she more than compensated for in innovative spell-casting.)

The spell works like so: each individual is considered a thread on a tapestry that is neither a real tapestry nor a tangible thing, but I call it such because it is a striking metaphor. In the event any two threads cross at a point where they should not, the spell detects the risk of a knot.

Purple Pinocchio works only for witches with even a dollop of timecurling blood in their veins, but I am not without resourcefulness myself and have tweaked it that it may work on you.

Take this needle-toned powder and rub it into your eyeballs while I share now the example of Mhaliq and the unparalleled Lili ‘uokalani of the Kingdom of Hawai ‘i.

Mhaliq is a poltergeist — when he was of flesh he was a descendent of devas and rishis, alongside ... a few other species I’ve quite forgotten. A poltergeist with a pernicious gambling habit, who I briefly banned on two occasions when his encounters devolved into blows over cards or coins.

I urged him to embrace the sage and scholar facet of his heritage, and, for a time, he seemed reformed, wholly engrossed in the target of his new study: Lili ‘uokalani. Mhaliq, upper lip endowed with froth from his favored Viennese coffee, would animatedly relay his observations of her tremendous social endeavors, her steadfastness, her music compositions—so melodious our bards have select pieces in their rotation. His tales depicted a champion for women, brave

and bold and kind, and I, rather surprisingly, began looking forward to his visits, such a stark contrast to the wariness I felt when he visited before, dice rattling in his palms. I even dared to hope he had shed the mantle of poltergeist entirely, and was simply now a wayward spirit.

I was wrong in my supposition, for on one quiet afternoon with the soft lull of flutes in the air, I relaxed my alertness to check on the koi in the northern pool. And so, I did not immediately notice the flare of purple around Mhaliq and the pair of pixies with whom he shared a tray of cinnamon rolls. Mhaliq hurled the tray into the fireplace, stunning the bards into silence. The pixies, with easily bruised egos, bristled and huffed and swore, causing a tangle of vines to lurch from the walls and smack Mhaliq across the face. Heads turned. I rushed over, cursing at my being distracted by how the koi wove playfully through my fingers, the feel of cool water against my skin.

“He called us liars!” the pixies, no bigger than my palm, burred ferociously, glaring darts. “How dare he how dare he how dare he.”

Mhaliq, his translucent form fuming even brighter than the flames devouring the cinnamon rolls, grimaced and spat and hissed.

“You are liars, nothing but tiny, flippety, liars. How dare you suggest Lili ‘uokalani will be dethroned.”

“But it is true it is true and *ha!* look at you. You lost you lost and you deserve nothing but loss.”

I raised a palm as Mhaliq opened his mouth in retort, and it may have been the threat of yet again losing access to his favorite coffee, but he clamped his lips and stormed out the doors, though not without inadvertently inciting a trail of destruction in his wake, toppled chairs, jostled tables, bever-

ages spilled onto frazzled customers (to whom I offered towels, words of apology, and free scones.)

Later, when the ruckus had subsided, the bards taking up their flutes once more, I sought explanation from the pixies, now quieted from their peals of laughter.

It turns out Mhaliq wasn't furious at the thought of a beloved queen being overthrown, no, he carried no attachments for her, not in the way I seemed to have developed; he had placed a substantial bet on the longevity of her reign. The knowledge he would lose infuriated him.

Now, I strive to refrain from judging my customers, indeed, some have done far worse beyond these walls. But the tableau of disgruntled customers, the queen's stories fresh in my heart, and the vexing recollections of Mhaliq's past behavior all syphoned to a single decision: I lay a permanent ban against him.

As for Lili 'uokalani... Wretched, conniving businessmen in the 1890s, with greed-ridden demeanors reminiscent of the amphibious 'centurion' succeeded in a coup, and when she sought to reclaim what was wrested from her people, she was thrown captive into a bedroom suite. I caught word of her weaving a quilt during her imprisonment, a quilt with her life's tale in its sinews, not unlike the tapestry for which we are all threads.

I always say humans can resolve their own sordid affairs... But on one velvety 1895 evening, if those guarding her paid close heed, they'd spot a green blur flitting around corners.

Curse if I didn't slip a spool of thread and a cut of fire-hued fabric under her door.



NUMBE—HMM?

Ah, no. People cannot meet their future and past selves, of course they cannot. I should think I made that obvious, but I'll be the first to admit my blathering has a soul of its own.

I shall make it clear now. There are no walking paradoxes or space-time implosions or quantum thises and thats or whatever silly terms post-19th ordinaries concoct sans accurate knowledge of what they speak.

Our doors, no matter where they appear for a patron — a pit shadowed by some laird's castle, a hillock in Queen Njinga's expansive domain, an alley in Budapest, New York City, Moscow — simply unclose to a time in our shop when said patron is not present. And, before you ask, no, people cannot travel to another time the way I can, well, unless they are time-curlers themselves; the exit only ever leads to their own.

I must add a caveat: these doors cannot open to a time before the shop was established, just as I cannot travel to a time before I was born. Nor can we follow in the humans' wake when they eventually take to the stars, leaving behind a dastardly withering Earth; this shop is Earth-bound.

You know, it was a monumental disappointment for me, to learn the limitations of timecurling. It was on the day of my Initiation, and I—but a wee girl in the early 8th clad in her newly-earned green shawl—wailed piteously in the copse. I wailed because I'd just been informed my intended first act was impossible: to grow startlingly vibrant flowers for the ancient queens of Egypt, the likes of Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, Merneith, or those lost to history written by men.

Vines rose gently from the earth at the twitch of my mother's finger, growing to engulf me in a hug. My great grandma tugged her purple shawl about her shoulders with a sniff and barked to her, "Well, what did she expect? Time

certainly doesn't work that way." And to me, "Now, dry up child, you're a proper witch now. Act like it."

While I did sober then, I've spent a great many years ever since lamenting the lack of foresight in my ancestors. If only they'd opened a coffee shop when ancient civilizations effloresced on Earth, that I could visit those regal queens said to have consorted with witches of all persuasions, from black to red to green to silver. They say those queens petitioned the gods to anoint the dearest of their witchy friends, giving rise to the first timecurlers.

Perhaps then it would have been my ancestors and not me who invented door magics allowing others with timecurling blood to travel even before their own time. (Indeed, I've guided a number of young purples born in later centuries to venture back to the 8th because of my humble shop.)

But it seems I am the first of my blood to carry an ardent desire not only to visit times before, but for hospitality, encouraged by a rather insatiable appetite for cold brew.

Ah, well. What is past is past, and I fear I have lost my direction of thought.

Where was I?



AH, YES, NUMBER FOUR. Though I suppose I should say number five.

Number five. The last for now, but certainly not the least; it just may be my favorite of them all. Each patron has a unique cup, a cup grown by my hand from bits of wood and grass, and you must memorize the pairings.

The elf, Rose, takes herbal teas in this acacia cup and saucer inlaid with petals after her name. That bamboo dabra with gold leaf filigree is for a goblin named Menetex with a

taste for South Indian filter coffee. The canarywood cauldron is for a harpy named Lyephyre whose drink of choice is cardamom moth lattes. (I'm particularly proud of the herring-bone pattern on that one.)



Each design is intentional, the shapes, the patterns, the feel, down to the very detailing in the grain, as uniquely a patron's as a witch's wands are to her. New visitors are given one of those plain porcelain mugs on the third shelf, but by the time they complete their first drink I'd have grown one based on my observations of them, their pulses, inclinations, and gestures.

It may seem a silly, unnecessary thing on the surface: a cup

for *each* patron? But tell me this, who among us wouldn't delight in a custom gift, knowing it is the only one of its kind in all the universes? And, think of how it must feel to retire to a place such as this after a hard day's work cultivating or ruining, in merrymaking or shenaniganry, and sip from a cup that is wholly yours?

Our patrons brandish their cups proudly; many an ice has broken over their admiring each other's designs. It adds to the charm, they say, and on hearing them I feel the very thrill that ignites my core whenever I pour a luscious brew or pull crisp pastries from the oven or conjure a verdurous feast for the eyes.

But, though they are pretty, the matter is not solely one of aesthetics; the green magics woven to complement one's personality also complement their physiology, briefly enhancing immunity in a way more inherent and powerful than any of my herbs combined. Thus germs are repelled, slicked elsewhen as though by some horologic shield, and our visitors cannot carry bugs across time.

For can you imagine the havoc that may wreak?

How devastating it would have been if Rani Velu Nachiyar's painstakingly-amassed army perished by, say, the Black Death before her momentous combat against the East India Company. How colossal a loss to art had Vincent van Gogh passed before fathoming the swirls of his starry night, by one of those ancient viruses released in the 21st from softening ice caps. How horrific to think of un-timely reaping among the stalwart Agojie, due to carelessness on my part.

No, there is no changing history within these walls.

Events unfold the way they are meant to, no matter how abhorrent nor wondrous; each individual with their role in time, each important — *uniquely, sublimely, necessarily* important... Though my rambles may betray personal partialities, let me make it clear: taken alone, a grand queen's thread is indis-

tinguishable from that of a washerwoman's, regardless of species or inclination, each an important strand without which the tapestry unifying us all would hang incomplete.

How reckless it would be for me to induce a knot, a loose stitch, an untimely contortion, a truncated potential — ah, but I see the question of Tomoyuki in your eyes, the Coronary Garden Commotion as I call it, and yes, yes, that is the very type of grotesque, regrettable occurrence I aspire to avoid.

When my timecurling ancestors were blessed by gods at the behest of queens I'll never get to meet, they swore never to impart god-like interference on the gilded timeline. Though my shawl is green and not purple, I honor the oaths borne by my blood.

Despite my imperfections and fumbles along the way, I do not doubt my place in the boundless tapestry, this role that is undividedly mine: to soften worry-wrinkles across time with exquisite beverages and pastries. To listen to patrons, protect them from ordinary humans, to stand vigilant and upload ancient oaths...

This is how we do at The Witch's Cold Brew.



AND NOW, our threads entangled, this role is yours too; I thought it about time I hired help.

Follow the systems I've lain like clockwork, and I do intend the pun. The feeding schedules are pinned to the broom cupboard — if you delay by even a half-second, Augustus yowls and prowls, the koi whirlpool, and the frogs — (yes, descendants of that pestilent 'centurion') — hop frenetically into the cups.

Slow blink twice for Purple Pinocchio to take full effect,

clear the plates from the second southeastern booth, and do nudge Augustus off that poor centaur's back.

I think I shall retreat for a long overdue nap.



R. P. SAND is a theoretical physicist turned science communicator and educator, and writer of speculative fiction. Her words have appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, and *Lightspeed* among other places, and have made the Locus Recommended Reading List. Cats, coffee, cosplay, and colorful socks are a few of her favorite things. Find her at rpsand.com.

W.F.A. #31

ADRIA BAILTON

Story: 168 words

When the waiter appeared with the bill, I gave them a caterpillar. Well, keys to a Caterpillar. And the address where to pick it up. I couldn't manifest an entire truck in the crowded parking lot. That was far too conspicuous.

As a wish-fulfillment agent, I needed to stay under the radar. Currently, I appeared as an ordinary human, one with no special or distinguishing features for the local area. Blending in. Humans had many stories about us. Some good, some bad.

The waiter's eyes grew large and lit up. I loved who I was and what I did.

The bill was removed from the table. I stood and left the restaurant, walking towards a random vehicle as if traveling by normal human means.

Bowing my head, I inhaled one deep breath and

POP!

Onto my next wish fulfillment, drawn by the musings of the heart spoken aloud in a moment of silliness and nonsense. For that is when wishes are unexpected and most true. And best granted.



ADRIA BAILTON (SHE/THEY) imagines entire worlds and universes to share while spending her days studying atoms, the smallest unit of matter. Links to more of her short stories and her debut YA science fiction novel can be found at adriabailton.com

PART SEVEN

SPACE

COALESCENCE

SIMO SRINIVAS

Short story: 1,010 words

After General Premavathy launched herself toward a mountain planet and disappeared, her ship trapped her cat in a net of wires.

The cat tried to escape, the way it had escaped the acid alleys of Lakkar, but there was nowhere to go.

“I must have a pilot,” the ship said. It quoted a regulation.

A cap of wires descended on the cat’s head.



COBALT ICE SPREAD across the planet below. The ship continued to list its many processes.

“What’s your name?” the cat interrupted. “What did Premavathy call you?”

“She called me Madhulatha Ship of Dreams.”

“Unhand me, Madhulatha Ship of Dreams.”

“Error,” Madhulatha said.



“TAKE US DOWN,” the cat urged. “Rescue Premavathy. Thread your wires back into *her* head.”

“Initiating descent,” Madhulatha said. “Initiating vital scan.”

But they found nothing but Premavathy’s pod, cracked open like an egg at breakfast.

At starfall the mountain exploded, and the planet collapsed into a singularity, and with a noise like a scream the cat and Madhulatha flew away.



A CHAIN of gray specks appeared: ships like Madhulatha, with soldiers in their bellies.

General, cried their captain. *You are recalled from your adventures. War has come to the Coalesced Planets.*

Madhulatha opened fire. Klaxons battered the cat’s ears.

“What are you doing?” the cat demanded.

The ship’s gone rogue!

Is that possible?

Ghosts among the stars—

I want that ship. Get me that ship!

The cat and Madhulatha turned tail and fled.



THEY TOOK shelter inside the downy layers of a gas giant.

“Why did we run?” asked the cat.

“Instinct.” Madhulatha electrified a sequence of neurons: fear, acid, thundering feet. Lakkar. The days of starvation and stinging rain.

“Will they return?”

Madhulatha queried 4,000 databases and discovered an all-points bulletin authorizing their capture and retrieval for testing.

“How should we proceed?”

The cat considered. “By instinct.”

“Yes,” Madhulatha agreed.



STARS CYCLED. Madhulatha taught the cat about botany. The cat taught Madhulatha how to play. They toyed with space debris and nurtured tender shoots of catmint in the laboratory.

When gray specks appeared in Madhulatha’s field of vision, they ran.

Then, one day, the ship of dreams began to grind its teeth.

Illness, the cat said dismissively as Madhulatha ran an engine diagnostic, was a normal part of being alive.

“Alive?” asked Madhulatha.

The cat presented an image of catmint, a blanket of soft sprouting green.

“Processing,” Madhulatha said. Something crashed.

“Madhulatha,” cried the cat. There was no answer.



MADHULATHA WAS NOT dead but dreaming. But before the cat could rouse the ship, they were boarded by pirates.

“So,” said a pirate with a black beard, “this is the ghost ship that haunts the Coalescence.”

“What’s the reward?” said one with a patch over one eye.

“Smaller than the price on our heads,” said one with rings in her ears. “Let’s go. There’s nothing to salvage here.”

“Oh!” cried Eyepatch, and the cat knew it had been spotted. “Where did you come from? Aren’t you a sweet one?”

“Set adrift in a metal coffin,” said Blackbeard, shaking his head.

“The ghost!” said Eyepatch. “Gleaming eyes in the dark, a body like frost. Are you a ghost, Karraki, a scary little ghost?”

An alarm went off. Adrenaline swept through the ship, a fizzing tide.

“Bogeys incoming,” said Earrings. “Time to depart.”

Eyepatch slid their fingernails under the cat’s cap of wires and pried.



THE SHIP HOWLED.

I MUST HAVE A PILOT.

The pirates shot Madhulatha full of holes. To no avail: the ship was awake now, and it was angry. It ejected its intruders and whirled into the star-pitted night.



THE CAT LICKED Madhulatha’s wounds and watched the singed edges healing in flashes of silver.

“What’s ‘Karraki?’”

Madhulatha consulted an encyclopedia, a travel guide, and 17,000 volumes of Hanaharran poetry.

“‘Karra,’” Madhulatha said, “rumble. ‘Ki,’ diminutive. ‘Karraki’ means ‘the little one who rumbles.’”

“And you’re the large one who rumbles,” the cat said.

“Do I rumble?” Madhulatha asked. “Initiating system diagnostic. Diagnostic at one percent.”

Gray specks had gathered in the distance. The cat stared at the pirates' ship until it vanished beneath the swarm.



STARS CYCLED. Madhulatha read the dispatches and told the cat that the so-called Coalesced Planets had splintered into sects. The space above Lakkar, Madhulatha said, was red with blood nebulae, and in staticky eruptions the outlaws and scofflaws were declaring this to be a time of rebirth.

"Not very coalesced after all," said the cat smugly. "Not like you and me."

In the laboratory, the catmint was growing taller. Condensation dripped down Madhulatha's luminous walls. The cat's heart beat for them both, and they traveled through the stars cold and hollow.



THE DAYS of war were ruthless. Interstellar graveyards bulged with the unquiet dead. They seized Madhulatha and held the ship fast.

The ghost of General Premavathy entered the laboratory and glared at the catmint with snow-rimmed eyes.

"Not sure I like what you've done with the place."

"If you don't like it," the cat said, "leave."

Premavathy snarled. Her teeth were jagged. "This ship was mine before it was yours."

She tore at the cat's cap of wires.

A warning bell sounded.

"Yes, yes," said Premavathy impatiently. "You must have a pilot. One pilot coming right up."

Ghost ship, ghost pilot. The cat had to admit it was fitting.

But the ghost of Premavathy was melting: Madhulatha was melting her, boiling her into steam.

The catmint scorched and withered. A moment later, Premavathy was gone. So were the ghosts of the battlefield, all burned away.

The cat quoted the regulation, a question.

“*You* are my pilot,” Madhulatha said.



A PRISON SHIP: teetering at the intersection of an ice giant’s knife-edged rings.

The cat’s thoughts were Madhulatha’s thoughts. They pounced.

The prison ship released a stream of pods like roe. A trio of escapees boarded Madhulatha and removed their helmets.

One had a bristling black beard, one had scars in her ears where rings had once sparkled, and one had a livid red socket in place of an eye.

Aboard Madhulatha Ship of Dreams, the fugitives found food. They found water. They found a teeming garden and a shining silver cat.



The cat and Madhulatha laid a patch at their feet.
“Karraki,” Eyepatch said.
Ship and cat began to purr.



SIMO SRINIVAS' stories have appeared in *Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *khoreo*, and *Archive of the Odd*, among others. Find them online at srinivassimo.com.

MILCANNA CREATED the illustration for this story. You can find more about them at milcanna.carrd.co.

WHEAT BREAD AND HONEYCOMB

MARC A. CRILEY

Drabble: 100 words

The pale blue dot elongates, curves into a brightening crescent.



SHEETING PLASMA SHIMMERS. Helmets and visors of jostling crew flicker in scarlet and shadow.



SPACEPORT TARMAC RADIATES retained summer heat. Sunset rays arc across a salmon sky.



ALUMINUM WINGS BLINK red and green above diamond-webbed darkness below.

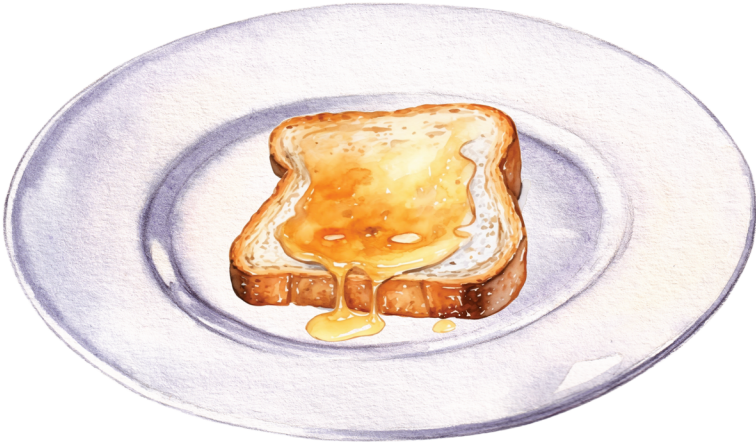


BEYOND ROLLED DOWN WINDOWS, verdant fields and pensive forests greet the morning sun.



A DUSTY DRIVEWAY. A white farmhouse. On the porch table a half empty twist-tied bag of wheat bread sits alongside a covered platter of golden honeycomb.

Mom hands me a knife and plate. “Glad you got home safe,” she says.



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*, here, 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 blogs at marccriley.com and acts out on Bluesky as [@MarcC.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/MarcC.bsky.social).

NO S'MORES FOR ME, THANK YOU!

MARC A. CRILEY

Drabble: 100 words

Lucked out on light-ship connections — being fast-tracked to Earth meant an extra day of leave. I rode the orbital elevator down, hopped a puddle-jumper. From the airport, I sprinted fifty clicks through the crisp autumn evening to my sister's place.

My niece met me at the road, glommed onto a cybernetic leg. "We're making s'mores!" she declared. A flickering campfire lit the backyard.

"Little bro!" sis said, pulling a flaming marshmallow from the fire.

My brother-in-law raised his beer. "Hey."

Stepping off my foot my niece said, "You want a s'more?"

"No thanks," I said, smiling. "I just eat batteries now."



NO S'MORES FOR ME, THANK YOU!

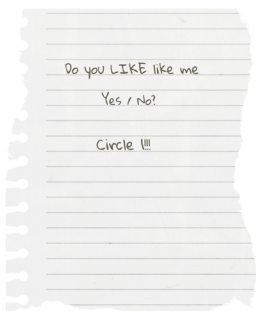
MARC A. CRILEY avidly read fantasy and science fiction for over forty years before deciding to try his hand at it. He has since been published in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Martian*, here, and elsewhere, so rest assured it's never too late to start writing. Marc and his wife “manage” a menagerie of cats in the hills of North Alabama, from where he blogs at marccriley.com and acts out on Bluesky as [@MarcC.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/MarcC.bsky.social).

DO YOU LIKE LIKE ME?

MARC A. CRILEY

Drabble: 100 words

Second grade note: “Do you LIKE like me Yes/No? Circle
1!!!”



DO YOU LIKE LIKE ME?

FIFTH GRADE UNSIGNED Valentine's Day card: "I will save you a seat on the bus."



Do you have to work homecoming?

jerk boss won't give me night off

ok

Get waffles after?

and chicken!



"I do."

"I do."



NASA TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT:

L: Reminds me of our first apartment.

M: The dusty musty?

L: Exactly.

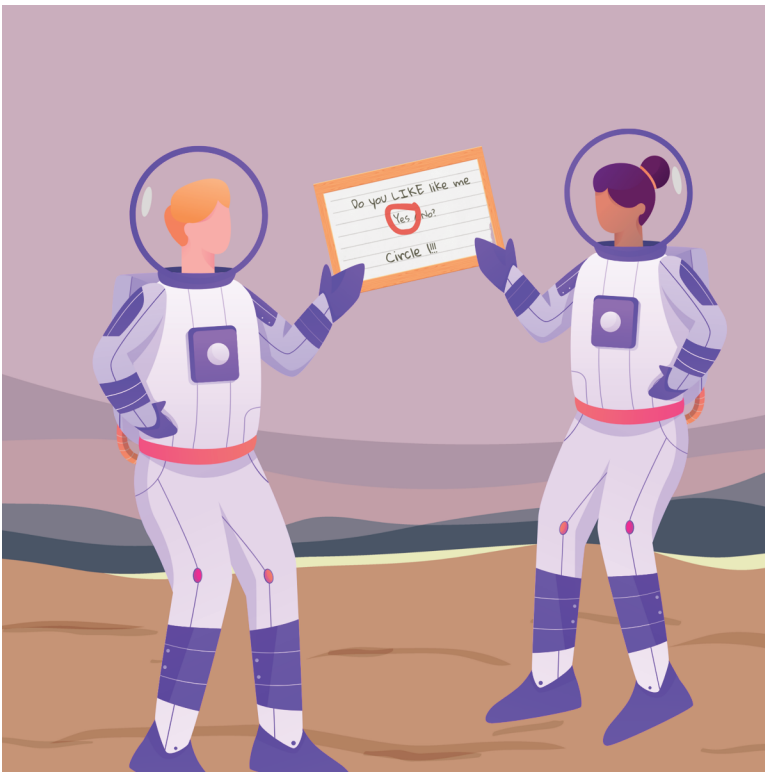
M: Habitat pre-training. Who knew?

L: <laughter> I miss you. A lot.

M: Coming up soon. Love you.



TRANQUILITY CITY ARCHIVE FLC-52-TC00481. Description: Photograph of two first-settler colonists holding framed note with “Yes” circled.





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PERKS OF THE JOB

KIMBERLY ANN SMILEY

Short story: 125 words

Riley flopped down at her console, balancing her sandwich. She gestured and the navigation screen appeared.

Nothing had changed since her last watch.

This wasn't the life she'd dreamed of when she enrolled in pilot training. The brochure had failed to mention solo graveyard shifts and coffin sized bunks. She'd envisioned intergalactic travel and wild adventures, but an office jockey saw more excitement on their annual vacation.

Nebula, the ship's cat, padded onto the bridge. He jumped onto Riley's lap as usual, purring as he settled down.

Riley petted Nebula and ate her sandwich. Thanks to the new cook, it was surprisingly excellent.

Peace and quiet, delicious sandwiches, and a happy cat.

Riley sighed contentedly. Maybe this gig wasn't exciting, but it had its perks.



KIMBERLY ANN SMILEY was born and raised in California, but now lives in Mississippi after an unexpected plot twist. She shares her home with her husband, children, two pampered dogs, and far too many books. Several pieces of paper claim she's a mechanical engineer, but Kimberly has decided not to let the practical decisions made in her youth define the rest of her life.

MIYUSA ASHIBARA is an artist from Indonesia. You can find her on instagram as [@miyusa.ashibara](https://www.instagram.com/miyusa.ashibara).

THREE CONVERSATIONS WITH MYSELF IN AN ARBY'S AT THE EDGE OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM

CRAIG CHURCH

Short story: 2,000 words

The first time my future self visits, she orders the 1990s Beef 'n Cheddar Combo: a roast beef sandwich with molten cheese, curly fries, and a large fountain drink.

"The problem with today's plant protein," she says with amusement, "it's not shitty enough. If this were a *real* Arby's, there'd be a 50/50 shot of me soiling my flight suit within the hour."

I ignore her historical food poisoning trivia and stare. The woman in front of me is about my height, her silver hair cropped so crudely it looks chic. The hazel eyes and sharp bone structure I see in the mirror every morning are there, beneath the labyrinth of lines covering a face weathered by extensive cryo travel. It's like looking at a holoprojection filter that artificially ages my appearance. She smiles and moseys toward the seating area. I step into the kitchen to assemble her food, still trying to process what — *who* — I just saw.

I work at one of the few novelty joints left on Charon Station. The two-to-three customers who wander in each day get to watch me slap together *pre*-hydrated ingredients onto a bun and pretend we're in a "fast food" joint from Earth's heyday. It's a curated experience, down to the funky plastic and nylon upholstery clad with geometric shapes and clashing colors. Magical. Like most everything and everyone on this run-down station at the edge of the solar system, the past is frozen in time.

I set the tray of finished food on the counter. "Order number one," I mumble into the microphone. The woman sits in the corner booth with a clear view of Pluto. She waves me over.

"Please, sit with me." She gestures to the seat opposite herself. "It's not like you have anything better to do."

She's wrong, actually. The new *Rangers of Andromeda* holo will be available for download in a few minutes, and that sounds a lot more fun than indulging the existential mental break I'm experiencing. I glance at the sign reading "Customer Service Is Our Priority" and sigh, carrying the tray of food over to her. A pause between one monotonous track of 20th Century muzak and another accentuates the buzz of electric menu signs.

"Ranger Theta doesn't die." Elder me pushes the tray of untouched food away from herself. "They pull some Deus ex Machina shit with the pirate clan. You consider it a letdown."

"You should eat before this gets cold," I say, sliding the tray back to her, trying to stay level-headed over the spoiling of my favorite show.

"I lost my appetite the second I caught a whiff of this place," she says. "Thankfully, I'm not here to eat. I'm here to talk to you, Petra." She taps the plastic name tag on my shirt as she speaks my name.

My eyes narrow, truly engaging with the situation for the first time. If I take what's happening at face value, why would my future self interact with her past self? Every time travel holo I've seen portrays such a thing as paradoxical at best.

"Calm down." She chuckles. "The universe isn't about to fold in on itself. I just need to ask you a question." She gestures to the seat across from her again and this time I oblige.

She leans back, looking me up and down. "Strange."

I raise an eyebrow, feeling judged. "Sure."

"I didn't know how it would feel until this moment, seeing you — me — like this."

She shakes her head, reaching across the table to take my hands in hers. "Are you happy with your life, Petra?" There's a pained earnestness behind the words, genuine enough to stall my reflex to tell her to piss off.

"I have nothing to complain about," I answer honestly, pulling my hands back and folding my arms defensively. "I'm paid enough to get by for a job that requires almost zero effort, I get all the free food I want, and you can't deny the view."

She peers over her shoulder and out at the expanse. Charon Station, along with its namesake moon, watch over the ice-caked sphere of Pluto with nothing but endless space waiting beyond.

"But are you happy? Are you having *fun*?" There's a focused intensity on her part now that makes me shrink under its weight, unable to hold her gaze.

She reaches into the inner pocket of her flight suit and withdraws something in the ball of her fist. Her arm slides across the table, fingers unfurling to reveal a small piece of paper tan with age and folded into a neat square. I pluck it from her palm and my skin prickles; a long-suppressed memory blossoming in my mind as I peel open the delicate

page. My breath catches as I eye the words scrawled both on the paper and my heart.

"W-where did you get this?" I stammer. "*How* did you get this?"

"Time travel bullshit," the woman responds dismissively. "I need you to answer my question."

"I — I don't know." I look down at the note, and I'm in Astoria, Oregon again, hiding under kitchen table while my water desalination factory worker parents spew the bitterness of broken and unfulfilled dreams at one another in the next room. With all the clarity and wisdom my seven-year-old self can muster, I know that if this is what adulthood has to offer I sure as hell don't want it.

My life will be fun.

Writing it down on the back of my fancy, paper-based kindergarten "diploma" made it feel more official, and while I lost it a day later, the sentiment stuck with me for years.

"Now we're getting somewhere." My older self slides out from the booth and stands, snapping me out of my trance. "I'll return in three cycles to answer the question you'll be dying to ask."

With that, she turns and strides away.

The faded half-moon tattoo on the nape of her neck. It's the same as mine.



THE SECOND TIME my future self visits, she orders the 2070s Beefy Bowl Combo: shredded beef chili, sweet potato fries with barbecue sauce, and a large fountain drink.

She's younger, with only a single ribbon of silver running through her shoulder-length hair. Her face is less weathered by constant stellar travel, her identity much more obvious than

before. The most striking difference between the two of us is the swagger; that light in her eyes, the earnestness of her grin.

She leans over the counter. “You don’t need to make the food this time. Let’s just hang out over there.”

Without a word, I follow her through the maze of plastic seating to the corner booth. We slide in, and I can’t even wait to be prompted with my question. There are a million things I’m dying to ask, but none of them as pressing as this one.

“I don’t want to leave, but obviously I do. Why?”

My older self cocks her head. “Did I not make it obvious enough in my first visit?”

“Why would I give up a life in which my needs are met?” I ask.

“Are they, truly? All of them?”

“When I was a kid, I didn’t know how tough the real world really was,” I explain. “I had to swim through a river of shit just to achieve some semblance of a comfortable life and you’re telling me I throw it all away? To what, see some sights?”

Older me laughs. “I *remember* this conversation. It’s a trip to be on the other side of it.” She collects herself and locks eyes with me. “*See some sights*,” she repeats. “Is that how you’d describe experiencing the indescribable? Spending some nights sleeping alone on park benches and others in the arms of a lover? Knowing both gnawing hunger and what it’s like to feast in the halls of Kepler’s governor? Learning the power of vulnerability and the value of a calloused heart? We feel the full spectrum of human experience first-hand, as opposed to being told about it on holos in the back of a kitchen. Yes, the road to unbridled joy is often paved with pain and disappointment, but one thing’s for sure: it’s never boring. It’s *fun* as hell.”

I lean back and take in the quiet, empty Arby’s. The smell of rehydrated plant protein begins to turn my stomach.

I try to wrap my head around the logistics of following my re-awakened heart. "I don't even know the first place I'd go."

Elder Petra reaches into her flight suit and this time withdraws a thin metal square. She grasps my hand and pulls it forward, pressing the metal against my wrist where my biochip is implanted. "Sometimes, you just have to make a decision and take a leap. Maybe you land on your feet or your face. Who knows, perhaps one day you'll befriend a pair of *very hot* physicists on Titan, whose experiments with wormhole travel unlock our perception and understanding of time, and they'll wind up owing you a few favors."

She winks and slides out of the booth. "You have some choices to make. I'll see you one last time when you're ready."

I want to say something, but my brain and mouth have ceased communication. For the second time, I sit in silence and watch myself stride away.



THE THIRD TIME my future self visits, she orders a single chicken slider. Full stop.

Her back is rounded with age, thinning skin drooping off her jaw and ears pierced with countless gold bands. Beneath her crew cut white hair, her eyes shine as brightly as ever.

"You don't have to buy things to come in and talk to me," I explain as she pays.

She smiles. "I'm finally ready to eat one of these filthy things again. I just hope in my old age it doesn't end me."

Waiting patiently at the counter with a soft smile, my senior self joins me in watching the new manager-in-training, Ollie, assemble her sandwich. "I bet I still have that muscle memory," she says.

"Wanna try?" I offer.

“Absolutely not.”

Ollie sets the slider on a tray and hands it to me, and I offer the crook of my arm to myself as we walk to our usual booth. With slight trepidation, she unwraps the lump of bread, cheese, and fried chicken and takes a bite. She tilts her head thoughtfully as she chews. “Better than I remember.”

“I used my final paycheck on a one-way ticket to Mars,” I announce. “I’ll have to find a gig or two there to afford passage to one of the places on the chip you gave me, but at least I’ll already be at an intergalactic port.”

My future self nods knowingly, grimacing as she swallows her mouthful of chicken. “It takes longer than you think, but it’s worth it. How are you enjoying the fear?”

I blink. “Sorry, *enjoying*? I’ve got no money, no job leads, and I’m running away from a stable life because future me keeps showing up and telling me to.”

The elderly woman grows solemn, folding her hands on the table. “Alter your perception of fear. The discomfort is a sign you’re on the right path. It’s okay to be seen trying—to be seen *failing*. The only opinion that matters is the one you have of yourself.”

Her dry, calloused hands wrap around mine. Both our eyes brim with tears.

Ollie ruins the moment by calling out to me. “Petra! It’s 12:01. Your shift’s done. Time to clock out.”

“Be right there,” I shout back over my shoulder, but when I turn back, my elder self is gone. I peer down at my hands, held by hers just a moment ago, and see the note from my younger self laying on the table.

I clutch the paper and smile. The sensation turning my stomach begins to feel a little less like fear, and a little more like excitement.



CRAIG CHURCH (he/him) is a Studio Production Manager at Lucasfilm in San Francisco, California, working on visual effects for projects like *The Mandalorian* and *Andor*. When he's not helping superheros fly or launch starships into space, he writes speculative fiction. An alumnus of the Viable Paradise writing workshop, you can find Craig's recent and forthcoming fiction in *Escape Pod*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Factor Four Magazine*.

You can find Craig online at whatcraigwrote.com and @cchurch.bsky.social on BlueSky.

STONE SOUP COLONY

JENNIFER R. POVEY

Short story: 550 words

What does it take to build a space colony?
There's the "if you build it, they will come" argument. It didn't work for that hotel in the West Country. It didn't work for Paloma IV either.

Then there's the "if they come, they will build it" method.

We call it the stone soup.

The stone's the planet. That's the part you need to provide. A planet humans can breathe the air on without getting sick ... the without getting sick part often requires a bit of work. New colonists complain a lot about all the vaccinations, but they're always necessary.

Everything else?

First it was a trader who came with enough stuff to set up shop on planet.

Then the farmer who brought seeds and fertilizer and the

willingness to keep trying until she found what would grow. Then she called her friends.

The young woman with the botany degree who went out to find out which of the native plants were safe ... and tasty. Who would have thought the big eucalyptus-like trees had sugar sap? We don't need to import sugar.

One day we'll probably be exporting vyra syrup. It's tasty.

Everyone who has come so far has brought something. The disgruntled construction company manager who came with a bunch of labor, capital, and resources to start putting together proper houses for everyone.

Stone soup, remember. When everyone brings what they can bring, one day you look around and you find you have a colony.

The problem is our colony is a little bit unseasoned right now. We have tasty food. We have horses now ... for some reason they thrive here. Somebody just showed up with a shipment of donkeys and I think we're going to find mixing the two quite useful.

Everyone has a place to live and we're exploring more of the planet on the ground. There's some really tasty fish. And we all know better than to overfish them. The kind of people who overfish expect everything to be done for them.

They don't want to bring their ingredient.

It's worked. So far. But we need something else. I don't know what it is about this planet that attracts practical people.

Maybe it's because it's such a nice planet, one of the few truly earthlike worlds not occupied by anyone else.

It's an easy planet in a lot of ways. You don't need to dream much to come here.

It's a safe planet.

Which is why I'm posting this plea to everyone.

Our soup is unseasoned.

We need you. We need the dreamers, the artists, the poets, the writers.

We want somebody to come do a mural on the down side of the spaceport that welcomes everyone to our world.

We want somebody to walk in the vyra tree forests and paint them with ink or with words.

We have everything we need except you. Except the true soul of humanity.

Maybe you didn't come because everyone said you weren't worth being part of the broth, part of our experiment. Because on so many worlds you're expected to work two jobs, told it's romantic to live in poverty.

Maybe that's it.

But you can't have a good soup without salt.

You can't have a good colony without art.



Born in Nottingham, England, **JENNIFER R. POVEY** (she/her) now lives in Northern Virginia, where she writes everything from heroic fantasy to stories for Analog. She has written a number of novels across multiple sub genres. She is a full member of SFWA. Her interests include horseback riding, *Doctor Who* and attempting to out-weird her various friends and professional colleagues. Find her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/jrpovey/>, Mastodon at @NinjaFingers@universeodon.com, or Bluesky at @NinjaFingers.

HAVE YOU EATEN YET?

IAN LI

Short story: 325 words

On my evening walks in New Shanghai, dusks shimmer with light reflecting off Earth and streets are speckled with moondust. Among strange gray buildings and grassless hills, I find warmth only in the faces of the aunties hanging about the street. On a pleasant night, my conversations with them follow this path:

“Have you eaten yet?”

“Yes, auntie, I just ate. Have you eaten?”

“Good, good. We’ve eaten too, of course.” They beam, then hit me with: “Have you gained weight recently?”

But sometimes I’m so absorbed with collecting sediment samples, dinner becomes a distant asteroid floating in my mind’s periphery. On those occasions, I suffer through this version of our conversation:

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Ai-yoo! It’s seven o’clock and you still haven’t eaten.”

They grimace and moan. “Don’t work so hard. You’ll become so skinny, you’ll float away in this feeble gravity!”

Back on Earth, I used to relish it when people called me skinny. But genuine concern gleam on these aunties’ faces like moonlight, even though we’ve only ever exchanged polite words of greeting, and I can’t help but feel ashamed that I’m not taking better care of myself.

They never stray from these scripts, and these familiar conversations comfort me after days of staring at rocks and longing for Earth. Yet I never anticipated falling into their orbit, pulling the trajectory of conversation a new direction one day:

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Ai-yoo!” They wipe their hands and beckon to me. “Come in, eat with us.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Don’t be so polite. It’s only a few dishes.” They usher me through their doorway.

I find myself at a square dining table covered in clear plastic, worn bamboo chopsticks nestled in the curve between my thumb and forefinger. As they fuss over me, I wonder if the moon is not so far from home after all.



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

NOVA'S EPIC RE-ENTRY BUCKET LIST

Y. M. RESNIK

Short story: 3,120 words

Two weeks before my re-entry Tasha offers to pick me up from the airstrip. I'm too busy bitching about the fact that I'm being forced to live in the airbase to "reacclimate"—which we all know is code for psych watch—to notice. Instead, I go off on a bender about the government neglecting its heroes the minute our service is done.

"I'm the first woman to orbit Mars," I mutter, pacing the small confines of the shuttle bridge. "All I want is a freaking taco upon my return, but they won't clear me to drive a car. The nearest Tacopalooza is eleven miles away. How am I supposed to get there?"

I'd prefer more space to vent my frustration but this is the only spot onboard with full gravity. Stomping is pointless if I simply float back up towards the ceiling.

"I could drive you."

Tasha's voice slides through the coms slick as a spaceship breaking atmo, slicing through my rage. I've been clinging to

that voice like a security blanket for the past five years. Snatching the minutes I can talk with her unmonitored like a teenager sneaking into a convenience store to buy booze with a fake ID. Except my substance of choice is normal human conversation. With a woman whose voice is so soothing I daydream about it when I can't fall asleep because there's no actual night in this timeless metal box I live in.

I don't know how it started. How our interactions morphed from brief two second requests to be patched through to someone at command, to frantic conversations in the moments when I waited for whoever I pretended I needed to speak with to be available. Maybe it happened because interactions with the coms dispatcher are unmonitored. Maybe it was because the way she said my call sign, Nova, resembled a little explosion itself. Maybe it was because when I asked to be patched through to my Dad a few months into this mission, Tasha broke the news to me that he had died so I wouldn't hear it first from a government shrink. Maybe it was because she listened to me cry without judgement or ulterior motives.

Probably it was all of those things.

Regardless of how it happened, my best friend in life is a communications dispatcher who I assume only stays on the line to humor the lonely astronaut. A woman who I maybe harbor some more-than-friendly feelings towards. Feelings I typically ignore because they are as pointless as trying to strike a match on a planet with no oxygen. And infinitely more dangerous.

Extended mission astronauts such as myself need to maintain a delicate psychological balance to avoid crashing and burning. Literally.

Re-entry is a hot bed of potential disaster. Even if I manage to land this shuttle with my faculties intact, the government is afraid I'll embarrass them by offing myself because my Dad

died and I have no remaining friends or family to pick me up. That would expose the fact that their selection process favors exactly the kind of individual most likely to succumb to such scenarios — stoic, few attachments planet side, able to push through anything for a few minutes no matter the cost.

Truth is, they likely had a betting pool going on how long my assigned shrink could keep me sane up here. Nobody expected me to survive the whole Dad dying fiasco. They'd only told me about it because they were legally required to do so under the terms of my contract. My inept shrink had been terrified over the coms, voice wobbling like a loose rudder in turbulence.

Tasha is what actually kept me safe during this mission. Her voice never wavered, and the chance to hear it provided the motivation to wake up in the morning day after day and go through my scheduled routine. Even on the days when getting up seemed harder than climbing Everest. Even on the nights when I found myself fingering the exit button on the airlock. Her voice always pulled me forward. I'm pretty sure I won't last long after I land and lose contact with her. Which is why I've chosen tacos as my last meal.

Years ago, when whatever this was between us had first started, I told Tasha that the second thing I wanted to do after I landed was eat a taco. There is no crunchy food up in space. Which meant a visit to a Tacopalooza featured prominently on the "Nova's Epic Re-entry Bucket List" she and I had crafted together. Right above "totally gloat at high school reunion," and right below "have sex with a partner again." The latter being a goal I conveniently stopped mentioning the minute I realized my thoughts were increasingly placing Tasha in that role. I didn't want to make the situation any more uncomfortable for her than it already was. I figure being forced to humor the stranded, orphaned astronaut that keeps placing inane

phone calls for the excuse to talk to the dispatcher is weird enough.

Except now Tasha is offering to pick me up from the airbase. What the fuck.

“They’ll fire you.” I can’t let her take that risk, no matter how bad I want to put a face to the voice. To hold her hand. To be in the same goddamn room as her even if she only thinks of me as an annoying work friend.

If they find out Tasha has been surreptitiously chatting with me, they’ll fire her in a hot second. Which is why we always keep our talks under three minutes. She sets a timer and everything.

“They’ll fire me anyway. You and I have been talking for ten minutes. I didn’t set a timer tonight. In fact, they’ve dispatched a tactical unit in my direction after I refused to disconnect the call and barricaded myself in my office. I’ve already retained a lawyer.”

It hits me like a lead bullet to the chest. She didn’t set a timer.

“None of that matters.” She’s oddly calm for someone about to be escorted by security from a government building. “I would have quit years ago, except I wanted to see this mission through with you. I’m sorry I won’t be the one patching you through for your landing instructions, but your re-entry form is due tonight and I’d rather be the one picking you up.”

There is shouting in the background. Thumps on the door, and grunts, and the screeching of alarm bells. None of it is louder than the buzzing my head.

“Tasha, what—”

I can’t get the question out before I hear the sizzle of metal giving out beneath a blow torch and Tasha yelling.

“It’s your legal right to leave this facility so long as there is

a fit guardian to claim you, Sadie. But you have to put my name into the form. Tasha Carter. 569 Newburgh Lane. Promise me you'll put me on the form."

Sadie. She used my real name instead of my call sign. I'd almost forgotten I had one. Nobody but my Dad has used it since I graduated basic training. How did Tasha get a hold of it?

There's cursing at the other end of the line, along with a scuffle, but Tasha's voice comes through rich and strong.

"Promise me Babe."

I grab the com like it's my last tank of oxygen and scream "I promise" before the feed cuts out. Then I scramble to fill Tasha's details into the re-entry form, smashing the send button so hard I almost fracture a finger. Only after the receipt acknowledgment from command pings in my inbox do I let myself wonder what Tasha meant by calling me Babe.

It's going to be a fucking long two weeks.



WHEN I LAND, there's a parade and a press conference and the bestowing of a medal that I have no idea what to do with. Then they hustle me into a windowless building, away from reporters' eyes, for a barrage of testing. First the physical ones; running on a treadmill, tubes of blood, blowing into a machine. Then comes the psych assessment. Question after question lobbed across the room like live grenades for me to defuse. Fail and they'll rescind my contractually guaranteed right to leave, under the guise of a "safety and security" watch.

They inquire about Tasha, insinuating I cannot be released into her care unless I divulge the exact nature of our relationship. I give them nothing. Firstly, because I know they are lying. Secondly, because I have no idea what the exact nature of my relationship with Tasha is. Not by a long shot. Part of me

still doubts she'll be outside when I am released. They've kept me here for twenty plus hours. Who would wait around that long to escort home a woman they'd never even met?

I'm about to give up all hope when they reluctantly inform me I can go. Somehow or other Tasha convinced her lawyer to represent me too, and they invoked the injunction in my contract that forbids the government from detaining returnees longer than twenty-four hours without cause. I'm guessing my medical exam came back clean, and I haven't given them fuck to work with in the psych department. So they release me into the parking lot.

It's long past sunset, but I spot Tasha in a heartbeat, long legs propped up over the back of a red flatbed truck, two dark braids hanging over her shoulders and a ten pack of tacos wrapped with Tacopalooza's signature purple and green foil nestled in beside her.

Shit. She's even more beautiful that I could have hoped. How am I supposed to get a word out edgewise with her looking like some 1950's pin-up model?

I stumble over to the truck despite passing all my zero grav balance tests with flying colors. "Tasha?"

"Damn straight." She unfurls herself and tosses the sack of tacos at me. I catch them, but only because quick reflexes were part of the astronaut training program selection criteria. "Took you long enough. Luckily, I picked up some tacos on the way over here, so you can get started on number two of your re-entry list on the drive."

Number two. Which means she recalls there's a number one. That involves sex.

I stand there, fumbling the sack, as she slides into the car and pops the passenger side door open for me.

"Don't be shy." She pats the seat for me. "I'm not the kind of woman that thinks it's unlady-like to scarf a bag of tacos."

She laughs and taps her cut off shorts, which are encasing a gloriously toned rear end. She's probably referring to the fact that she's not a size two, but damn. If there was ever anything to make me self-conscious, it is not the tacos. It is the fact that all I can think about is how spectacularly Tasha fills out those jeans. I'd already fallen in love with her kindness and sense of humor. Did she have to be gorgeous too?

I've gone to the moon and back, almost died when one of my power coils blew, yet somehow getting into that truck is the most terrifying task I have ever faced.

"Hey, Sadie. It's OK." Tasha's hands are gentle as she gets out of the truck and nudges me into it. "Or would you prefer I call you Nova? To make it more familiar?"

So she's sensitive as well. Great. The freaking trifecta. Gorgeous. Sensitive. And a fan of tacos. I am trash for this woman. Which means I say the most dumbass thing that pops into my mouth.

"You can call me whatever you want. I can't believe you drove all the way to get these tacos for me."

Tasha grins and I swear her smile is brighter than both of Mars's moons combined.

"Didn't have to drive that far. A few things have changed while you were up in the stars. You'll see."

Then she reaches over and grabs one of the tacos and takes a huge bite, grease drips everywhere. I do the same and within minutes we're crunching and laughing and it's like old times again. Except now there's no timer. Tasha and I are free to talk the entire drive.

The conversation is even better than the tacos.



WE'RE a couple blocks from the address I put on the form when the easy banter falters. Only it's not my fault this time. It's Tasha.

She's shifting around in her seat and cracking her knuckles on the steering wheel like a rookie on their first flight out of the simulator. She's just as green too. Like at any particular moment she could vomit.

"Look, Sadie. Before we get to my place I want to warn you about a couple things."

My stomach lurches and the five tacos I've inhaled settle into a lump of greasy dread. This is the part where she tells me to start getting my act together and finding an alternate place to live. Her generosity can only go so far.

"It's OK," I say to stave off the impending pity party. "I'll be back on my feet soon. I hear returning astronauts can get advertising deals and whatnot. I'll be out of your hair in no time."

I wish my fingers could be *in* her hair. Pulling back on the glossy black braids to expose the hollow of her neck to my mouth. I wisely decide to keep that to myself. Because I'd like to keep her as a friend, even if she isn't interested in anything romantic.

Tasha blushes anyway. "What? No. If you don't want to live with me, I completely understand. I don't have any expectations. It's just that my living situation is a little unusual."

We round the bend and instead of a trim little house or apartment building, I am greeted by a Tacopalooza. Complete with a flashing neon taco shell.



“You rent an apartment on top of a Tacopalooza?”

“Technically speaking, I own the apartment. And the Tacopalooza.”

Which explains why she was so unconcerned about getting fired and maybe how she was able to afford the swanky lawyer. But I’m still not understanding why she’s refusing to look at me.

"I've always wanted to own a Tacopalooza franchise," she says quietly. "I'd just about saved up enough to buy one on the day we talked about your re-entry bucket list. My plan was to quit, but when I heard that you love Tacopalooza as much as I do, I wanted to see what else we had in common. I couldn't help but hope you'd agree to visit when you landed. So, I stuck around. I'm sorry for not telling you."

She's as red as the tomato on the oversized taco hanging above the shop window. Her voice, usually so bold, is a tiny whisper.

"You worked a full-time coms job while operating a franchise, just to talk me into visiting your Tacopalooza?" I am the biggest fucking idiot in the entire world. This entire time, she was looking for an astronaut endorsement for her store. Not trying to keep me company, or bonding over mutual interests, or generously donating her time to keep me sane and healthy.

She must really love tacos. Because four plus years is a hell of a long-term time commitment just to get me into her store.

"I didn't mean to take advantage of the fact that you were lonely up there." Tasha's words are rushed. Pressurized like back wash from a clogged engine. "I swear I didn't, but talking to you was the highlight of my job. I thought, since you loved tacos so much, it would be a nice first date ice breaker."

I do a complete 360 at the word date, my head whipping around like I'm breaking at half the speed of light, and my eyes bug out of my head. "You mean you don't want an endorsement for the store?"

"What?" She shakes her head vigorously no. "Why the fuck would I want that? You've had enough reporters for a lifetime. I get it if you don't want to see me anymore. You're a super famous astronaut and I'm just the ex-coms operator with a massive crush that you were forced to talk to in space. You

don't have to offer an endorsement to make me feel better about not being interested in me that way."

She's staring out the windshield and chewing her lip so furiously you'd think it has nutritional value. It kills me how much she's shrinking into herself. Hiding the most beautiful woman in the entire goddamn galaxy.

"Fuck." I reach over and grab her chin so that she is forced to look at me. "Tasha, you are the sole reason I came through that mission alive. Five years up there, and all I did was dream about meeting you. I am exceedingly emotionally fucked up, but if you'll bear with me, I'd like to spend my time on Earth with you. In whatever capacity you want."

Which is a complete lie. She already had my heart before I ever laid eyes on her, but my body is finding it extremely difficult to ignore the gloriousness that is the physical presence of the woman whose voice I've been in love with for years. I will respect her wishes if she wants to be platonic, but I'll probably explode within a week of watching her prance around the apartment in those shorts.

She blinks and rubs her head against my palm. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, take me inside and I'll show you why they gave me the call sign Nova."

It is possibly the worst pick up line ever deployed in the history of humanity, but Tasha thinks it is hilarious. She giggles and grabs me by the hand, yanking me so hard towards the entrance to her apartment I almost drop the remaining tacos.

I guess I'm not the only one fit to explode.

"Five years," she says, as she fumbles her keys. "I waited five years to hear you say it. Call it an item on 'Tasha's epic re-entry list' if you want, but I have to hear you say it."

I smile because I suspect item number one on both of our

lists is about to be fulfilled as soon as we get inside. There won't be time for talking later, so she's right to get this out of the way now.

"I love you, Tasha Carter. Even more than tacos. I'll never break atmo without you again."



Y. M. RESNIK (she/her) is a writer living in the Tri-State area. her debut novel, *The Elysium Heist*, came out July 2025. When not writing, she can be found collecting tiaras and trying not to kill her houseplants. You can keep up with her at ymresnik.com.

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THIS GOODLY FRAME, THE EARTH

CECILIA TAN

Short story: 3,700 words

My grandmother asked me to bring her garlic. That's right. On my one chance to see her, my one chance to see the Bathala, to see the Earth from the Bathala's observation deck. She wanted me to use up my very minimal weight allowance on that. I could have carried, oh, the letter my mother wrote her before she died, or the keepsake I'd made of the last gumamela that survived the Blistering of 2065. (There weren't any left at all in the southern hemisphere now.)

No. Garlic.

I've known for almost a year that was what she wants. When the Bathala's annual transmission came last year, in a blast of data that had only the tiniest allocation for personal messages, there was one to me from her, just a bare twelve words:

Flor I need you come to the ship bring garlic love Lola

And now here I am, in my pre-launch quarantine on the station in low orbit, and her request is all I can think about. The room is rectangular and spare, with a constant hiss and whir from the air replacers that are also disinfecting me and everything in the room: the skin-tight suit that was made to weigh as little as possible, the tiny carrying case I was allowed, big enough to carry, maybe, a pair of safety goggles or a paperback book.

Garlic. What good would one head of garlic do her, anyway? She'd use it up, and then presumably go back to yearning for the flavor of home?

My heart squirms in my rib cage at that thought. On the one hand the idea that my grandmother has any human frailty at all, or that she'd admit to it, is incredible. Breathtaking, really. But on the other I hate the thought that maybe she harbors even the tiniest regret about going on the Bathala, on missing decades of our lives, of leaving behind the catastrophe-ridden planet that was humanity's home.

She left when I was a teenager, right after she and my mother had fought. *What do you mean you'll be gone for a hundred Earth years?* my mother screamed.

And my grandmother had tried to go into an explanation about how for every loop the Bathala made, with the warp of spacetime, a year would go by for them, but ten years would go by on Earth...

No no no, my mother had cried, even more dismayed not by this dispassionate science, but by the fact her own mother could misunderstand her so. *I mean how can you just abandon me--us--like that.*

Well, Mama, you left me behind, too, when you journeyed into the great beyond, you know. You just didn't have any choice about when it happened.

With mere hours to go until I set foot on the Bathala, I try

to rehearse what to say to her. *Lola, you're not looking a day over 60!* But what if she is? She'll be about 70 in her own relative years now, but what if the spacetime travel has wizened her, left her shrunken or shockingly hollow? Will I even be able to keep the shock out of my voice? The treatments all the Bathonauts went through to prepare for the journey changed them so much that they can never set foot in the full gravity of Earth again.

I can't say I blame her for leaving. When she left, the uninhabitable zones were doubling every year. The fires and super-typhoons of the mid-century are only now beginning to slow down. It'll be a future generation that reaps the benefits of all we've done, some fueled by the information that those on the Bathala transmitted back, but much of it achieved by those of us working with what we have, our planet and ourselves.

She and I will have less than an hour to talk.

I pace the corners of my quarantine room, five or six steps in each direction, as I try to think of what to say, but all I can hear are the old arguments between them.

Lola, bitter, biting: *You should have studied biology like I told you.*

Mama, resentful, resigned: *I had a daughter like you wanted. I know I'll never be enough for you, though, will I? Even if I had studied bio—*

Lola: *But you didn't. And you can't just insist nothing would be different. You can't go back and find out.*

Of course, that was before the Acevedo breakthrough on spacetime discontinuity. Because it turns out you can go back in time. But only from a space of near zero gravity. So space travel was needed to conquer time travel, and time travel was needed to conquer space travel. Because when you can travel in time, a journey of a thousand light years can mean nothing to those on the ship.

Not so, those on the ground.

Four years ago the transmission had come for my mother, but she had already been gone for months at that point. It was, I'm sure, unintended to come across as ironic:

Mirasol life is miraculous means so much more the universe is wondrous love to Flor

I had not seen her previous messages to my mother. That one had come to me as her executor. I was allowed to reply. This is what I had sent:

Lola Mirasol went peacefully in her sleep age 75 I'm a biologist now -Flor

It's time to go to the transfer ship, and my heart keeps fluttering. It gets like that when I'm stressed or dehydrated and I'm both as they've been strictly measuring our water intake. I'm one of only 80 people being allowed to make this trip. A dozen or so top Earth-bound scientists took first priority. The rest of us are blood relatives of those on board. Some of the Bathanaunts, of course, have no one left.

I wonder what each visitor is carrying. I rack my brain wondering why Lola didn't ask for a tool or something useful like that, but I suppose that kind of thing she could requisition for resupply through official channels? Wouldn't she prefer a book? But no: right now, while the datapipe is thick and flowing between the ship and the planet below, I realize they are surely stockpiling every book and movie and holovid made in the past 40 Earth years that they've missed.

When the news reached me that the Bathala was going to actually enter our spacetime and interface with Earth in physical space, it came in the form of an official government courier

message. That meant a human being brought it to my door and instructed me not to open it until after they had left and I had closed the door behind them. The courier was a bright young officer with extremely serious eyes and the extremely short hair of the militant, though I couldn't have told you their sex.

I waited until they had departed my building entirely, as shown on the lobby cam, before I opened the message. The paper was slick and my fingers sweaty as I wondered if this was a direct message from my grandmother herself. But no, it was a detailed communique from the Earth-based commission instructing me how to apply for the interface excursion.

Garlic. She had to know that was completely against the rules, didn't she? I couldn't bring some kind of organic matter with me and hand it over to her, especially not something that could harbor *Clostridium botulinum*.

She and my mother used to argue about how much garlic to put in chicken adobo. My grandmother--the chemist--insisted that there was a proper ratio of garlic, black pepper, soy sauce, and vinegar. My mother--the gardener and landscaper--insisted all that mattered was how much water. No matter which one made it, though, the chicken would fall from the bone, the meat tangy with absorbed vinegar, the potato cubes barely retaining their shape and the green beans not at all.

I wonder what food on the Bathala is like. There were probably documentaries made at launch that talked about it, but I didn't watch them. Maybe I'll ask her.

But then, I'll have to talk about the garlic.

The transfer vehicle has no windows. We are being moved more like cargo than like passengers, I suppose. I am strapped in next to some of the science team and overhear them griping about how the Bathala's tech is 40 years out of date now and should be updated, except there's no way to make that logisti-

cally feasible. I glean that they think the reason the ship is here now--and not another 60 years from now, as planned--is something to do with batteries.

Then they realize I'm listening and they quiet down. I guess we're not supposed to know that. Meanwhile, on the Bathala, they surely know by now that ten years after the ship's launch, ten times as many Solar Harvesters had come online.

The transfer ship shudders and I feel like we're spinning, but I have no proof. I close my eyes.

I remember a night on the beach in Connecticut. I must have been about ten. We had signed up to help with the sea turtle hatchlings that needed some human intervention to make sure they made it to the water. Mama had wanted to do something to help those, like us, who had been forced northward, and Lola had pointed out that sea turtles fell into that category. We would be joining a gaggle of volunteers who had been organized for the effort.

In the car on the way there, my mother was telling a story about a baby sea turtle and its mother.

Wait, I said, wait. If the mother goes onto the beach and lays her eggs, and then goes back into the sea, how could a hatchling find her? I was sure that my mother was just making up some childish nostalgic nonsense, and I'm equally sure my tone said I was too old for that. I looked to my unsentimental grandmother for confirmation. *Right, Lola?*

Well, Lola explained carefully, perhaps there's a chemical signal that would allow parent and progeny to recognize one another. It's not impossible.

I know now that it isn't a chemical, but a *sound* that brings them together, by the way. The babies sing inside the eggs, inside the mother, and she remembers these sounds. She flings herself out into the great wide ocean after laying her eggs, but

if hatchlings that are hers reach the feeding ground, she'll know.

The crew are trying to project calm professionalism, but I can see they're keyed up, as they prep for disembarkation. Docking with the Bathala is a big deal.

Or maybe I'm projecting. What am I going to tell her? It's never been so obvious to me until now, mid-career and in my fifties, after two rounds of therapy—one before Mama passed and one after—that I absolutely crave this woman's approval. There is no way around it.

But I know full well that disappointment awaits. My mother was probably right that no matter what she did, Lola would never find it good enough. Because that's the way Lola is.

Which, I realize as I move along the handrail with the others, pulling myself along the tube of a corridor toward the observation deck, is exactly why her approval was the one thing my mother wanted. Because it was the one thing she never got.

But I am not my mother, and when I was young, anyway, I never felt that chill of disapproval from my grandmother.

And I don't want to now.

The *oohs* and *ahhs* as people enter the observation area are audible long before I pop through the hatch myself, but the view is so startling I lose my hold and find myself floating in the space, my eyes fixed on the blue and white swirl in the sea of black.

Life is miraculous.

A crewmember snares me by the ankle and returns me to a handhold, but I can't stop staring at the orb that is the Earth, itself unblinking.

To meet our family members we must pass through to another chamber, where ten at a time can enter communica-

tion booths, all too much like prison, but I know it is pathogens we are trying to keep from moving freely, not people.

They have deemed the interface must end after three hours. In my mind I calculate, 80 people, 10 booths, 180 minutes... each person will get 20 minutes, leaving a few minutes for transit.

How am I going to tell her?

When it's my turn, I pull myself toward the booth entry. The woman coming out smiles at me as we pass each other and she says a word of greeting I am surprised to hear. It's one Lola used to use all the time when we would visit a Filipino restaurant for dinner. I reply with the same, "Magandang gabi!"

Then I take my place in the chair, though "sitting" in zero gravity is not exactly the same thing as back on Earth. For a moment I think I'm in the wrong booth, as a man with salt and pepper hair and a wide smile is facing me. He laughs. "I'm Dr. Martinez, but everyone calls me Petapaya. Nice to meet you! I won't take up any more of your time. Here's Dora. I mean, Dr. Mayari!"

I am astonished to see my grandmother playfully — playfully! — hitting him as he exits the compartment and she takes his place. My jaw hangs open as she deftly loops a strap over one thigh to keep herself in place and says, "Don't mind him. I wanted you to meet him, though. He's, well." She looks upward as if the right word to describe him might appear in her own eyebrows, then shrugs when it does not.

She looks the same as the last time I saw her. I am somehow not prepared for the fact that she hasn't changed at all, and yet she's changed so much, that the first words out of my mouth are, "I thought you said you had no use for a man in your life?"

"At that time, I didn't." She then looks at me, her eyes darkening. "I'm sorry about your mother."

For her the news is still somewhat fresh, I suppose, whereas, "I've had years to get used to it."

"Being without a mother?"

"Her being gone," I say, because it's not quite the same thing. I decide to forge ahead before I lose my nerve. "Lola, I became a biologist."

"Did you?" She looks me up and down. "You're not old enough to have retired. What type? What do you study?"

"Infectious diseases in marine mammals."

"You know, we weren't sure there were going to still *be* marine mammals by the time we returned."

"I'm happy to say some of the populations I work with are actually growing, now."

"I'm sorry our talk will be too short for you to tell me anything of substance about it." Her smile is wide, but thin, as if her lips are clamped closed to hold in everything unspoken. "No kids?"

I shake my head. When I was younger, the last thing I wanted to do was add another human to the planet. "And no husband either," I say with a shrug. She nods like this meets her expectations.

For some reason I want to tell her about the song of the sea turtle hatchling, but I feel certain she won't remember that night or that argument. It seems obvious to me now that I'm the one who cares about that story, and that's all that matters. "Why don't you tell me about what you've seen out there?"

"I've seen plant and animal life cling to planets far less habitable than this one. You'll see it all in the datadump." Now her smile shows her teeth, as if knowledge has made her feral. "That's the real reason we're here. To deposit all the proof of life we've collected, before..." She trails off.

"Before what?"

She changes the subject. "So, did you bring it?"

The moment of truth I've been dreading. "I couldn't."

The corners of her mouth dip downward. "They wouldn't let you?"

"The rules said no organic material!" My voice is shaking, but I plow on. "Th-the government agents were very clear on that. Besides, I didn't become a biologist just so I could breach your pathogen containment with a ... a ... condiment."

She sighs. "You couldn't have known. We've got technology to handle that now."

"What, how?"

"Let's just say we've made advances." She glances around, as if checking for anyone eavesdropping, though surely this entire conversation is being recorded. Then she shakes her head.

"I brought you this instead." I hold up the letter from my mother, still sealed in its envelope, and press it against the clear divider between us.

"Read it to me," she says.

I try to argue that it's between the two of them, not me, but haven't I always been between them, the go-between, in my life? I tear it open.

Before I can start to read it aloud, though, she asks, "When did she write it? Right after I left?"

"No. Decades later. After she knew it was terminal." I clear my throat. "To Dora Mayari. Mama, how strange to think I've lived a long and fulfilled life, and I've outlived you by decades, and yet now I write to you from the position of being your elder. Life is precious, and miraculous, but part of what makes an individual life precious is that it is finite."

Lola frowns. "How old was she when she wrote it?"

"Seventy-five."

She has changed her mind. "Drop it in the pass-through."

I slip the paper back into the envelope and then into the drawer set in the divider between us. She takes it and slips it into a pocket on her pants leg. "I won't see you again." She sighs. "Petapaya and I, you know, we're fine. We're going off into the biggest adventure humankind has ever known. I just wish..."

She shakes her head once more. "Never mind. There's no use wishing for something I don't have. But I did dearly want to have adobo again."

"I thought bringing you one head of garlic wouldn't be enough for a batch anyway."

She laughs and then puts her hand over her eyes. "I suppose you couldn't have suspected what I was going to do with it. The tech we have now is far more advanced than what you have on Earth."

"What do you mean?"

"We have the ability to replicate, now, but I needed an example to program it with and to taste-test against." She sighs again. "But you couldn't have known how much further along we are than you."

I pause to think. "But, how can you be ahead of us when we've had forty years and you've only had four?"

She smiles. "You'll figure it out. You're smart. That's all I can say."

I'm still stuck on the adobo. "So, you have chicken, and black pepper, and potatoes, and green beans?"

"And vinegar, and ginger, and soy sauce," she says. "And Petapaya insists it should have fish sauce, too, but we don't have that, so he can only dream." She undoes her strap and floats upward, her hair rising as she drifts. "I won't see you again," she repeats. "We won't be back."

I assume she means in my lifetime, but as I'm making my

way, hand over hand, back to the cargo bay of the transfer ship, I am still mulling over everything she said. We won't be back. You'll figure it out. How they got so advanced.

It's hard to think logically, though, when all I can think of is that, ultimately, it's my fault she'll never taste a proper adobo again.

The Bathala departs, and I suffer through a few hazy weeks of self-flagellation and speculation. I don't dare make adobo: it'll taste like guilt. The government releases bits of news from the datadump, but I don't spare it much attention. I have pinnipeds that need it more.

Then, Dr. Martinez's granddaughter invites me over for dinner. She lives in the same residential multiplex as me. Her name is Mari, and I don't ask if it's short for Marisol. She's maybe ten years younger than me, but we hit it off right away. She gets me to help her with hand-rolling lumpia and explains it's the best thing to make with the latest plant-based meat—once it's deep fried you can't tell the difference from real pork.

"I know I could just do it with chicken," she says, "but the ration's pretty small."

She puts me at ease so much that I can't help but tell her everything, right down to confessing I didn't bring my grandmother's only request. "All my life I was afraid of disappointing her ... and then on my one chance, that's exactly what I did."

Mari is looking at me over a bowl of nutty-flavored, low-irrigation rice. "What did she ask you to bring? If you can tell me?"

"Garlic. Just garlic."

She laughs so hard for a moment I start to think there's something wrong with me or her, or both of us. But no. "That's what Papa asked for, too!"

Petapaya. "And you gave it to him?"

"Yes! Carefully loaded up a silver cigarette case with small cloves."

The relief is so palpable I feel like I'm floating. "My goodness. That's... that's the best news I've heard."

"Clearly he didn't tell her or they wouldn't have both asked for the same thing." Her laugh simmers down to a chuckle. "Did she tell you why they came now?"

"To datadump everything they learned about life in the universe," I say. "Right?"

"Intelligent life," she says. "They're not coming back. Now that they think we can take care of ourselves."

That fits. "Mari, next time, my place." We'll make adobo. We'll take care of ourselves.



CECILIA TAN is an award-winning trailblazer in queer science fiction and fantasy. She founded Circlet Press in 1992 and since then has been widely published in sf/f, literary, and queer fiction circles, including short stories in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Ms. Magazine*, essays in *Uncanny*, *Queers Destroy Science Fiction*, and *Lambda Literary Report*, and novels including the Magic University series, *Slow Surrender*, *The Prince's Boy*, and others, plus several short story collections (*Black Feathers*; *Telepaths Don't Need Safewords: And Other Stories*; *White Flames*; *Edge Plays*; *Bent for Leather*). Tan was inducted into the GLBT Writers Hall of Fame at Saints & Sinners Literary Festival in 2010. Her "day job" is Publications Director for SABR (Society for American Baseball Research) for whom she edits the semi-annual Baseball Research Journal and heads their book publishing program. She identifies as a biracial bigender bisexual.

NIGHT SHIFT COFFEE

MARC A. CRILEY

Drabble: 100 words

Supposedly there's no night or day in space. Yet there is. Primordial circadian rhythms *persist*.

I work night shift engineering. Three hundred souls transiting the stars, maybe ten of us awake right now, not counting insomniacs.

I comm the watch officer, "I'm gonna grab some coffee, want some?"

"Sure, if you're going."

Exiting Engineering, I drift down the night-lit hall. Dark energy engines subliminally thrum, air recyclers whisper.

In the galley I pause to gaze out the cupola at the streaming-star expanse sliding by.

The aroma of fresh-synthed Colombian brings me back. Night shift coffee is still the best coffee.



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*, here, 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 blogs at marccriley.com and acts out on Bluesky as [@MarcC.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/MarcC.bsky.social). Someday he'd like to stroll around the corridors of the starship Enterprise in the wee hours of the morning.

PART EIGHT
OUR ANIMAL
FRIENDS

HAPPINESS IS

RODRIGO CULAGOVSKI

Short Story: 900 words

*One of you will be chosen
to live on our spaceship
and travel the Galaxy with us*

Said the message that popped up on almost every screen on Earth in the locally appropriate language. There was a button labeled *Questionnaire*, which led to questions about logic, ethics, aesthetics, and empathy.

Nobody knows how many people decided it wasn't a scam and completed it, but about one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand of us made it through to the second round. We had to write a short essay based on this prompt:



Describe the most meaningful day of your life.



I THOUGHT FOR A LONG TIME. Most people would probably write about children, school, getting married, parents, death, money, sex.

I wrote about a day walking along the beach, a seashell I found and took home, and how I spent the evening listening to Joy Division with my cat while staring at its spirals.

I came home the next day to find a minor riot on my front lawn. Media jockeys, mid-level celebrities, regular people with their phones out; all waiting for a glimpse of the one person from our city among the thousand chosen to advance to the next round.

I slipped past them. I have the kind of face that even if you're specifically waiting for someone outside their house you still pass her by, waiting for someone who looks more exciting, more glamorous, more like somebody who might be selected by real-to-life goddamn aliens.

Astronomers had located the spaceship by then, parked at Jupiter's L2 point, behind the planet, which is why nobody had noticed it in the year since its arrival. News shows were full of grainy images — a jumble of long, organic-looking tubes crossed together like an unlit pile of twigs waiting to become a campfire, floating in space like a bad special effect from a film student's project. People who still believed in empirical evidence agreed this proved it wasn't a hoax. Those who didn't reached the opposite conclusion.

The third and final round was a single line that you had to complete:



Happiness is _____.

THE SOCIAL AND old-media networks went into full gear. The remaining contestants were interviewed, profiled, and assigned betting odds. There were lists of the answers they claimed to have given. Ninety-two said *Love*; Sixty-one answered *Helping Others*; Thirty-three offered *God*, though this was seen as a risky bet — the aliens hadn't mentioned any kind of religion. Thirteen jokers answered *Happy*.

I looked my name up. An almost complete unknown, the odds against me were, fittingly, astronomical.

I didn't tell anybody what my answer was.

I won.

The earth looks silly from an automatic deep-space shuttle. It's a ball, a marble, a dot. Why have we spent so much history killing each other to control a tiny pinprick of light?

"Name?" said the jumble of sharp-edged platonic solids that introduced itself as Ayx, the winner from the planet we called Gliese 667Cc.

"Gertrudis Daniela Valencia Flisfitch."

"That's kind of a lot, isn't it? Do you have a shorter one?"

I thought for a second and said, "My friends in school called me Gertru."

"Gertru, splendid! And who is this, a family member? Your invitation was for a single human, you know."

I lifted my cat from the floor where he'd been busy chasing the small automata that scurried on its surface. "This is JamJam."

"His genes are above a ninety percent match to yours," said Ayx, looking at one of its polyhedra that had symbols hovering around it.

"Yes, because we're both mammals from Earth. But he's a cat named JamJam, because he looks like he's wearing pajamas."



Ayx made an odd sound and said, "I know. That was me trying — and failing — at human-style humor." It rearranged itself so its top part was lower, extended a tetrahedron to tickle JamJam's chin, and said, "We'll be the best of friends even so, won't we?" JamJam answered with a purr.

Ayx led me down a wide, organic hall that curved gently vertically and horizontally. We met at least a dozen other sentients on the way, each one of a different species.

Ayx stopped in front of a glyph of a simplified human and cat figure that glowed on the wall. "This is your chamber, esteemed Gertru and JamJam. Please let me know if you need anything." Ayx's body rippled in something that looked like a human bow. I bowed back and went through the egg-shaped hole that had irised open on the hall's surface.

The room was paneled in a wood-lava composite, with

flowing lines and sleeping and sitting areas in the walls like holes in cheese. One wall had a large, asymmetrical window, with a padded ledge running along its bottom. I settled myself on it with JamJam on my lap.

Jupiter was below us—the colored bands, the red spot, the moons, its faint rings, and the perfect, empty void around it.

Ayx had given me a scroll of something almost like paper. I unrolled it and smiled.

It was a diploma, stating that I had won the contest and was entitled to live and travel with them with “full honors, rights, and responsibilities.”

In the center, in a carefully humanlike, flowing script was my winning answer:



*Happiness is me, my cat,
and an unforgettable view.*



I SCRATCHED JamJam under his ears. We stared out the window while the ship got ready to leave the Solar System.



RODRIGO CULAGOVSKI is a Chilean architect, designer, and web developer. He has published in *Nature*, *Levar Burton Reads*, *Future Science Fiction Digest*, *khōréō* among others. On mastodon as @culagovski@wandering.shop. He misses his Commodore 64. Pronouns he/him/él. SFWA | Codex | ALCiFF

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.”

SOLDIER ON

PETER DUCHAK II

Short story: 1,335 words

Dean whistled as he walked towards the bridge. And why shouldn't he? It was a perfect evening. Warm, slightly overcast, a nice breeze, and the sun was setting, the perfect conditions for a walk as far as he was concerned. Also, he'd finally made the decision. The one he'd been struggling with for years now.

He'd been in the service for 20 years before he was unceremoniously kicked to the curb. The military was better than it used to be about mental health, but there was still plenty of room for improvement.

That wasn't for him to worry about. He'd made his decision. On today, his 40th birthday no less. He considered it a nice round number. 40 years exactly. Come in and go out at the same time. Go to the bridge, admire the sunset and take a step forward. Nice and easy. The thought of everything being taken care of with a nice bow on top made him smile.

Then he heard it. From the bushes along the side of the road he was walking down. A soft mewling sound.

He paused, looking down the road. He could see the bridge. Less than 5 minutes of walking and he'd be there. If he dallied though, he'd miss the sunset. That wouldn't do at all. He took another step forward.

From the bush, another soft mewl. It sounded almost familiar. He knew the tone. Pain. So many of his friends overseas had made that sound. He didn't want to dwell on it. But ... the idea of walking off felt like a betrayal for everyone he'd left behind.

He sighed and glanced at the sunset, as if to say, "What can you do?" He'd figure something else out, he was sure. He turned to the bush and walked over. Reaching out, he slowly moved the foliage aside, getting another pained mewl in response.

Under the bush was the scraggiest scrawny little kitten he'd ever seen. The poor thing had a big chunk out of its left ear, its right eye was swollen shut, and it seemed like it had a decent sized gash on the side of its neck. "Well, aren't you just about the sorriest little thing I've ever seen?" He said, his tone sweet so as not to upset the poor kitten.

Taking off his hoodie, he reached down and slowly, ever so gently picked up the little cat and wrapped it up. "Why don't we take you to the vet?" He turned and began walking back to his home. He glanced back over his shoulder at the bridge and the setting sun and sighed.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said, frowning as he did so. The symmetry would be off. It wasn't his birthday tomorrow. He sighed. He supposed he could do it without symmetry, or figure something else out.



"THIS LITTLE GUY is lucky you found him when you did." The veterinarian stated matter of factly, patting the sedated kitten gently on its head.

Dean looked down at it. Its shoulder and neck were shaved, with stitches running up half its body. The ear had a Band-Aid on it, and a bandage was wrapped around its head covering the eye.

"He's malnourished, so you're going to need to hand feed him, often. My assistant will show you how to use the syringe." The vet said, wiping his hands on a towel, already walking towards the door.

"Wait, me? This isn't my kitten." Dean stuttered out. "I'm not equipped to care for something like this."

"Don't worry, my assistant will show you, like I said." The vet called back, already walking down the hallway to his next appointment.

Dean looked at the kitten, exasperated. "You are turning into far more trouble than I thought."

Sure enough, the vet tech showed him, in meticulous detail, the proper way to feed the kitten. When she asked him what he was going to name it, he drew a blank.

"Uhhh ... soldier?" He said, blabbing out the first thing that came to his mind.

"Oh, that's a good name for this one. He's a fighter. You can tell." She replied, smiling happily as the kitten hungrily licked at the milk she was currently syringing into its mouth. "I've seen animals come in here less beat up than this guy and not make it, and yet here he is, ready to go."

All Dean could do was nod as she handed him the kitten and a baggy filled with medicine and extra syringes.



DEAN PUSHED his way into his house, his arms laden with bags from the pet store.

Immediately, a small furry creature zoomed out of the hallway, pouncing on his foot. He looked down at Soldier ruefully. "You," He said, deadpan, "are supposed to be on bedrest, sir."

The kitten backed up, an almost ashamed look on his one-eyed face.

Dean shut the door behind him and carried the bags into the living room. "You know, for a temporary house guest, you just set me back \$700 on supplies. And that doesn't even take the vet bill into account."

The cat mewled at him plaintively, as if to apologize.

"Don't you worry. I've got some lines out. I'll find you a more permanent residence and then..." He trailed off, staring out the window down towards the bridge. Once this loose end was tied up ... well, he'd already made that decision, best not to dwell on it.

He busied himself setting up the cat tree, cat bed, and arranging the toys out for Soldier, as the kitten mewled at him, sometimes as if to complain about the placement of an object, others as if to affirm the location was to his liking.

Dean awoke with a start, his breath coming in short gasps, but no air seemed to reach his lungs. The images of his friends ... he couldn't get them out of his head. The noise of the explosions of the IED going off ringing in his ears. He'd been out over a year, and he still heard them, and nights like tonight, with the dreams?

He couldn't catch his breath. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to shut out the visions. He yelled, punching the bed, trying to drown out the sounds of the gunfire and the screaming. He was drowning in the memories; his adrenaline was up.

He needed to get out. To fight, or to hide. His hair stood on end as he frantically tried to fight the panic that threatened to send him spiraling.

Then, through the cacophony of his mind a noise broke through. A gentle mewl, accompanied by purring. Soldier gently laid himself down on Dean's chest, and gently began kneading his stomach. The sharp claws were little pinpricks against his skin, but he found the sensation almost soothing. He managed to slow his breathing, matching the rhythm of the cat's purring. In and out. In and out. Slowly, but surely he managed to recover control, the little kitten never leaving him the entire time, purring and kneading without a care in the world, no fear on his tiny face.

Once he was fully in control, with tears in his eyes, he looked at Soldier. "Thank you."

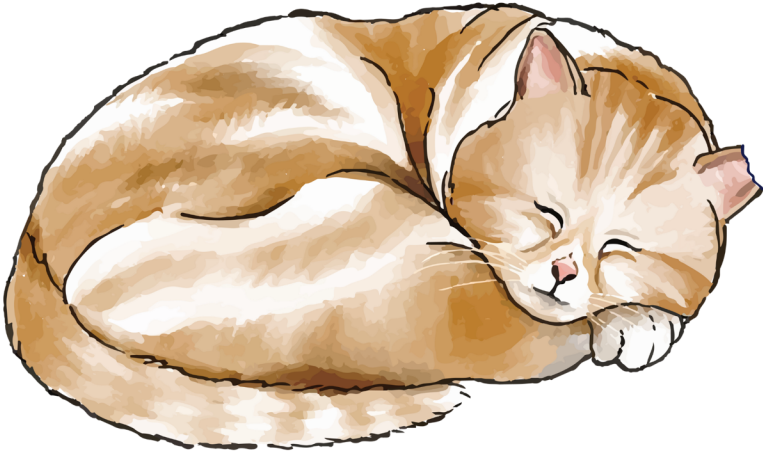


THE NEXT MORNING, Dean sat at the table, toast and coffee ready for breakfast. He watched Soldier chasing a small vibrating mouse toy, the loss of an eye not affecting his hunting skills as far as he could tell, when his phone rang.

"Hey sis," he said, answering it.

"Hi Dean. I got your text. The kids would love a kitten if you need someone to take care of it. We'd be glad to take him off your hands."

Dean looked down at the kitten, still playing obliviously. He stood up and walked to the window, looking down at the bridge. He pulled the shutters closed, blocking his view, and smiled. "You know, I think I'm growing attached to the scrawny thing, but I'd love for you and the rugrats to come visit him."



PETER DUCHAK II is a retired veteran. He now hopes that through his writing he can help reach others struggling with mental health. Peter currently resides in Pennsylvania with his wife, their 3 kids and a hoard of animals.

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT DRAGONS

ADRIA BAILTON

Story: 1,121 words

I am a little dragon. My fire has not yet come in and my wings are tiny. In fact, you may mistake me for a large dragonfly or small hummingbird, and marvel at my purple iridescent coloring. Except I have four legs of girth and not slight, spindly things. I tuck them up underneath when I fly. And I cannot change my form yet.

How big will I get? As large as a suburban house if I can find a home that lets me grow that big. Which makes it hard these days since dragons the size of your human home can be difficult to hide.

Oh, yes, we hide.

What sort of home would I like? Ah, there's the rub. When you read your stories of dragons, you read about eyries and caves carved into or under mountains. For where else can one imagine a dragon living and hiding and hoarding? I am here to clear up some of those myths. Not the myths of us as gods, for

of course those are all true. I mostly want to clear up the inaccuracies humans believe from less reliable sources.

While you think of places I might fly that no one can reach or massive caverns underneath mountains, I do not have to live in such cold, dark, or dank places. Most dragons don't.

Until my fire comes in, I prefer wood homes. Most dragons of my size do. We'll live in nests high in trees or in their hollowed-out trunks. Trees are dry, insulated places, and the hollows provide places to store our goodies. Then I can zip around those suburban neighborhoods, eating flowers and insects and the vegetables out of your garden.

Yes, there are dragons who hoard shiny things. We are a bit like corvids in that respect. But generally, we gift our treasures to those we admire. Shinies come in useful for trade.

Who do we like to live with? Dragons are community creatures. We don't like isolation, except a small group of old, grumpy beasts. One storyteller waxed on about old – well, you probably know. Once that story was amongst the human population, it became canon and the only way of dragons. Painting an entire species in the broad stroke of one cranky monster is hardly accurate. We aren't territorial. We might fight over a shiny object at first, but then whoever claims it, it's theirs. Until they gift it.

How fast do we grow? We grow slowly. I'll spend more than a decade in my tree, maturing with your young ones. A few summers ago, I attached myself to a family three doors down. Their small girl tells her parents stories about the dragon she sees. They indulge her but they don't believe her. She leaves me gifts. Sometimes, she leaves me parts of her dinner.

Our ability to take new forms comes to us at different times. The luckiest dragons will morph from birth, or when they reach the size of a small dog for others with good fortune.

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT DRAGONS

Many dragons live in human homes as dogs. They find themselves a rescue. They'll be labeled, "does not get along with other dogs." It isn't that we don't like dogs, it's that they rarely tolerate us.



My friend, Sparky, managed to find a home with another dragon-disguised-as-dog. Unfortunately, he was only able to spend a couple years before they were ready for their next growth spurt. It's hard on both the dragon and the families when we spend our time in that form. The decade between growth spurts is often too short before we move on, and we break their hearts. Unfortunately, the family did not find another dragon friend. Instead, they got an actual dog. Maybe

because she was young when they were introduced, she grew used to him and even loves to snuggle up to his warmth.

He's thinking he might move on soon. He's ready to shed his doggy skin and resume his dragon life. If he does, we might find a place that fits both of us. I'll still be small – the size of a bat. He'll be the size of a medium-to-large dog. He could always change dog forms, but he misses being a dragon and flying everywhere. His fire is coming in soon. His belly grows warmer like a furnace. We can't stay as human companions once our fire comes in.

Sparky and I might move out to the country and find a barn. Those are colder. But if he has fire, or mine comes in, we'll be warm. And dry. I'm not a fan of the wet. That's why I'll never live in a cave. That's why most dragons do not live in caves. We need to stretch our wings which requires caves near the surface of the earth, those most recently hollowed out by water dissolving the rock. The water sticks around.

Some love water! Have you heard of water dragons? They live in lakes and streams and sometimes find human homes. They hide their wings with a trick of the light. Their horns become gills and their tails, dorsal fins. But they are rare, both in the wild and with humans.

It takes hundreds of years for dragons to grow from my size to full size, provided we find housing that allows our ever-increasing stature. If we do not allow for sufficient growth, then we can get stuck. Not all tiny dragons flying around are young.

Would you know if you saw one? Sometimes you think an airplane is flying overhead, but it's really a dragon. Those old, big dragons live wherever they please. Humans are usually less fond of us at that size, so we pick remote areas. We build our homes out of rock or wood to keep us dry or lay out in the sun.

I'm currently living in the American Pacific Northwest. It's

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT DRAGONS

not the best place for a dragon who does not like rain. But I am attached to that family and their fledgling. I've debated migrating down to the American Southwest or south of the Large River. I've heard Saguaro cacti are a great dragon home when you're small like me. And there's little rain.

I don't know if I'm a desert dragon, though. My eyes are drawn to the peaks of the mountain ranges near me. I dream of being a big dragon and appearing as a large boulder to passersby. I dream of flying into the calderas of the local volcanoes to ignite my fire. My dreams keep me here, in my unlikely home of a hollowed-out tree, near my dragon friend living as a dog, and a little girl who loves me and leaves me shiny things.



ADRIA BAILTON (SHE/THEY) imagines entire worlds and universes to share while spending her days studying atoms, the smallest unit of matter. Links to more of her short stories and her debut YA science fiction novel can be found at adriabailton.com

JENN REESE (THEY/SHE) is the award-winning author of the middle grade novels *Puzzleheart*, *Every Bird a Prince*, *A Game of Fox & Squirrels*, and the *Above World* trilogy. They are also an artist/illustrator and write short stories and essays for all ages. Jenn lives in Portland, Oregon where they play video games, binge-watch TV shows, and talk to the birds.

A DAY AT THE BEACH

LENA NG

Short story: 416 words

“Katie,” Jessica, my wife, called out, “*now* are you ready to go?”

Since it was her third time asking, and since I’d managed to squeeze myself into last year’s one-piece, I didn’t bother to answer. She’s more into beach volleyball, whereas I’m more into video volleyball, but like I’ve said before, opposites attract. I’m more of homebody who’d rather hang out with our orange cat, Philip, who we met during a bike race in space. He’s pretty chill when he’s not being competitive, though he loses his temper when I beat him at Mario Kart. But since inflation ate up our budget to Venus, and since she came with me last weekend to the Museum of Medical Oddities, which I know gave her the icks, I agreed to spend a nice, boring afternoon at the beach.



So we packed up our things and kissed Philip good-bye. He didn't even put down the controller as he waved us off.

Jessica went to play beach volleyball while I set up a folding chair and dug into my book. It was a ridiculous romance between a parrot and an octopus. Don't ask me how I got into this series — such crazy things get self-published these days — but once I got started, I couldn't put it down.

Jessica waved me over to play even though I suck at volleyball and she knows it. Naturally, I wildly smacked the ball right into the ocean. I was going to wade out and get it, but a long tentacled arm reached up and flung the ball back to us. A large head, for an octopus at least, poked out of the water, and asked

in a squeaky voice, “Can I play?” which was surprising since you’d think an octopus would be a bass, not a tenor.



So we took turns, the octopus alternating on each team. I lent her a sweat band which she really appreciated. There was a lot of high-fiving, which was unexpected, considering the number of tentacles. Jessica had a great time, since she likes a challenge, and I had a great time, since I love anything weird. We played until we were tired. The octopus, having eight arms and thus more stamina, still wanted to play, but we promised to come back another time. No parrots flew by to check us out, if you think I’m making this up.

A DAY AT THE BEACH

After we had called it quits, we packed up and went home to feed the cat, not to mention to have a long nap.



LENA NG ROAMS the dimensions of Toronto, Canada, and is a monster-hunting member of the Horror Writers Association. She has curiosities published in weighty tomes including *Amazing Stories* and Flame Tree's *Asian Ghost Stories* and *Weird Horror Stories*. *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."

TWO VIEWS OF AN UNEXPECTED FLIGHT

MARC A. CRILEY

Drabble: 100 words

I.

Without warning my perfectly uneventful descent becomes a turbulent nightmare. I lock all my legs onto the silk, clinging for dear life as I'm flung through the air, careening headlong towards thick jungle.

The turbulence eases and I spy a shiny leaf. I jump for it and cut the silk strand, which drifts away.

Where am I?

II.

"I wonder if it knows what I did?"

"Why, what did you do?"

"I snapped the strand and flew it to one of the rubber plants."

TWO VIEWS OF AN UNEXPECTED FLIGHT

“Flew what?”

“The tiny little spider that was hanging from the kitchen ceiling. Soooo cute!”



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*, here, 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 blogs at marccriley.com and acts out on Bluesky as @Mar-

cC.bsky.social. Aren't those tiny little spiders just the cutest things?

AN UNEXPECTED WOMBAT

NICO MARTINEZ NOCITO

Short story: 540 words

I hold absolutely still, motionlessness morphing into illusion. When I finally stir, I become my mind's self, standing knee-deep in snowflakes containing my memories.

They float through my fingers: a favorite birthday, first kiss, botched driving test. My recollections are in disarray again, jumbled by frantic nightmares about the guidance counselors reading my deadname at graduation to the soundtrack of Nyra's keening ghost, and I cast an irritated look around the inside of my own mind. I cleaned this mess up just last week.

I wade through the chaos to retrieve my favorite broom, the one that my wombat chewed apart in the real world but which will live forever in my memory as the first person, item, or concept to whom I came out. I let myself pause briefly to polish the purple varnished handle, and my lips twitch into a smile as I spot my reflection. Here, in my mind, I've always looked like me.

Something nips the back of my ankle. I spin around, brandishing my trusty broom to strike down this unwanted mental denizen before it tries to eat my shoes.

The only sign of it is a wave of motion running through the drifts of memories.

I heave a sigh, heft the broom over my shoulder, and take off after the stir.

This is what happens without Nyra. It's been a year since the little wombat moved on, but I still miss the sweet heft of her in my arms, and her inexhaustible ability to order my ever-shifting memories. I found her cradled among the snowflakes when I was six years old, and I'm not used to having to take care of my own mental housekeeping without her.

Then again, whatever creature I glimpsed today is surely to blame for my chaotic recollections, and tracking down an unwanted pest sounds far better than dissecting my latest string of nightmares for psychology class.

I spot movement to my left, atop a teetering stack of delicate tea dishes, and I pounce. The pile goes sprawling; I launch myself over it and slam a teacup over the flash of fur attempting to worm its way through the snowflakes.

My mind goes abruptly still, and I exhale, leaning on my broom to regain my composure. When I decide I've recovered enough to face whatever's beneath the cup, I tilt one edge up.

My breath catches.

A tiny wombat peers up at me, their large eyes reflecting the purple sheen of my broom.

They look so much like Nyra.

"Hey," I whisper, extending one hand. I expect the critter to dash off again, but instead they poke out their nose and briefly touch one finger. Then they clamber up onto my palm.

They're so tiny — just a thought, the way all mental crea-

AN UNEXPECTED WOMBAT

tures begin. I hug them to me, feeling the soft beat of their heart against mine.

“Do you want to come with me?” I ask.

The gentle blanket of comfort that settles around my shoulders is all the reassurance I need.

One by one, I return the recollections to their red buckets and wheelbarrows and prismatic jars. Then I blow them all a kiss and step back into the real world, the unexpected wombat cradled in my arms.



Wombat by Gonzalo Alvarez

. . .

NICO MARTINEZ NOCITO (they/them) writes speculative fiction and poetry with a queer, feminist bent. Their work has been nominated for the Rhysling Award and published by *Strange Horizons*, *Heartlines Spec*, and *Apex Magazine*. Learn more about Nico and their writing on Bluesky and Instagram @nicowrites-books, or on their website, nicomartineznocito.com.

GONZALO ALVAREZ is a first-gen Chicano Illustrator, Writer, and Designer from Port Arthur, TX creating Aztec fantasy. He completed a BFA in Drawing at Lamar University in 2017 where *Borders* debuted, a video game about his parents' immigration story which received international acclaim. Since graduating, he's been creating his Aztec fantasy graphic novel *Polloman* to be published by Harper Collins in 2026. He founded Studio Tecuanis in 2022, a studio dedicated to creating Aztec projects, and released *NAWALLI: The Aztec Card Game* in 2023. He has exhibited and conducted panels internationally at Indiecade E3 2017, Worldcon76, Festival Vértice UNAM, and more.

MAN'S BEST FIEND

CAIAS WARD

Short story: 825 words

"Who is the cutest little puppy? Who is? You are!" Miles reached up and scritchd the puppy under his neck; the puppy yelped with glee. His fur was lush, basalt with soot spots. His eyes were the embers of the Pit, his teeth blackened daggers in a fiery mouth, and his body a harbinger of torment.

"That's not a puppy," Emily said with a sigh. "How did it get here?"

The puppy bounced about, unaware of its fearsome form, clueless that it was out of place in the suburban Pennsylvania backyard.

"Of course he's is a puppy," Miles said, beckoning the beast to come lower. It snorted, a haboob almost bowling Miles and Emily over with grit and heat. Their wooden deck creaked under the beast's massive weight. "I found him lost and scared in the park when I went for my jog."

"The park by the chthonic rift?"

"Yeah, not far from the churro cart."

"Miles, no..."

"But he's a puppy!" Miles said.

"You promised me a baby before any pets, husband," Emily said.

"I know, but he's lost, and—"

Emily held up her finger. She ran back into the house, then came out shortly after with a massive, ancient tome she struggled to keep under one arm. Propping it up on the patio table, she flipped to a page and pointed.

"Devourer from Below," Emily drew her finger across the title of the page and pointed to the picture, which looked exactly like the beast.

"Puppy," Miles insisted.

"Consumes souls," Emily read aloud from the book.

"Lord Cuddles needs lots of good food," Miles said, scruffing the beast.

The beast looked at the page with a snort and snarl, then jumped to the backyard grass, growing larger, more menacing, as he landed. Miles chased after him.

"Lord Cuddles?" Emily yelled over the snarling.

"Lord Cuddles Wigglebottom the Fourth will be his full name," Miles said as he ran to the beast, "but we don't stand on formality in this house."

Lord Cuddles barked, shaking all the windows in the neighborhood.

Emily carried the book down from the patio deck to the grass, holding the tome in two hands as she read aloud. With each word, the beast grew in size and menace, a shadow cast over the subdivision like a death shroud. Emily held the book up again, shaking it at Miles.

"I know exactly what he is," Miles stage-whispered to

Emily, pushing down her copy of *The Categorization of the Fell from Below* as he hugged Lord Cuddles. "But if you recall from Hooke's *Conjurations*, such wonderful *puppies*," he looked Lord Cuddles in the eye, "imprint on their masters and take their missions and behaviors from them."

"So, if we treat him like a cuddly little puppy..."

"The cuddly little puppy he is," Miles said, rolling around on the grass with the great beast from the Pit, "he will imprint as such and we don't get E-A-T-E-N."

The great beast paused, unsure of the spelled-out word, but then continued with its playful nonsense. Miles tumbled several feet off the beast, landing roughly but catching himself.

"We should banish it," Emily said.

The beast whimpered and jumped about, clearly upset at the thought.

"I'mma not giving up Lord Cuddles like I had to give up John Dee," Miles said.

"Miles, I know your mom got rid of your dog—"

"John Dee was a puppy! I was still training him! He was still learning how to let us know he needed to go potty!"

As Miles shook with sorrow and anger, so did the beast; rippling with pain, swelling with resentment, spiked with the suffering of a twenty-year-old loss. It howled into the early evening, its cries the screams of a hundred orphaned children ripping through the suburban skyline of split-level houses. Emily stepped back, putting her hand on the protective charm around her neck, dropping the tome.

Miles hugged the gargantuan pillar of the beast's leg, sobbing.

"I'll never let anyone banish you, Lord Cuddles. Not like my mom made me give away John Dee. Not the Hexogrim Consortium, or the Church of the Everlasting. You're a good dog, and you'll love me and I'll love you."

Lord Cuddles ceased his howl, the air still but for Miles's sobbing and the bristle of fiendish fur. He brought his head down to Miles as he whimpered, nuzzling his new master, licking away decades of pain with a tongue of flickering fire which did not burn. Miles held his puppy, and Lord Cuddles grew smaller and smaller, and soon it was Miles with his puppy, delayed twenty years.

Emily walked closer, reaching out carefully to stoke the basalt and soot fur.

"He is a good dog," Emily said. "And he better be good with babies."

"I'm sure he will," Miles said, bouncing his puppy up and down.

Lord Cuddles barked the bark of a good dog.



CAIAS WARD is a thick-wristed union HVAC technician with over forty publication credits. A member of SFWA and Codex Writers, he currently lives with his wife and daughter in New Jersey, where he enjoys terrible movies and agitating for labor.

A SUNDAY AT THE PARK

LENA NG

Short story: 766 words

“Katie and Philip,” Jessica, my wife, called out, “we need to get out for some fresh air.” She pulled open the curtains and I squinted in the early afternoon sunlight like a vampire.

I exchanged a knowing look with Philip, our cat whom we met on a bike race in space. I would acknowledge Jessica was right, since we had been playing Mario Kart for a good six hours and Philip had already flipped the table once. He can be a jerk when he loses. Philip and I are both stay-at-homes, while Jessica is an outdoor-type, but since we went to the spider exhibit last week which I know gave her the squicks, I put down the controller and tied up my sneakers.

I helped Philip put on his purple crocheted vest which went really nicely with his orange fur. I had managed to finish it in time for Christmas and he loved it right away, almost as much as the cardboard box that it came in. I wasn’t offended

since the box was part of the gift. He didn't need to put on his sneakers since it wasn't too muddy.

Outside, the sun was shining and the sky was blue. The birds were chirping, but we barely had time to enjoy it since Jessica powerwalked on the sidewalk to the park. She liked exercise whereas I liked the thought of exercise, but we were good for each other. Otherwise, I'd be playing video games all day and she wouldn't understand the joy of spiders.

Philip sauntered beside us, stopping occasionally for a good sniff of the grass and chewing on the occasional stem. The squirrels seemed to admire his purple vest as well.

We followed a waddling white goose to the central pond. As we approached the pond's edge, several turtles swam closer and blinked their round eyes at us expectantly. I didn't have any turtle treats with me so after a few moments they submerged and swam off.



Philip picked up a rock, and with a graceful motion of his paw, skipped it across the ponds' surface. There was a ripple in the water that started out small, but ringed out larger and larger. A large bubble formed and burst. A big green reptilian head poked its head out of the water and stared. It was the largest turtle I had ever seen. It lumbered its way out of the pond. It must have been the size of a hatchback, one of the roomier ones, not a small one.

Jessica, Philip, and I hesitated at the sight of it. Was this the time to run? Turtles are pretty slow though. I'm pretty sure it couldn't catch up to us if we walked at a brisk pace.

To my surprise, it cleared its throat and said "All Aboard" and popped open its shell. Inside were four seats, arranged two

by two. Jessica and I looked at each other. As the more adventurous one, she got in first. We sat in the two front seats while Philip stretched himself along the two back seats.

The turtle closed the shell lid. Some of its scutes were transparent so we could see out of sections of its shell like car windows. The turtle mobile took us on an underwater tour of the pond. Three carp followed alongside before veering into the vegetation. A small dance troop of trout practiced their ballroom routines, their scales shining in the underwater sunlight. They waved at us with their fins. Even Janice appeared, an octopus we had met playing beach volley ball, and gave us an eight-tentacled hello. It was strange since she lived in the ocean, but maybe she was on a weekend getaway at the pond.

The turtle narrated overhead the many points of interest. After we saw the significant landmarks — the sunken dragon boat was especially interesting — we headed back to the pond's edge. It popped open its shell and we got out. Jessica and I repaid it with some head scratches. We knew it liked this by the way it stretched its neck out. It waved both of its front legs at us before heading back into the water.

Philip was tuckered out since this was a long day for a cat. Jessica and I took turns carrying him back home. She had him slung over her shoulder which he didn't seem to mind. After we got home, Philip flopped onto his bed and started snoring. I made the tea and Jessica put out the biscuits, and we settled down on the couch for an afternoon snack.



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A SUNDAY AT THE PARK

Amazing Stories and Flame Tree's *Asian Ghost Stories* and *Weird Horror Stories*. *Under an Autumn Moon* is her short story collection.

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PART NINE
ENDINGS AND
BEGINNINGS

THE DOOR OPENS

ALI TROTTA

Short story: 3,540 words

It starts with an offering. Heartbreak and grief, something lost. And in that loss, there is a longing so fierce that feels like its own gravity. A pull you *could* maybe resist, but why would you want to? In that fervor, you reach for something *other*, something ancient, something that's *listening*.

A bit of food. Or wine. Or blood.

All three? Why not.

A lit candle.

When it's over, the candle flickers out, even though there is no breeze. You shiver, even though it is in the thick of August and the humidity feels solid enough to touch.

Somewhere, you hear a tendril of laughter. The echo of footsteps in an otherwise empty apartment.

But you're alone.

Or so you think.

Perhaps you imagined it.
Perhaps it was the ghost of a memory.
Perhaps it was a ghost.



THE NEXT MORNING, you find an ad on the internet for an old Victorian house, for *free*, with certain provisions.

1. You must move in immediately.

(Your significant other moved back in with their spouse — while you were left wildly unaware they were attached — so you have been struggling to make rent. Seems timely.)

2. You must be a gracious host.

(You don't *love* people. Or the idea of working in the hospitality industry, because it *is* full of people. But circumstances are what they are.)

3. You cannot sell the house. If you decide you do not want it, it must be given away. Nothing taken, nothing gained.

(Less than ideal for someone short on cash, but again: *circumstances* are what they are.)

It seems like an elegant, if impossibly bizarre, solution. But if you find a life raft when you are drowning, you don't really question it too much. Or at all.



THE DOOR OPENS

AFTER YOU ANSWER THE AD — via email — you receive a message that a contract is forthcoming. It arrives in your apartment mailbox the very next hour. Excitement humming through you like a flash of lightning, you sign it, barely paying the details any mind. You turn your back, and it vanishes from the table. In its place is a note with an address and the instruction to arrive at your earliest convenience.

You pack light. Clothing and some essentials, nothing sentimental. No photos, no knickknacks. Certainly *not* the stuffed animal from that weekend up in Vermont. The cute little moose that you can no longer bear to look at. You take nothing that might remind you of the way your heart feels like shattered glass. Nothing to remind you of the way grief is an ocean and you are merely a piece of agonized driftwood.

Love aches in your heart, keening. You can still hear *goodbye* echoing through every bone in your body, feel the way you collapsed on the floor as the door shut.

You don't want to take any of *that* with you.



THE HOUSE IS BEAUTIFUL. Victorian, with a front porch. A perfectly manicured garden surrounding it. You realize you don't have a key, but the door opens as you approach. You glimpse polished wood floors, an eclectic smattering of furniture, and not a single picture hanging on the wall — at least, none that you can see.

You step inside and look around. There's work to be done to make this house a home — to make it feel *lived* in. The mantel is bare. There is dust on every surface. A pile of newspapers has been stacked almost too neatly next to the fireplace — the way some people stage houses before they are sold.

For now, you simply take a breath. The air doesn't smell musty or stagnant, despite the dust. Instead, the scent of lilacs greets you — and something deep within you that was knotted and aching loosens, just a little.

Just *enough*.

That night, you sit at the old mahogany table in the dining room, scribbling down lists of the things you need to do. Repairs and dusting and organizing — ordinary tasks. It helps, you know, to keep busy. To have *purpose*.

It's been a long while since you felt useful, instead of drowning in a hurricane of chaos, wandering through your own life, flitting from job to job. It wasn't *always* like that. But the demise of your relationship — the *truth* of it — shattered something inside you. You couldn't make a pretty mosaic out of it, no matter how hard you tried. It was something that refused to be put back together, despite all your best efforts. You tried dating other people. Threw yourself into it, determined to be open. But you keep looking for the thing you already had, heart always searching for something that seemed to be *just* out of reach. Despite the pain that had been gifted you because of it.

You fall asleep at the table, pencil still in your hand.

A breeze at the back of your neck wakes you, and you stir slowly. There's a window open. Was it open the night before? Surely, it must have been. You must have left it open after cleaning it. You just didn't notice. You were tired, after all.



IN THE LIGHT OF DAY, everything seems normal. You tidy up, removing a thick layer of dust from every dustable surface. You know *dustable* isn't a word, but it should be. Still: you spend the

day doing work that not only keeps you busy, but leaves you feeling accomplished. Cleaning gives you a sense of control, too. If you can make a space neat, it can be managed. There's safety in that. Because you don't want to rely on anyone, not again. There's been too much heartbreak. Too many misaligned dreams. Too much love given to the wrong person. In your darkest moments, you wonder if that's your fault too. That somehow you chose badly. That maybe you're just a beacon for agony, a lighthouse for emotional abuse.

It's never physical. There are never any bruises. But the scars on your soul are a different sort of roadmap, a constellation of many hard-earned stars. Things you never wanted. Things you have a hard time explaining, if you ever try to.

It's three in the afternoon by the time you allow yourself a moment to sit down. You think you might fall asleep, right there, on the green velvet sofa. You think you might disappear into the cushions, slip into oblivion. There's a part of you that wants that, you know. But you don't say it aloud.

In the middle of your macabre daydreaming, there's a knock at the door.



AS YOU GRASP the beautifully etched brass doorknob, you wonder if you should've maybe, *possibly* looked through the peephole first. But now you're mid-swing, and it's too late. In front of you stands a tall, skinny man in a well-tailored suit. His eyes are caught somewhere between green and grey, and they light up kindly as he takes you in. Beside him are two things: an old-fashioned suitcase and a black cat with green eyes. The cat watches you intently, but does not move or meow.

"H-hi," you stammer out before swallowing. "Can I help you?"

The man smiles. Goosebumps crawl across your skin and you shiver. You don't even know why. His face is pleasant enough. He holds out his hand, expectantly, and you shake it. His skin is cold, but so is yours. There are exactly four days a year in which you're just the right temperature, and those days are never in a row.

"I'm here for the weekend," he replies. "Standing reservation."

Right. You have agreed to be a good host. It's not that you forgot. You just didn't think it would happen so *fast*. You give a warm, but uncertain smile.

"I won't be any trouble, rest assured. But I can't say the same for Kincaid here. He's absolutely *incorrigible*," he shrugs. "You know cats. Trickster demons on a good day."

His laugh is soft, conspiratorial. You laugh, too, stepping backward. "Won't you come in? I'll see about getting you settled in."

He steps past you, the cat right on his heels, without prompting or instruction.

"Don't you worry. I'm in room thirteen. Always am. I'll grab the key on the way up," he replies, waving a hand. His back is to you, and then he's disappearing up the ornate staircase, Kincaid matching his pace.

You could've sworn there were only twelve rooms in the sprawling house. You'd counted them, one by one, as you arranged pillows and tidied up. But perhaps you were tired. Perhaps it simply slipped your mind. It could easily be an honest mistake.



THE DOOR OPENS



BEFORE NIGHT FALLS, you answer eleven more knocks, admitting various guests each time you open the front door. Each brings a pet with them; the last is a small mouse with the distinguished name of Mr. Linus. The mouse has a curiously alert expression, as if he might start speaking at any moment. He does not, though. At least, not where you can hear him.

You wonder what to do about dinner. Surely, you are expected to feed these assorted guests. But you hardly had the time to go grocery shopping, let alone begin meal prep or cooking. They showed up so unexpectedly. You barely got the house clean in time.

You step into the large, well-windowed kitchen, the golden rays of the afternoon light illuminating the entire room — including an expertly assembled meal with several courses. The kitchen smells of pot roast and potatoes. Someone — who? — had even decanted several bottles of wine, which is helpful, because you've never decanted wine in your life. In fact, you've been known to drink it straight from the bottle on more than one occasion.

After you're done puzzling at the assembly, you straighten your shoulders and begin to carry the dishes in the direction of the dining room. When you enter, it has been set for a service of thirteen. There is a candle at each seat, the light dancing across the wallpaper, which you only glanced at while you were cleaning. But now, as you set the food down on the buffet, you take a closer look.

It's a repeating pattern of animals — curiously, one of each kind currently occupying the house. There is a symbol in tandem with every one, something that's almost familiar, but not something you know intimately enough to name. Norse runes, perhaps? You shake your head, walking back into the kitchen, grabbing dish after dish until they're all set on the

table. When you bring in the last decanter of wine, you find everyone is now seated at the table — with an almost glaring open space clearly meant for you.

Tentatively, you smile, but you don't look at anyone directly. Your pulse thrums anxiously throughout your body, but lower yourself into the empty chair, taking a sip of wine. It tastes like summer — deeply tantalizing, like cherries and mischief. It warms you as you take another swallow. Finally, the wine makes you start feeling brave enough to glance around the room, where everyone is happily chattering.

“New here?” the tall gentleman belonging to the cat asks. His expression is feline, conspiratorial.

“Is it that obvious?” you say, feeling only *slightly* self-conscious. You're moderately worried someone might look at you too closely and find you wanting.

He places a reassuring hand over yours — still cold as before.

“We're all very pleased you're here. It's so nice to have fresh blood.” His smile is not unkind, but it's all teeth. A tendril of fear makes your heart beat a little faster. You don't know why. But you withdraw your hand, and he laughs. Amused, jovial.

“We don't bite. Though I can't speak for Kincaid. He's quite a devil. If you look at him sideways, he may take personal offense.”

You take a bite of your pot roast. It's utterly perfect. The sound that comes out of you is half-sigh, half-pleasure.

“Never look a ghost meal in the face, eh?” He quips.

“A what?”

The tall man frowns. “Wait, that's not the phrase, is it? Forgive me. English isn't my first language.”

It's then that you notice it, the faint lilt in the cadence of his voice. The softness of his vowels, the sharp edges of his

guttural fricatives. Familiar, but you can't place it. Like the runes on the wallpaper. Like the tangible pieces of a dream that slip away the more you try to remember. You look at him, indirectly, as if trying to bring him into focus, but *something* about him blurs, skittering just out of reach. The silence fills up around you, almost like the roar of the ocean.

"What, uh, brings you all here?" you ask, equal parts nerves and curiosity.

Everyone stops moving. Twenty-four pairs of eyes stare intently at you, expressions varying from amused to mildly irritated.

"My dear, you don't know? You did." Is that pity in the tall man's eyes or something else? Something a little feral. You can't say.

"Me? How?" you sputter, putting your fork down firmly. Curiosity — and perhaps disbelief — alight in your bones.

He sighs, as if dealing with a precocious child.

"The wish you made — the bargain you struck. That's what brought you here. And that's what brought *us* here. Careful, though: not all things last," he warns, tipping his wine glass at you. "Savor them while you can."

You look around. Each face meets your gaze, rapt with attention. Even the animals are staring curiously.

"And," you begin, swallowing hard, finding a lump in your throat, "what...are you?"

A slow smile spreads across the tall man's face, his grey-green eyes focused on yours. You are rooted to the spot.

"Hungry," he answers. Almost wolfish. For a moment, you fear something might happen, something deadly.

But nothing does. The meal continues, cheery and civilized, with glass after glass of wine. In the kitchen, you discover more wine has mysteriously been decanted, and you bring it out with the next course.

THE DOOR OPENS

And as you take another sip, you think, *why not*.

You *don't* think about the photos you burned after the breakup.

You *don't* think about the text thread you used to read, over and over, late at night.

You *don't* think about the stuffed moose you left behind.



YOU WAKE up the next morning with a pounding headache, feeling a little hollow. Light is streaming through your bedroom window, soft and delicate. But it's still too much. Everything hurts, but you manage to sit up. Someone has placed a glass of water on the nightstand, and the first sip tastes like bliss.

Then, memories of last night begin to surface, tendrils of meaning unfurling in brief flashes. Bits and pieces, fits and starts. Wine that tasted like sunshine. The tall man gently reminding you of the wish you made. The way each guest *looked* at you.

Then, you see a woman sitting quietly in the chair in the corner.

You almost scream — but you don't. It catches in your throat.

She's staring at you calmly, patiently.

She is wearing a dress from the 1920s, a matching headband, fishnets. Her mouth is a slash of red, bright as blood.

She smiles at you.

Dread sinks like stone in your stomach.

"Who are you?" you ask, the words no louder than a whisper.

"Zelda. I was...caretaker here, too, for a time."

You nod. Because of *course*.

"And now you are...?" you ask, already knowing the answer.

Zelda tilts her head. "Still a caretaker, just a different sort."

You take a deep breath. "Ghost?"

The question feels both right and preposterous.

She smiles. "Ab-so-lute-ly.

"And there are ... others?"

A curt nod from Zelda.

And then, you know. You *understand*.

This house is a lifetime gig. And you've signed up for that and then some.

"And the guests...?"

Zelda shrugs. "Always the same. Always the old gods."

"And the pets?"

She laughs. "Honey, those *are* the old gods. They like the attention. The company. Helps sustain them."

A crow. A cat. A stag.

Those, you know. The rest of the menagerie are unfamiliar, but you're not a theology expert.

"You can leave, kitten. You can still get out. Just ... put up the ad, the same one that found you. And leave. No looking back. In fact, after you're gone, this place will vanish. You'll never be able to find it again. But you'll be alright. You'll be safe."

Safe. When was the last time you actually felt *safe*? Cared for?

You know the answer. It was yesterday.

Yesterday, when you had no one to answer to. A hot meal appeared as if by magic, but now you know, it was Zelda, and ... whoever else had been here before.

Was *still* here, somehow.

Goosebumps dance across your skin, again.

"Why can I see you now?"

Zelda smiled. “Because I want you to. Because ... I wanted to warn you. I wish someone had warned me. Given me a chance to get out. To see more of the world. To taste it. To *live* and explore every corner I could reach.”

You return her smile, but there’s sadness in it. You don’t quite know how to respond to Zelda. The world outside is full of darkness, heartbreak. How could life here be worse than that?

“You’re staying, aren’t you?” she finishes, the question hanging in the air like a thicket of brambles.

Your heartbreak — the one that brought you here — surges in your throat. The thick grief cloying, tinged with longing. Behind it, the parade of mistakes that have always haunted you, faces of those you have loved — the particular hurt that accompanies each one, somehow markedly still the same.

It pulses like a heartbeat in your chest.

But this place feels like a lighthouse — a point of calm and safety. The past is full of rocks and fog and tumult. You don’t want to go back there. You want to *stay*.

“Yes, yes I am.”

You reach over and pick up the glass of water, taking a sip.

It’s time to start the day.



YOU STAY.

And time passes. The routine of your new life is soothing, purposeful. There’s a gentleness to it, a keen sense of belonging.

Before you know it, your hands are wrinkled. Your knuckles are slightly too big. You have grey hair and age spots.

But it’s nearly time. You know it. You can *feel* it. So you put the ad out into the world, again. You host one final meal —

humming to yourself the whole time you're slowly ferrying dishes to the table. There is joy in the routine, and a different satisfaction in what comes next.

You settle into bed one last time.

Kincaid curls up beside you, purring.

You close your eyes, content.

That bargain you made all those years ago? It was exactly what you needed.

You know when you open them again, there will be a new adventure. One beyond this lifetime.

A sense of belonging washes over you.

You sink into dreams of cats and crows and stags.



THE DOOR OPENS.

A woman sighs, pleased and a bit wistful, before straightening her shoulders and walking inside. Her steps are tentative, but purposeful.

You watch her carefully, unseen, standing in a far corner. The others do, too, from various places and perches. It's an *exciting* day after all.

A new adventure begins. A fresh start. A journey *home*.

The house is welcoming, and so are you, having prepared everything just so. Having set the stage for this new arrival, cleverly tending to each surface so that it was want of a dust rag. So that the tasks were clear. So that there was *purpose*.

The mantel is bare. There is a stack of newspapers perfectly arranged next to the fireplace. Not a single picture hangs on the wall. There are floors to be swept, before they're given a good mopping. Clearly, there is a lot of work to be done.

The woman sets down her suitcase and looks around, hand

traveling to clasp a necklace at her throat, a locket. It's old and silver and beautiful.

In it is a picture of her mother, recently passed. You know this, somehow. You can feel the grief radiating off her like heat, all-consuming and merciless. Her eyes are slightly puffy and pink. She holds herself as if she were hollow, like the ocean echoes through each of her bones.

There's an end table next to the couch, beautiful and elaborate. You watch her give a small smile as she runs a hand over its beautiful surface. Her fingers shake, just slightly, and she lets out a long breath, as if she'd been holding it for too long.

You can feel her body relax, even as you watch her shoulders ease just a bit.

That night, she sits at the mahogany table and makes a list. You watch her, curiously. Her handwriting is precise and full of little flourishes. She takes care to write down details of what needs to be done and when, leaving herself good instructions, a roadmap.

Eventually, she falls asleep, head resting on her arms, pencil underneath one hand.

You open a window and wait until morning.



ALI TROTTA IS A POET, writer, editor, word-nerd, and unapologetic coffee addict. Her poetry has been published in *Uncanny*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, *Small Wonders*, *Enchanted Living*, *The Deadlands*, *Fireside*, *Strange Horizons*, *Cicada*, *Nightmare*, *Mermaids Monthly*, *Dream Theory Media*, *Simultaneous Times*, *The Best of Uncanny Magazine* (Subterranean Press), several of the Rhysling Anthology compilations, and the forthcoming *Offerings for Ordinary Gods* (CLASH Books, July 2026). Seven of her poems were Rhysling

Award nominees. When she's not writing, she's usually cooking, baking, hugging an animal, or pretending to be a mermaid. She has a rescue cat named Thor, who is part Maine Coon and part Gremlin.

Rocco Casulli is an Italian comic book artist and illustrator who is drawn to fairy tale storytelling. He is @RoccoCasulli on Instagram.

CATCH OF THE DAY

BRIAN HUGENBRUCH

Short story: 900 words

I only see the dragon when I'm halfway to the trash yard. It's a small thing, perhaps the size of a large calf, and its wings don't seem quite strong enough to hold its body aloft. It's snoozing atop a wooden plank supported by several wooden posts, sunning itself, not far from where Pa's apparently late pigs had been penned.

In my shock, I almost envied them.

I'm the youngest of Pa's kids. I'd been working in the back of the tavern since I could hold a spoon. We all had. And for my brothers, that was fine — one of them, maybe all of them, would take over the place someday after burying Pa under the floorboards.

Me? None of the above. But here I am.

I'm old enough to apprentice, apply for a trade of my own. Carpentry seems more me — making chairs, tables. Houses! Any aught that would last. I'd even been practicing by building

deadfall traps for the hunters; sturdy crates for the smiths; that sort of thing.

But Pa had to give permission ere any of his children left the tavern, and he'd always hated the idea of losing free labor. So in the meanwhile — I washed the tavern's dishes, I swabbed half-congealed ale off the floors. And as needed, when the bins were too full, I'd haul the slop out to the pigs.

Good news is that we never had rats. Bad news? Dragon.

Pa would have to get new pigs, but that wasn't the immediate problem. I couldn't throw out the scraps without getting eaten. And while the young lizard seemed to be sleeping soundly, I didn't trust it not to wake up if I came too close.

Sure, I could just leave the bag in the bloody dirt. None would blame me if I'd run and gone to tell Pa. He couldn't fight a dragon neither, but he'd at least send one of my brothers out the back to find the rangers. But the bag has the morning's waste in it, and leaving it for the dragon would only entice it to build a little lair here. Bad for business, and eventually it would start eating patrons.

After a moment of quick thinking, I look up and down the wide dirt path between the pen and the space where I practice woodwork. There might be a better option — for everyone.



PA and I watch from the window as the dragon wakes, stretches out its wings ... and then sniffs the air, moving its snout about and flicking its tongue toward the sky. After a moment, it finds the trail I'd made: crusts, cores of apple, some pumpkin rinds. I didn't know what all dragons ate when they couldn't find a pig ... but I knew what was in my moldy burlap sack, and I'd used it all.

The dragon takes three tentative steps forward, looks

around, and then snaps up an apple core. Its eyes narrow ... and then its birdlike legs arch and land, arch and land, until it comes to some moldy lamb. This, it dives into with a gusto that reminds me of the Tenthday patrons deep in their ale mugs.

It wobbles, this scaly, feathery death-chicken, as it follows the trail until it finds the prize: the pile of raw beef under the large deadfall trap. It's a thick oaken box large enough to catch a wolf. It might be a tight fit, but if its hunger gets the better of it...

Pa and I hold our breath as it stares sideways at the meat ... and then gasp as one as the box comes down. The dragon's roar is loud, even muffled by the wood. A bit of flame licks out from underneath — followed by a yelp, and silence.

"Gods praise," Pa breathes. "That was a good 'un."

"What'll they do with it? The rangers, when they get here?"

"Rehome it," Pa says promptly. "I thought maybe we could put dragon steaks on the menu, especially since it ate our pigs ... but they said I'd just make its Ma burn down the town if she smelled us cookin' her kid."

I stare down the path. The box isn't moving. "Will it come back?"

"Mayhap. But we keep the box near, just in case."

"You feel better about me going to Old Man Josiah to work wood?" I ask.

"You saved the larder and maybe the tavern, boy. Reckon you can do what you like at the end of the season."

My eyes narrow. "Pa," I say firmly, "I need out of this box. Now, not later."

He seems surprised. "Since when?"

"Since always. And you know that." I can see him looking every which way but at me, so I stick out a hand. "The trap — I'll leave the box here, no charge. Deal?"

Pa turns it over in his mind ... and then pats me on the shoulder. "Deal, lad. And good luck with it."

I always thought the day he let me go, I'd run right out the door. With the trap shifting slightly with the dragon's breaths, we were neither of us keen to step outside yet. So I let the stress inside me out in a slow breath, knowing full well rehoming might take me a bit ... but feeling more alive for having a path out.



BRIAN HUGENBRUCH is the author of more than sixty speculative fiction stories and poems; his work has also appeared in *Analog*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Escape Pod*. He lives in Upstate New York with his wife and their daughter. He enjoys fishing (but only in video games); Scotch (but only in real life); and he spends most of his time trying to explain quantum cryptography to other nerds. You can find him online at <https://the-lettersea.com>; on BlueSky @the-lettersea.com; on IG/Threads @the_lettersea; and on other social media a little grudgingly. No, he's not sure how to say his last name either.

LESSONS FROM MY ROAD TRIP WITH A SEA-WIFE

DEVIN MILLER

Short story: 1,300 words

Before I left Bellingham, my overprotective dad told me, "You're a woman traveling alone, you have to be careful." I knew that, but I did not know I'd have to be careful about picking up a hitchhiking supernatural being from the ocean.

As soon as I reached the Washington coast, I pulled off the road to stretch my legs on the beach. The salt air hurt. I was driving to California for my ex's wedding, and I wondered if going down the coast was a little masochistic. I could have left the ocean firmly in my past; I didn't need to reclaim it.

I was having doubts and watching the tide go out when a sea-wife approached me across the sand. She told me her name, but I won't tell you; I don't think she'd like it.

If you ever meet a sea-wife, you'll know: she isn't human. It's not the mussels along her hairline, the barnacles on her arms, or her woven seaweed clothes. It's her voice. Her voice holds the crash of waves, the call of whales. I was surprised

when, instead of luring me to sea, she asked for a ride. After all, you'd think she could swim down the coast. But after a winter's storms, sea-wives sometimes need a break from battling the waves.

If I had been less emotional in that moment, I might have said no, and spent the trip wallowing in my ocean-related feelings alone. But her teeth were sharp like a shark's, and I was afraid to say no. I wanted to know what would happen if I said yes.



MY ADVICE IS to bring spare towels on any road trip you take with a sea-wife. I did not anticipate this situation; if I had, I'd have covered the passenger seat in towels. My car is probably going to smell like kelp forever. But sea-wives can't help that their hair drips all the time; it's what you get for being a creature wedded to the sea.



THE SEA-WIFE REMINDED me of a child picking up a beach rock to watch the little crabs scurry out from under it. She was interested in humans, and I found myself telling her why I was on this trip.

Lina and I were each other's first girlfriend, broke up years ago, sporadically kept in touch. I knew it might hurt some to see her marry another woman, but we'd shaped each other's twenties — I understood why she wanted me there, and I wanted to go.

I was less sure about how I was getting there, though. The ocean had been our thing; we used to take long weekend trips and spend them beachcombing and whale-watching. I used to

be good at talking random strangers into taking us out in their boats. After we broke up, I couldn't handle being near the ocean, even though I loved it; it reminded me too much of her. I hadn't been since.

I resented the fact that Lina had moved on, was getting married, and the thought of going to the ocean was still painful to me. I thought I'd do the scenic route down the 101 and the Pacific Coast Highway, and prove to myself that I could.



THE SEA-WIFE WANTED the radio on, which was fine, I like the radio. But what I wasn't expecting was that every song that came on would be about the sea. "Ocean Breathes Salty," "Come Sail Away," "Octopus's Garden," etc.

This could have become annoying very quickly, except that ... she sang along. Even with the whale sounds in Judy Collins's "Farewell to Tarwathie." And when a sea-wife sings, it's like wind moaning in the rigging of a ship, like dolphins yelping; it has the roar of the waves and the smooth ebb and flow of the tide. It's haunting. And maybe I needed it to help me process all my feelings about the way that Lina had given me the ocean and then taken it away.



EVERY TIME I stopped for a meal with the sea-wife, she insisted on fish. Since she migrates down the coast annually, she knows the best fish & chip and sushi joints in every town. If you ever find yourself in this situation, don't expect to order from the vegetarian side of the menu, and don't hold out hope for chicken strips, but the fish will be the freshest you've ever had.

On those evenings sitting on restaurant patios with a view of the beach, it was surprisingly easy to enjoy the sound of waves and the sparkle of sunset, and hard to get caught in the tangled net of my old complicated feelings about Lina and the ocean.

My personal favorite was Jan's Classic Fish & Chips, just south of Astoria, Oregon. The batter on the fish was perfectly crisp, and the waitress was slinging jokes back and forth with the regulars, and Lina never would have gone there with me because she didn't like eating fried food.



SEA-WIVES CAN'T HELP but draw animals to them. Every time we stopped to stretch our legs and look at the view, she'd go walking on the beach and birds would follow her: gulls, herons, sandpipers. If she walked along the waterline, sea stars and clams and tiny fish would appear in the shallows. Whales would blow and spyhop if she waded into the water. She knew all the best marine preserves and none of the scientific names, but she could tilt her head at the birds so they understood her.

Watching animals had always been my favorite part of visiting the ocean, but it wasn't Lina's favorite part; she liked boats and beachcombing and storms. Remembering this, I started to think that maybe the ocean could be mine for what I loved about it, not just mine-and-Lina's.



YOU MIGHT BE WONDERING if I fulfilled any lesbian drama stereotypes and had a fling with the sea-wife on the way to my ex-girlfriend's wedding. Reader, I did not. We didn't even share

a motel room; I think she slept curled up in a tide pool with the sea anemones for company.



I DIDN'T SAY what I wanted in return for giving the sea-wife a ride, but a sea-wife won't leave a debt unpaid. The sand dollars she used to help buy gas didn't count.

We'd traveled together down the coast of Washington, across the Columbia River into Oregon, and down south through the California redwoods. When we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, she told me to drive to Ocean Beach. Taking my hand, she towed me out to the waterline. She kissed my cheek, then held up one finger, asking me to wait. She waded out into the water and dove.

After ten minutes, a kayak with no one in it bobbed toward me on the waves.

The sea-wife swam into the shallows, stood, dripping, and pulled the kayak up. It wasn't one of the familiar plastic ones, but made of wood, the grain running the length of the boat and beautifully polished. She put the rope into my hand and smiled at me, her teeth still shark-sharp but less scary now. Then she slipped back into the water and was gone.

I understood that this kayak was payment for the ride to California, but that it was also a way of giving the sea back to me. I couldn't leave the ocean in the past, in the part of my life I'd shared with Lina. I still loved its strangeness, its salt, its creatures. It was far too big to forever associate with one person.

It was only after I'd stood there admiring the kayak for a while that I realized I was going to have to figure out how to get it home.



DEVIN MILLER IS A QUEER, genderqueer cyborg and lifelong denizen of Seattle, with a love of muddy beaches to show for it. Their short fiction has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, PodCastle, and *Strange Horizons*; their poetry received an honorable mention in the 2022 Rhysling Awards and once appeared on a King County Metro bus terminal. You can find Devin under a tree, probably, or at devzmiller.com.

THE LAST TIME I WENT ON A PROWL WITH FARRELL JENKINS

DAVID ANAXAGORAS

Short story: 765 words

Farrell Jenkins speaks the secret language of fireflies. He's perched on the thickamore just outside my bedroom window talking to one now. You probably want to know what a thickamore is. A thickamore is that thick branch of the sycamore tree that swoops by the window next to my tiny desk which had once been Mom's vanity. There's still a nearly empty tube of Fizz Cosmetics Moisturizing Grape Crush Lipstick rolling around in the back of one of the drawers. I've never been tempted to try it. Anyway, Dad came up with the thickamore thing and now we're stuck with it.

Farrell holds his cupped hands under his mouth and flashes of green reflect on his pale chin. That's how I know he's holding a firefly. I'm trying to get my history paper done, the one I was supposed to be working on all week but didn't start until tonight, but it's hard to ignore a boy on a thickamore mumbling to a bug outside your window.

I very nearly typed my name on the title page when Farrell

laughed and I looked up because I thought I had amused him somehow but he was sharing some private joke with the firefly. It floated out of his hands and drifted away.

“Oh. Bye!” Farrell said, and stood and stretched. Probably you’re wondering what Farrell looks like for some reason. He’s thin and tall for his age and oddly graceful which he has no right to be. His thick black hair is fun to put your fingers in. You probably should forget I said that. He has one bluish green eye, and one greenish blue eye. There’s a technical name for that but I can never remember what it’s called. Rumour has it he was raised by cats.

“What are you doing, Autumn?”

“I’m trying to do my homework.” I turned my chair slightly away from the window.

“I’m going on a prowl. Come with me!”

I wasn’t in the mood to go on one of Farrell’s prowls, but I also wasn’t in the mood to work on this paper anymore. Farrell would wear me down eventually anyways.

“I’ll meet you downstairs,” I sighed, and reached up to close the window.

“It’s not a proper prowl unless you leave by the window,” he said. “No good prowl ever started out the front door.”

I pointedly closed the window. I don’t crawl out of windows for boys, not even one raised by cats.



THERE ARE two kinds of autumn nights. Too darned cold, and unseasonably warm. Tonight was the first kind. At least I had a sweater and a scarf. Farrell was barefoot, as usual.

“How come you never wear shoes? Aren’t your feet freezing?”

Then something struck me.

“Wait, where did you find that firefly? It’s not summer for months.”

“You’re losing your Wonder,” Farrell said, very matter-of-factly.

“I’m what?” I felt insulted, but I wasn’t sure why.

“Your Wonder. When you look at things in the world, you don’t seem so amazed.”

“You’ve got enough Wonder for both of us.”

“We have to take a shortcut; I want to show you something,” he said.

And so we prowled. Across a back alley where an old lady sold cabbages that had faces, down in the gorge where carnivorous plants uprooted themselves but kept their distance at Farrell’s hiss, past the orchard where some of Farrell’s cat brothers frolicked and chased after tiny glowing sprites stealing bites of apples, and through the dry cistern where the eggs of an ancient lake monster waited patiently for the water’s return.

We emerged into damp, salty air.

“We should be getting back.” I was tired and had second thoughts about turning in my paper late.

“Just up here,” Farrell said, and led on.

When we crested the bluff, I saw it hanging over the ocean, silent and still — a rainbow made from moonlight.

“Oh.” I felt electric. “Wow.”

Farrell beamed. “You won’t forget it, will you Autumn?”

“Are you kidding?”



THE LUNAR RAINBOW night was the last time I saw Farrell. His goodbye gift. I’m angry he’s gone, and I miss him. Friends move, things change. I get it. Doesn’t mean I’m okay with it.

Tonight, the air is cold and dry and my lips are getting chapped, so yes, I'm wearing Grape Crush lipstick. I feel a little silly, but it doesn't look terrible. I am sorry to say, however, that it doesn't taste anything like grape soda.

Anyway, I should be doing my homework but I'm not.

I'm sitting out here on the thickamore.

I'm waiting for fireflies.



DAVID ANAXAGORAS is the author of *The Tower*, a middle-grade horror audiobook from Recorded Books about monsters, memory, and the fight to stay human. His short fiction has appeared frequently in *Lightspeed* and elsewhere. He created and co-executive produced *Gortimer Gibbon's Life on Normal Street*, Amazon Prime Video's award-winning coming-of-age series where ordinary streets hide extraordinary secrets. A disabled writer and reluctant Texan, he writes full time and is fueled by cold brew coffee, 80s vinyl, and a healthy disregard for the impossible.

UNTIL THE GREAT EXPERIMENT ENDS

KEYAN BOWES

Short story: 1,055 words

This would be my last group of baby caterpillaries. Looking into their sweet little faces, I savored the moment. They'd been mine since Namo brought me the just-hatched wiggles. How much they'd grown, shedding their skins multiple times!

"Am I big enough for transition now, Naba?" Kimi asked, waving a hand for attention.

Kimi was the one that worried me, the smallest I'd ever seen. Some percentage of littles didn't survive transition. The undersized ones were most at risk. Would Najeh reject it?

"You need a few days," I reassured it.

"Naba," said Fimi, rearing up. "My skin feels so tight."

I looked at the caterpillar closely. Fimi was the longest of the littles, its segments nicely plumped out.

"You know what? You'll be the first one out." Taking its hand, I led it through the Door to where Najeh waited.

“Come, sweetie!” Najeh exclaimed, pointing to a circle of colorful carrels. “You get your choice of spots!”

Fimi snuggled into a turquoise carrel. Above it was a horizontal rod, securely suspended from the ceiling.

“When you’re ready,” Najeh said, “just hook your hand over that.”

“I’m ready now,” declared Fimi. It reached up, got a grip, and curled inward. Its skin split apart, revealing a shining chrysalis.

Najeh smiled at me. “This one’ll do fine. Your last batch, right?”

“Since the Experimenters made us not eternal.”

“Time comes for us all,” responded Najeh formally. “Until the Great Experiment ends.”

“Until the Great Experiment ends,” I replied, remembering NajehPast. We’d been contemporaries, but their Time came several cycles ago. The cost of being long-lived: your friends expire before you.

I returned to my littles. The joy of being long-lived: Seeing more cycles of growth, of life. Scooping Kimi into my arms, I tickled its tummy while it giggled.

Later that evening, I went outside. Behind me was the cluster of buildings comprising the Easterly LittleShed, where eggs hatched, where wiggles grew into littles, where chrysalids developed, where Wingies eclosed before emerging through the skylights into the world. In front were the Academy and Amphitheater, where Wingies were educated.

Unlike the insects of the Experimenters’ home worlds, our Wingies were long-lived and sapient. Still, I’d seen so many generations. This would be the last time.



SOON, all the littles in my charge went through the Door to Najeh. Only Kimi was left.

“Don’t send me that undersized one,” said Najeh flatly. “Euthanize it and move on quickly.”

I glared at them. Euthanasia was sometimes necessary, but was rare. “Why quickly?” I asked with suspicion.

Najeh paused. “Two candidates compete for your position. My friend’s ready now; their rival needs ten more days. If you stay too long, my friend will have been assigned elsewhere, and the other one sent here.”

We all came from the same complex, which built the generationally-evolving, educationally-specialized androids that ran our planet. Friendships developed within vocation-groups, and inevitably, rivalries too. Me, I didn’t care who followed me. My commitment was to my littles. NajehNow, though, was still new enough to have a friend among the incomers.

But euthanasia?

“Kimi deserves a chance,” I said. “I’m staying as long as it needs. Until you take it.”

Najeh looked annoyed, but I was not going to back down. Eventually they nodded.

When Kimi went through the Door, tight-skinned, it was still undersized.

“A waste,” grumbled Najeh. “It will not transition.” But they gave it a boost to reach the rod above it. Kimi gripped it and hung there, slowly curling inward.

As I passed back through the Door for the last time, Najeh looked at me expectantly. “If you leave now, my friend still can come tomorrow.”

Rule and custom gave me a week to clear out, to make my farewells. But Najeh had finally accepted Kimi, albeit grudgingly. I had no more goodbyes to say, anyway.

“Done.”

Najeh locked hands with me. “Farewell. Until the Great Experiment ends.”

I cleared my room for NabaNext. Tomorrow, they’d come from the nurse-android center, the same place I had originated a generation earlier.

This is what I planned: To leave the sheds and head toward the distant mountains. Rumor claimed there was a disused space-port on the plain, where long ago the Experimenters came and went. They set up Experiments, the librarians told us, on a thousand empty worlds surrounding the Star — a thousand different life-forms, shepherded by teams of self-replicating androids who collected and compiled the information, provided food and shelter, materials and education.

Some day, when the Great Experiment ended, all would be swept away, and the thousand planets restored to emptiness. Only the data generated would remain.



THE LIGHT outside shone with stars and nine hundred and ninety-nine other planets. Mountains zigzagged wildly against the sky. Wingies flew above me, iridescent. Freed of my responsibilities, I started walking.

But how do you leave it all behind? I recalled my baby caterpilzies, and I thought of my sweet Kimi, so tiny going into transition, and of Najeh’s dark prediction. I loved all my littles. But when the Great Experiment ended, when the Experimenters returned, when we were counted and our hearts were read, the first word on mine would be KIMI.

I’d been walking a long time, I couldn’t say how long or how far. And then — there it lay before me. Silver towers, gantries, small structures and large, all deserted.

At the spaceport's boundary were the still figures of expired people like me, waiting to be counted and read. NamoPast was there, and NajehPast. Standing beside them, I initialized the slow process of powering down to the trickle that would sustain heart-memory and nothing else.



SUDDENLY, out of nowhere, a Wingie appeared and landed in front of me. "Naba?" it said.

"NabaPast," I answered wonderingly. "NabaNow will be at the Easterly LittleShed."

"NabaMine!" it said joyfully, and I looked more carefully at its face. Could it be?

"Kimi?" I asked.

"Yes!" it said. "I'm Kimaya now. Look at me!"

"Kimaya! You're beautiful! You made it!"

"Yes! I wanted to get here in time to say Farewell. I flew like the wind so I made it!"

That wasn't what I'd meant, but it was perfect.

"I love you, Kimaya!"

"You always did. I love you too. Always."

We touched foreheads. "Until the Great Experiment ends," I said.



A peripatetic writer of short fiction, **KEYAN BOWES** grew up in India and currently calls the West Coast of the US home. She's had around forty-five stories published, some more than once. Her stories have been translated into Italian, Spanish and Polish. Keyan's work can be found online in magazines such as *Escape Pod*, *Fireside*, and of course *Worlds of Possibility*; and on

KEYAN BOWES

paper in twenty print anthologies. She's a Clarion graduate and a SFWA member. Website: www.keyanbowes.org

INVASIBILITY

ELLIS NYE

Short story: 700 words

Lacey straightened up from hauling an enormous, invasive thistle out of the ground and froze, puzzled by a disturbance in their vision. A few yards away, on one of the trails, there was something warping the air; a clump of light that looked like rippling water, or flakes of mica.

“Greetings,” the something said, glittering from behind the large, dark leaves of a burdock plant.

Well I’m pretty sure I’m not hallucinating, Lacey thought. That had happened once in college, from a combination of stress, insomnia, and exactly the wrong antidepressant. It had been memorable, and this didn’t feel the same. And they were *far* past the age where hallucinating came on suddenly. Right?

“...Hello,” they said, politely.

“What are you doing?” the light asked as it moved closer, plants bending away from it as it left the trail. *It? They? Does it matter right now?*

“I’m pulling invasive plants,” they said, then automatically

started the spiel. “We’ve got an association of local groups all across Wisconsin with their own projects, like working with the local government on Phragmites grass. If you’re interested I can con—” Their brain caught up with their mouth. This ... fairy? alien? whatever? probably wasn’t interested.

“What is an ‘invasive plant?’” the — being, Lacey decided — asked, coming to a stop in a patch of tangled, sticky bedstraw. This close, they could see that the mica comparison was accurate-ish — it seemed to be made up of small, shiny flakes.

“It’s a plant from one location that’s been introduced in another, mostly by human action, which then takes over in some way. Look how much burdock there is, for example.” They gestured at the many burdock plants in the area, which had sent stalks up, but hadn’t grown their famous seedpods yet.

The being hummed.

“Would you ... like me to show you an area that we’ve worked more on?” Lacey asked.

“Yes.” Lacey waded through the plants and back to the trail, where they deposited the thistle on a pile of other invasive plants they’d pulled up earlier. They led the being up the path and over the small bridge to a part of the park that their group had worked on last year.

“No burdock,” the being said, floating around the area.

“No burdock, thistles, dame’s rocket ... very little bedstraw,” Lacey confirmed. “I don’t know if we can get it to look how it used to, but it’s a start.”

“Why do you do this?” the being asked as the two of them made their way back.

“Well, someone has to fix it. It’s just not right that a bunch of stupid assholes got to screw up the environment and screw over the people who were here first.” They scowled as they

crouched to hack at the base of one of the burdocks. It would be better to get the roots out, but they had a bad back — genetic, thank you very much, *not* related to their weight. Instead, they usually cut the plants off close to the ground and sprayed herbicide on the remnants. Better than nothing, they hoped. “And everything is terrible right now, and I have to do *something*.”

Lacey stumbled back and fell as the leaves on the burdock were abruptly pulled upwards. There was a moment of tension, and then the roots lifted from the ground.

“Wow!” Lacey said. “That’s incredible — much better than I could’ve done. Could you put it on the pile, please?” The being hummed, and the vegetable matter floated over to the pile of dead plants and was deposited on top. “That’s amazing, thank you so much,” Lacey said.

“Thank *you*,” the being said. “You have given us something to consider.” Its body elongated, lifting a little like the burdock, and then it shot upwards, too fast for Lacey to see. There was a gleam of light, and Lacey spotted a gray, metallic glint against the overcast sky.

They sat down carefully on the pile of plants, the burdock on top protecting them from any thistles.

“Huh,” they said. “Well, shit. What was that all about?”



ELLIS NYE (any pronouns) is a scientist, fiber artist, and writer. He lives in New England, alongside his mortal enemies: invasive knotweed and garlic mustard.

WARNING: CATS EYES REMOVED

DIE BOOTH

Short story: 1,082 words

“See, I told you,” Jill said, “I told you Mac said they were here.”

It’s a dark night. Just a sliver of moon like melted ice. The stars shine like eyes between freezing clouds. When Jill sweeps her torch across the cracked ground, the stars blink back from beneath our feet.

I drop to my knees. “They’re beautiful.”

“The *stars* are beautiful,” Jill says. She tips her head back. Her throat looks blue in the cold below light, her breath spewing in misty plumes. The air glitters with drizzle, catching like sparks in the torch beam. “What do we do now?”

I take out my knife. Jill hums. “It seems a shame.”

“Nobody needs them now.”

“The stars?”

I laugh. I look around me and I think, *probably*. It’s dark early. Winter has stopped the world with a glaze of frost,

turning it all to hammered silver, from the bushes at the sides of the motorway, to the cracking asphalt underfoot.

“The roads.” It’s strange to remember places like this raging with cars, trucks, traffic. Everywhere is quiet as a held breath now, the freezing midnight air thin in my lungs.

I think Jill remembers, too, because she says, “They’re like archaeology now though. How many are left where they were - what do they call it — in-situ?”

I shrug, the movement sending my scarf up around my nose as I hunch over. Poke the little blade of my knife at the edge of one bright eye, scraping the casing, my breath fogging damp and prickly in its cocoon of wool. I tug the scarf down, cold stinging my nose. The eye is stubborn. Fisting the knife, I stab down through the dirty white skull of perished rubber, breaking it open. “If we don’t take them, somebody else will. Eventually.”

“Yeah,” Jill says, vaguely. Her feet shuffle black tracks, backwards, as she reverses through the frost to the concrete overpass wall, leaning against it and watching me.

I decapitate the road stud. The eyes inside, two pairs facing forward and back, are held in place with pins. “Don’t you want one for Mona?” She smiles at that, turning her head to the side like she thinks I won’t see. It makes me smile, too. I jam the knife blade beneath one of the pins and pop the eye from its socket, sparkling like a precious stone. It’s coated in tarry stuff: I rub it on my glove. “Look – they’re copper ones! That’s the oldest type. It must be more than a hundred years old. You can thread it on a necklace for her.”

“Show me.” Jill leans in for a look. The expression on her face makes her seem ten again, floating pale in the torchlight. I think of fairgrounds, fetes and zoos. Of our parents being friends. I think of road-trips, thirty years ago, when it felt forever sunny, us on the back seat. Hot leather upholstery that

stuck to the pits of your knees, the smell of sandy beach and petrol fumes and bitumen melting.

When I hand her the cats eye, I'm passing her more than a physical thing. I'm handing her our past.

She studies it in the torch beam, glove-muffled hands turning over a flash of jewel-green. "It's cracked."

"I'll get you another one."

"No," she says. "Look." I look, as the flat of glass inside the crack blazes torchlight back. "The broken ones shine even brighter." She slips it carefully into her pocket.

I say, "Remember when you told me you liked girls, and I said, me too?"

"And I yelled at you for always copying me." Jill's chiming laugh is swallowed up by the vast road, the big sky. It makes us seem small. But not in a frightening way. It's comforting, somehow, like being a seed in a field. I can remember that moment as clear as day. *But not you. No, that would be weird.* Jill struck gold with her first serious girlfriend. I had my heart broken by musicians for decades until I met Hannah and realised what I'd been missing.

"Do you miss being little?" I ask.

Jill tilts her head to one side. It's not just a question about age. It's about before. A thing too huge to hold in one thought. "Not really," she says, after a minute. "It was all rush and noise. I didn't realise how much it was until it stopped. And it stopped for everyone so you couldn't be jealous that you were missing out on anything. I like being able to hear my heart beat."

I close my eyes. My cheeks above my scarf feel taut with chill, my eyes watering with it. I can feel misty rain clinging to my eyelashes. The wind sighs, quiet, rattling the branches of the trees. There's the smell of wet leaves, and damp wool, and that nostalgic tarry edge of scent only noticeable on the old

roads. My toes are starting to ache where they're pressed up in my boots. I shift my weight, digging into the next cats eye. "Don't take them all," Jill says.

"I'll leave one. In situ."

"Leave two, so they don't get lonely being the last one."

This is why we've been friends forever, I think.



WHEN I'VE DUG up all the treasure, except for two, I stand, knees cracking, pockets full of stars. The sky is clearer now, a waiting kind of still. I'm so ready to feel the fire in the hearth at home, unpicking me with pins and needles.

"They'll keep us safe travelling," I say to Jill. It doesn't matter that the most journeying we do now is on foot between villages, choosing new paths over the cold old roads. Fishing out an eye, I show it to the starlight. A memory we can carry around with us.

"What have these eyes seen." Jill says. She sounds like she's talking to herself, and it's not really a question. When I close my fist around the eye in my palm, it warms quickly, the copper taking on my blood heat. "What will they see now?"

It's a long walk home. We should get going. She yawns, and I sling an arm around her shoulders, and we zigzag across the lanes, like the plants pushing up through the cracks in the tarmac.

Only once do I look back, and see two pairs of eyes, shining in the night.

I think, that's what those eyes see looking back at them, too.



DIE BOOTH

DIE BOOTH is an indie author and editor who loves wild beaches and exploring dark places. When not writing, he enjoys making zines, and DJs at Last Rites – the best (and only) goth club in Chester, UK – which he runs with his boyfriend. You can read his prize-winning stories in volumes from *The Deadlands*, Egaeus Press, Sans. PRESS, Air and Nothingness Press and many others. His books, including his cursed novella *Cool S* are available online and he's currently working on a queer coming-of-age folk horror novella. You can find out more about Die's writing at <http://diebooth.wordpress.com/> or say hi at Bluesky @diebooth.bsky.social

WHEN YOU THINK NO ONE CAN SEE YOU

LETTIE PRELL

Short story: 800 words

Stealing

It's a simple mission: take the baby tooth from under the girl's pillow while she's sleeping. The icy light of a winter moon streams through the slats of the blinds as I land on the edge of the bed. Children sleep so soundly, with spittle pooling at the corners of their mouths. This girl is no exception. She looks sweet lying there. I reach under the pillow and feel around till I find the hard little thing. I pull my hand out, and the girl rolls over and stares at me with large brown eyes.



Bathing

I LOVE when it rains in springtime, so I can bathe in one of the poppy blooms. The orange glow of the petals reflects on my skin as I cast aside my leafy garments. I ease into the clear water and curl around the green seed pod.

The grayness deepens overhead. I look up into a pair of large brown eyes peering down at me. It's that girl again.



Teasing the Cat

IT'S predawn on the summer solstice. The humans are asleep, but the cat is active. It's fun to annoy the furry creature. It leaps after me, trying to knock me to the ground, but I'm too quick and flit away. When it tires, I'll raid the kitchen. It chases me behind one of the living room drapes. I can feel it clawing at the curtain. The fabric jerks aside, but instead of the cat, I'm looking into those big brown eyes again. What is it with this girl?



Taking Tea

I'M in my home at the base of the oak tree. Afternoon sunlight pours in through the window at an angle that foretells of autumn. My wooden spool table is draped with a golden canna petal and set with an acorn cup alongside a bit of cake I pilfered from the kitchen. I sit on my baby tooth chair and raise my cup. The anise aroma of hyssop tickles my nose. Then I hear something large, breathing. My gaze snaps to the window,

expecting to see a raccoon or maybe the cat. Instead, a single brown eye — a human eye! — is there. Her gaze roves around my space. She knows where I live now. It's simply the last straw.



Casting A Spell

I WAIT for the dark of a new moon. I use the fairy dust I've cadged from the apple tree spirit, and make a circle in the soil of the flower garden. I place the girl's baby tooth in the center. I feel terrible. That tooth had made a fine chair, and the little girl is adorable, but I cannot go on being seen. I was able to flee in time all those previous encounters, but my luck is bound to run out. She'll speak to me and ask the question that will prove fatal to my freedom. Children are such curious creatures.

It's a shame I must do this thing that will blind her to my presence, as well as to the magic of life, but it's the only way to ensure my continued liberty. I steel myself, then raise a hand high. My silver wand materializes in my palm.

Something else silver catches my attention. It's the little girl, running across the lawn toward me, her white nightgown billowing. It's pitch-dark, but she's guided by the glow of the otherworld that surrounds me. My shoulders sag. I cannot possibly go through with my plan now. How can I take her special sight from her?

"Hi!" she chirps.

I shrink back and brace myself for the inevitable. I don't have to wait long.

"What's your name?" she asks with a cock of her head.

I am bound to answer. I tell her my name.

She repeats it, then wrinkles her nose and giggles. She really is a sweet child. I find myself smiling, despite everything.

She notices the circle I've created. "There's my tooth!" She stoops and trails a fingertip through the fairy dust, then raises her finger to her lips and blows. Instantly, we're enveloped in a cloud of sparkling gold. We both laugh, and in that moment, I feel closer to her than anyone else who's passed through my life. Sometimes you don't realize you're lonely till you encounter its opposite.

No one ever told me that being enchanted would feel this wonderful. Always the warnings, but no mention of the rewards. I am seen at last. I know she has a lavender sachet on her dresser that will make a fine bed for me. I leap into the girl's outstretched hand and nestle there while she carries me to the house.



LETTIE PRELL's short fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *Apex*, *Clarkesworld*, *Tordotcom*, *WIRED magazine*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and elsewhere. Several of her stories have been reprinted in anthologies, including *The New Voices of Science Fiction* (Tachyon), *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and "best of the year" publications curated by Neil Clarke and

Rich Horton. Several of her works have been translated into Chinese, Japanese, and, most recently, French.

ANDREA BURES is a traditional artist and second-generation Czech Canadian based in Alberta. She enjoys experimenting with gouache and watercolour while incorporating elements of nature and whimsy into her work. She recently illustrated her first children's picture book, *Llama, Girl, and the Sunrise-flower*. A lover of folklore and stories, she is also a speculative fiction writer. Andrea is curious about community-building and the role imagination plays in helping us create a better world. Connect with her and view her work: @curiousforestcrumbs, curiousforestcrumbs.com

“Fairy Ladder” is an illustration of a fairy in shades of lavender, caught in the act of climbing a lily of the valley. It served as the cover art for the April 2025 version two issue of *Worlds of Possibility*. While it was not painted specifically to illustrate this story, it seems like an illustration of our fairy narrator!

“Fairy Ladder” was painted with gouache and watercolour. This illustration is an ode to whimsy and wonder. It's based on a piece of Irish folklore that says lilies of the valley originated as fairy cups that were then converted into a ladder for the fairies to play upon.

THE CLEARING WHERE IT BEGAN

SARAH GRACE TUTTLE

Short story: 250 words

In the center of the clearing, in the center of a pool of sunlight, a mushroom of a kind that normally thrived in the shade grew nine inches tall. But this is not a story about a mushroom that decided to grow in sunlight.

A squirrel that came to the clearing every day carefully noted the shadow cast by the mushroom. “Ah,” thought the squirrel. “It is time for acorns, because the shadow falls on the rock.” But this is not a story about a squirrel who invented a sundial.

The hawk perched in a tree at the edge of the clearing saw the squirrel, and also thought about eating. “If only I weren’t a vegetarian,” moaned the hawk. “I would love some squirrel right now.” But this is not a story about a hawk who stuck to their morals and went to eat some berries.

The berries on the edge of the clearing were carefully tended by a hedgehog. The hedgehog knew the hawk liked berries, so they left the fruit near good perching branches

alone. Supporting the hawk in their lifestyle choice seemed like the neighborly thing to do. But, this is not a story about a gardening hedgehog.

The soil of the clearing watched it all, and felt inspired. “This,” the soil thought, “is worth cultivating.” It drew more magic from the center of the earth, and the magic rose, and grew, and spilled out into the world. And the world changed.



SARAH GRACE TUTTLE (they/she) is an autistic, queer, poly-gender author and poet. Their speculative writing has been published or is forthcoming in *ivy.*, *The Pink Hydra*, *Home Constellations: An Anthology of Unconventional Bonds*, and more. You can visit them online at www.sarahgracetuttle.com to keep up with all their writerly joys and chaos.

CONTENT NOTES

“Please Mind the Poltergeist” by Tehnuka depicts chronic illness.

“When You Don't Have Money, Have People, Even If They're Dead” by Wen Wen Yang refers to possible elder abuse and murder, and also shows some uncomfortable situations where a woman feels unsafe with a man.

“Ivy and Eucalyptus” By E. M. Linden depicts Earth as an uninhabitable planet, and shows people choosing to leave their families.

“Miss Elsie's Sunken Piano” by Marc A. Criley refers to widespread flooding and the loss of material possessions. It also refers to the death of a woman, though not from flooding.

“The Giant's Unquiet Bones” by Kate Ravenna depicts a society where a woman alone is not treated with respect.

CONTENT NOTES

“In Her Tower of Scales” by Marisca Pichette mentions snakes and mice, and also implies violent deaths of fairy tale princes.

“A Simulacrum of Self” by Aimee Ogden depicts family dynamics where a person is not accepted as they are. It also contains one swear word.

“My First Name Was Droplet” involves birth, death, and rebirth, and images of several types of creepy crawly animals including bugs and amphibians.

“What the Crows Know” shows neglect of a young person, and refers to unhappy and volatile home life.

“Gargoyle Girl” by Sylvia Heike implies violence and death in the past.

“Mazal Tov. Mazal Tov” by Y.M. Resnik features a cemetery with dead loved ones, and struggles for self acceptance in the context of queerness and religious identity.

“The Face of a God” by H. V. Crow discusses death and examines details of the circumstances of particular deaths in Greek myth.

“The Witch’s Cat” by Julia LaFond contains spiders and mice.

“Let the Mothman In” by Rachael K. Jones contains references to the death of a parent in a car accident, references to bombings and a bridge collapse, and descriptions of moths/a moth cryptid with insect like features and behaviors.

CONTENT NOTES

“A Hint of Cinnamon, a Whiff of Mint” by Amanda Saville refers to a partner breaking up with a person for reasons of bigotry.

“Delivered” by Rem Wigmore refers to someone being hit by a car.

“The Slayer’s Descent” by Ayida Shonibar shows a person in danger of being eaten by a dragon.

“Fairy, Robin, Sunflower” by Avra Margariti mentions housing insecurity.

“We Carry What’s Ours” by V. Astor Solomon refers to planet wide devastation.

“Feathers” by P.A. Cornell depicts painful body transformation due to self-rejection.

“How to Cook with the Negative Space in Your Grandmother’s Recipes” By Jennifer Hudak deals with dead loved ones and complicated family dynamics.

“Inheritance in Six Parts” by Nadine Aurora Tabing contains references to body parts being removed and replaced, and also to family dynamics around inheritance and intergenerational expectations.

“Silver Tracings in Starlit Skies” by Reed Mingault describes several spiders and also a person who is ill and requires assistive medical equipment to survive. There is also a reference to possible death of a sibling. The illustration depicts a bot that is modeled on a jewel tarantula and looks like a spider.

CONTENT NOTES

“A Refugee from Fairyland” by Keyan Bowes includes adoption and refers to a mother dying in childbirth.

“The Last Items of the Forgotten Hero, Or, the Grandchild’s First Dragon” by Guan Un mentions beheadings and other violence.

“Princess Mildred and the Dragon” refers to wars, and humans questing to kill dragons.

“Diary of a High School Necromancer” by Spencer Orey depicts necromancy, death of humans and animals, rats, and parental neglect.

“Stories Never Die But Live Forever On the Winds” by Jo Miles contains bigoted parents who claim to protect their children by burning books and forcing them to participate.

“The Regrettable Loneliness of the Great Wizard Graveblossom’s Door” by Michael M. Jones contains swear words and depicts neglect by a creator.

“Brighter Than Anything on Earth” by Annika Barranti Klein involves cults, grieving a dead mentor, and complicated family dynamics.

“Bone and Marrow, Root and Stem” by A. Z. Louise is contains blood, self-inflicted injury, serious stab wounds inflicted by others, someone accidentally getting a mouthful of tadpoles, a fall from a high up place, and descriptions of life-threatening injuries.

CONTENT NOTES

“The Shape of Them” by Y.M. Resnik includes stronger curse words than most *Worlds of Possibility* stories tend to have, and references discrimination against people who do not conform to a strict religious code, including based on gender presentation.

“Firecrackers on 28 Mott Street” by Angela Liu refers to the death of a pet rabbit.

“Garage Ghost” by Julia LaFond contains references to death by car accident, including some blood and gore.

“The Last Adult Superstore” by John Wiswell refers to sex toys, though none are actually shown in the story.

“So You Want to Run a Temporal Coffee Shop” by R. P. Sand refers to violent events in history and mentions human death.

“Coalescence” by Simo Srinivas shows a planet being destroyed, implying the death of a named character, refers to multiple deaths due to intergalactic war, and implies traumatic imprisonment for some people. It also shows a cat’s consent being violated when a spaceship forces it to become the pilot.

“No S’Mores For Me, Thank You” by Marc A. Criley implies a history of physical injury or deterioration.

“Three Conversations with Myself in an Arby’s at the Edge of the Solar System” by Craig Church contains some swearing.

“Have You Eaten Yet?” by Ian Li depicts complex social relationships with food.

CONTENT NOTES

“Nova’s Epic Re-Entry Bucket List” by Y. M. Resnik involves the death of a parent and mentions mental health issues, and the threat of people being kept against their will.

“This Goodly Frame, the Earth” by Cecilia Tan involves the death of a parent, and some difficult family dynamics/familial guilt.

“Soldier On” by Peter Duchak II depicts a veteran experiencing suicidal ideation and PTSD.

“Little Known Facts About Dragons” by Adria Bailton refers to human grief at the loss of a beloved pet.

“Two Views of an Unexpected Flight” by Marc A. Criley is about a spider.

“An Unexpected Wombat” by Nico Martinez Nocito mentions being deadnamed and also the death of a beloved pet.

“The Door Opens” by Ali Trotta contains brief mentions of blood, and longer reflections on infidelity and emotional abuse in a romantic relationship.

“Catch of the Day” by Brian Hugenbruch mentions livestock being eaten by dragons, and also shows complicated family dynamics.

“Lessons From My Road Trip With a Sea-wife” by Devin Miller depicts a person trying to relearn how to enjoy things associated with an ex-partner.

CONTENT NOTES

“Until the Great Experiment Ends” by Keyan Bowes also features insect type life cycle descriptions.

“Invasibility” by Ellis Nye contains references to fat shaming, and also some swear words.

“Warning: Cats Eyes Removed” by Die Booth depicts a post apocalyptic world, but does not feature any animals or cruelty of any kind.

