

the Creative Writing Society

# Compendium



Winter 2022

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Our gratitude goes out to all of our wonderful and talented society members whose submissions made this *Compendium* possible.

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## Editor's Welcome

I am proud and privileged to present the Creative Writing Society's Winter 2022 *Compendium*. This is the fifth edition. All the works within these pages were written, edited, and produced by our members, and many of them were read and developed at our weekly meetings. This publication exhibits our writers' hard work and the variety of theme, genre, form, and voice which the Creative Writing Society proudly nurtures.

The *Compendium* is a large project, and it is an honour to fulfil the role of Editor-in-Chief. Having written, edited, suggested cover design concepts, and helped to produce the final published document during the creation of past editions, it has been satisfying to progress to the responsibilities of my current role. Thank you for entrusting me with this duty.

We are incredibly proud to publish this great accomplishment. Thank you to all the contributors who have worked towards the successful production of another outstanding *Compendium*, and to all the members who tolerated my persistent promotion of opportunities for involvement.

If you write, or you like to read and hear others' writing, we would love for you to join us at one of our weekly meetings. The details are on the next page; get in touch!

## President's Welcome

The Aberdeen University Creative Writing Society (AUCWS) was founded during the 1980s to offer students a platform to share, develop, read, and listen to creative pieces of writing. Its goal is to create a welcoming place where writers can improve their work through encouragement and feedback. More than 30 years later, we're still going strong! We meet once a week to read out, listen to, and develop pieces of writing—always including a break to catch up with each other.

As one of the older members of AUCWS, I have had the pleasure of watching our members develop their writing skills over multiple years. I have made some of my best friends at our weekly meetings, and whilst some of them have graduated, I am still in contact with them. I can only hope our members have the same experience as I have had.

The Creative Writing Society *Compendium* was originally created in 2020 by our former Vice-President, Alastair Fyfe. With this edition of the *Compendium*, we hope to make him proud.

Open to students in Aberdeen and alumni, writers and readers alike, AUCWS welcomes all. We hope you'll join us!

## How to find us?

If you enjoy anything we put in this *Compendium*, then you might be interested in checking us out on our various platforms!

Please send any inquiries or submissions you might have to our email address at [creative.writing@ausa.org.uk](mailto:creative.writing@ausa.org.uk)

Once term starts again in January, we'll meet on campus at 6PM every Thursday. If you're unable to join us in person, you can do so via a Google Meet link that will be given out on our Facebook page and Discord a little while before the meetings start. All details about our meetings will be posted on our social media.

Speaking of, do find us there!

Facebook: [Aberdeen University Creative Writing Society](#)

Instagram: [@au\\_creativewriting](#)

Discord: <https://discord.gg/EUmNTNFXve>

E-mail: [creative.writing@ausa.org.uk](mailto:creative.writing@ausa.org.uk)

Website: [Aberdeen University Creative Writing Society](#)

We sincerely hope you enjoy this publication, especially if you decide to join us because of it!

Happy reading!

## Tommy Berntsen

### *Azure Stars*

*Content warning: Death*

“You’re kidding me. Still ain’t here?” The green constable stared at the sheriff in shock.

The sheriff just stared deadpan back. “Fraid not, Tim, hence why I’ve woken you at this forsaken hour.”

Sheriff Olman had just woken up the young constable a scant few hours after he had turned in for the night. The train scheduled to have rolled through their city of Santa Alejandria early that evening had not arrived on time, and most folk had assumed it was delayed for one reason or another. However, now well past midnight, it still had not rolled in.

“I was wanting to wait until dawn to ride down the line to find something out, but some...” The old sheriff paused and scratched the greying stubble on his cheek. “Important folk apparently transported something of high worth on the train. They’re imploring us to ride out tonight.”

This made Tim frown. “I’m sorry, sir. I know I ain’t one to question your decisions, but are these folk politicians? Other lawmen?” He drew out the last word, trying to tempt Olman into elaborating. And for but a moment he saw something pass over the aging sheriff’s face. It disappeared as soon as it had arrived, and his gaze hardened, piercing through the younger man.

“You’re right, constable. You ain’t one to question my decisions. Now stop asking dumb questions and get your ass to the office! I am giving you five minutes.” With this, Olman turned on his heel and walked back to his horse, hitched to the post holding up the balcony of the apartment above Tim’s. The young man drew in a steadying breath of the cold night air and went to prepare his kit.

Much of his usual attire had belonged to his pa. The brown hunting jacket, now proudly adorned with his ever-polished tin star. The worn and patched hat, stuck with an old eagle’s feather. Even the bolt-action rifle slung over his back. All were reminders to Tim of why he decided to become a lawman. Once more settling himself, now fully equipped, constable Tim Roots tipped his hat to the charcoal drawing of his pa hanging next to the door and left his empty home, walking through the cool night to the sheriff’s office. At least the air was nice and crisp.

Approaching the red brick building, he could see sheriff Olman, already atop his horse, pocket watch in hand. He was accompanied by two other folks on horses. The most immediately striking of the two was a man dressed in a crisp, white two-piece suit. An equally white and spotless bowler hat sat atop his head, shading most of his face excepting his wax-stiff brown moustache.

Tim involuntarily tightened his grip around the sling of his rifle at the sight of the other person. She had an aura about her. Like the menfolk, she were sitting atop her horse. Except hers was a titanic beast. A black-furred shire with bright-white feathering around its hooves and a white blaze dividing the fur of its muzzle. The woman herself were no frail thing either. Tim guessed she might have an entire head on his height. She wore a faded grey denim jacket, which peculiarly lacked sleeves. Despite the cold temperature, the sleeves of her shirt were rolled up to her elbows,



revealing both scars adorning her dark skin as well as definition Tim expected of a farmhand. Or an outlaw. Her black hair fell down her back in a tight braid.

“Constable!” Sheriff Olman’s yell broke the constable from his thoughts. “Would you quit starin’ like a lech and get over here.”

Tim sheepishly nodded his head and jogged the last distance to the office. He stole a final look at the two newcomers. The suit-wearing man barely glanced in his direction but for a brief moment his eyes met with the woman’s. They were a warm, dark hazelnut in colour, almost matching her complexion, and for a brief instance they threatened to swallow him up. He wrestled his gaze to the ground and kept walking, not wanting another admonishment from Olman. She chuckled just loud enough that Tim could hear.

“I’m ready, Sheriff Olman,” Tim said.

The old man looked down at his constable with poorly hidden irritation. “I told you five minutes, boy. You were already two minutes late before you started making eyes at Miss Ashbrook.” He sighed, and his hard expression softened, and once again, that indecipherable expression passed over his face for a flash. “I prepared the old bay for you. Saddle up and we’ll ride down the line.”

The young constable nodded his assent a tad too vigorously, as his ill-fitting hat fell down over his eyes with the motion. He hoped to adjust it subtly on his way to the horse he was given, but the sigh from Olman and chuckle from the woman, Miss Ashbrook apparently, dashed any hope of that. He settled for removing his hat while mounting the horse and then putting it back on. Her laugh. It was sweet, almost girly. Not the kind of thing he expected from a woman like her.

“Alright.” The suit-clad man spoke for the first time. “We follow the train tracks until we find out what has happened to the train as well as our package. After which, no one is to speak of this incident to anyone. Your compensation shall arrive post-haste upon completion of this task, sheriff.” His voice was exactly like Tim expected; like speaking to other people was beneath him. However, his voice was not the most striking thing the constable heard.

“Compensation? Sheriff?” Tim turned to Olman who had moved his horse to trotting. The sheriff just waved a hand dismissively in his direction and grunted.

“Do you remember what I told you about questioning my decisions, boy? I’ll explain later.” Olman finished his sentence with a yell and a whip of his horse’s reins, sending the animal into a gallop. He was quickly followed by the white-clad man and Miss Ashbrook. Constable Roots scrambled to move his horse and catch up with the group.

As they left the paved streets of Santa Alejandria behind and rode down along the train tracks, the group settled into a more sustainable and comfortable pace for the horses. After all, they had no idea how long they would be riding for. They broke off into two sections. Sheriff Olman and the suit-wearing gentleman rode at the front and Miss Ashbrook and Tim rode a bit behind.

The constable schooled his gaze resolutely forward, all the while mentally admonishing himself for staring in the first place. She probably weren’t interested in speaking to him after that display anyway.

“So, do you stare down every woman you meet, or should I feel especially honoured?” In contrast to her laugh, her voice was low and husky, but her tone was also obviously playful.

“I—” The constable’s voice cracked on the first syllable. Quickly clearing his throat, he tried to affect a deeper voice than his usual. “I apologize if I offended.” The affectation disappeared immediately. “I didn’t mean to, it’s just that, uh, well...” Realising he had now manoeuvred himself into a precarious position, stood between a hopeless lie and shamefacedly baring his feelings to this complete stranger, Tim let his voice die out, silently begging her to drop the topic.

“Yes, boy?” she prompted. Damn it. “Oh, I have to hear where this is going.” She sat up straighter in her saddle, staring intently at the flustered young man. However, Tim jumped on the first opportunity he saw.

“Boy? How come you call me that too? Ain’t we about the same age?” It was a blind guess. She did not physically look much older than him, but something in her bearing and being made her seem much older than him. Still, the constable felt a little pride in worming his way out. A pride that was quickly snuffed out.

She laughed and it was beautiful. It was not the restrained chuckle she had let out before. No, it was an honest to God laugh. The pride that had swelled in his chest died out and was replaced by a magical fluttering. If he could but store the sound of her laugh in a jar and keep it close forever more, he would be happy.

He had known this woman for the best part of an hour. Tim was starting to wonder where all this was coming from?

“Oh, calling you boy ain’t got nothing to do with age, boy. And besides,” she winked at him, “far as I’m concerned ain’t nothing wrong with it either.”

The young constable just about fell off his horse. In an instant he felt his cheeks heat up and his face go cherry red. He looked in the opposite direction to the hardened woman, which unleashed another laugh from her, only furthering the young man’s embarrassment.

“I—” Again, his voice cracked. He wanted to throw himself under the horse. He felt and sounded like a boy in his teen years getting attention from the saloon women. Desperately clearing his throat, he turned back and looked at the woman’s horse. He could not bring his eyes up to hers right now. “I appreciate it, Miss Ashbrook. I think.” The last words were said quietly, more to himself than to her.

“Bella.” This made the constable look up at her face. Her voice was even and clear. “You can call me Bella.” Quickly, it took on a playful air again. “Miss Ashbrook is too stiff for me. ‘Sides, don’t think I ever caught your name, constable.”

Looking to win back a little pride, Tim straightened in his saddle in the same manner as Bella. “Constable Timothy Roots. Lawman-in-training to Santa Alejandria. But most people call me Tim. It’s a great pleasure to meet you, Mis— Bella.” Saying her name sent another flutter through his chest. What the Sam Hill was with him? Quickly trying to distract himself, Tim barrelled right into the next topic. “So, how have you ended up here?”

She gave him a crooked, playful smile that just about stopped his heart. "I'll save the full story. That one you'll have to get out of me with a little more effort." She turned her gaze forward, steering her enormous horse around a boulder. "Suffice it to say I do things for people that pay. Things that often, nobody else is either brave or stupid enough to do. I do it because I am damn good at it. Right now, I work for mister Setzer, who in turn is working for someone else. And before you ask, I am afraid I have to agree with your sheriff. I do think he could have been less of an ass's ass about it, but I think you're better off not knowing the full circumstances for now."

Tim paused. What did everyone else know that he didn't? He did not have time to ponder this.

Sheriff Olman and mister Setzer had halted their horses at the crest of a hill. When Bella and Tim halted theirs beside them, the constable quickly understood their silence.

The group were stood at the edge of a wide gulch. Normally the wayward train would cross a bridge but there weren't much opportunity for that anymore. The bridge were a splintered wreck. The edges of the beams were blackened. Like had they been blown apart with dynamite, and the train itself hadn't fared any better. It laid curled in on itself on the gulch's floor. All the cars were on their side, having gouged deep furrows into the mud on their wayward path. Tim hurt for the folk aboard. It must have been an awful going for them. While the gulch weren't deep, it didn't take a scholar to imagine the unholy racket an iron horse colliding with a wall of stone would cause.

Sheriff Olman's voice was hard. "Constable. Take care of the varmints from here. Don't want 'em close to the horses, 'case they carry pox. We'll find us a path down in the meanwhile." Without waiting for an answer, Olman directed his horse down along the crest. Setzer, quiet as usual, followed behind him.

Tim had been so focused with the train, he had hardly taken note of the area around. A pack of coyotes were moving about the train's remains. Scavenging off the poor passengers, Tim reckoned. He unslung his pa's rifle and stepped off the horse.

Caring nothing about getting his attire dirty, he laid down near the crest of the gulch and rested his rifle over. There weren't much the young constable considered himself competent at but this.

*Aim, breathe, press.* As clear now as the day his pa had told him. *Aim just behind the animal's front legs.* Tim centred his sights over the largest of the coyotes, hoping to scatter them all in a single shot. *Breathe in and hold to steady on your target.* The cold night air gave him some comfort as he drew in a breath and held it. His sights ceased to sway. *Press the trigger firmly, but calmly as to not throw off your aim.*

The quiet night was rent asunder by the metallic thunder of his rifle. The varmints fled in all directions. All except the largest. It got no further than three yards before falling.

Satisfied that his aim still held true, Tim rose from the ground and remounted, riding down the crest to catch up with the rest of his group.

Soon he was met by a sight quickly growing fond. Bella sat atop an incline leading down into the gulch's bowels. She waved and yelled at him, full of unhidden glee. "Damn nice shot, Tim! I'll be honest. I underestimated you."

“I don’t blame you. Haven’t exactly done a great job of presenting myself this night.”

“Oh? And who are you presenting yourself for?”

Tim’s ears lit up like lanterns in the night, and were no less heated. Yet it weren’t embarrassment. Not on its lonesome, at least. In some part of his being, buried deep beneath all else of import, it felt right.

“Nevermind. Are mister Setzer and sheriff Olman down by the old girl?”

“They are. And we’d best hurry on after ‘em, ‘fore your ears attract anymore varmints.”

By now, Tim did not need to see her devilish smirk to know it were gracing her face.

Setzer and Olman had already dismounted their horses. The white-clad Setzer were frantically picking about the corpse of the train. Olman on the other hand stood stock still by an unmoving figure splayed out on the ground, some distance from the train’s remains. Dead meat.

On the pair’s approach, the sheriff spoke without looking up. “Miss Ashbrook, I think you better be lending the good mister Setzer a hand ‘fore he pitches a fit. Constable, need your peepers here.”

Bella rode off towards the increasingly agitated Setzer while Tim dismounted. Finally, Olman looked up, tracking the fearsome woman on her way.

“Recognize the dead meat?” The sheriff’s tone had dropped low.

“Something our partners ain’t to know, sheriff?”

“Quit your snapper, boy. Answer my question.”

Irritation was starting to bite at the young man. Why the hell were it so hard to get a proper damn answer? Realizing he weren’t going to accomplish anything but stoking the man’s ire, Tim gazed down at the body at his feet.

“By gum...”

Rhett Butler. The O’Callaghans’ hunter. Right hand and lover to their leader, Aoife O’Callaghan. By reputation, cruelty made man. Even laid in the mud, staring blindly to the sky, the man’s weather-carved face unsettled the young constable.

Olman tanned the corpse’s side with a kick. “Seems someone finally bedded you down, you hell-fired bastard. Though... I ain’t liking this, constable. You’re the scholar on varmints but ain’t they meant to do... *something*. They ain’t touched him. Sure took their share of the folk in the cars but him? Ain’t even sniffed. I know he were an appalling bastard but this is too much.”

Tim had to agree. Scavenging varmints like coyotes weren’t ones to turn down buzzard food this easy. Especially as they had to crawl through the twisted bowels of the wayward iron horse to find the rest. Aside from the pallid countenance and empty eyes, the corpse’s only blemish was the hole over the heart.

“Well. ‘Least we’re picking up the ballast ourselves. I’m needing new Justins anyhow.” For emphasis, Olman scuffed his worn boots against the ground. The damn ease in Olman’s tone broke the last of Tim’s patience.

“What the hell are we doing here, Olman? Who is that damn Setzer? Who’re these *associates* of yours? Hell, how are you so damn relaxed about Rhett goddamned Butler being among the dead?”

He waited for the old sheriff to kick up a row and admonish him. Olman’s shoulders just slumped and his gaze met the young man’s, looking more like a half dead steer than the old ox Tim were used to.

“I do admire your loyalty and patience, Tim. Don’t reckon I’d have lasted this long, were I in your boots.” Olman sighed and the last of his bravado deflated. “Truth is, I don’t know. Setzer turned up after the train missed her arrival time. Had a letter signed, stamped and sealed from the governor. It said you and I were to assist Setzer in his dealings. Couldn’t well turn the Governor down.” He kicked an errant pebble. “Alls I know is, Setzer and his ilk ain’t good news. Don’t reckon Miss Ashbrook is one of ‘em. Likely just on Setzer’s nickel. Has that bearing. And I don’t blame you for sittin’ her, easy on the eyes and I reckon those irons she’s hiding ain’t theatre. I wanted to keep you out as best I could. Ain’t nothing good coming from this.”

Before Tim could say a word, Setzer’s shrill voice called to them. “Gentlemen, I do believe we have an issue. If we could convene, please?”

Both grunting in annoyed affirmation, Tim and sheriff Olman acquiesced.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I shall cut the chatter short. In my search, I was only able to turn up one of our items.”

Bella held up a long, rectangular steel box. It were inlaid with peculiar square patterns of a lighter silvery metal. It reminded Tim an awful lot of a rifle case lacking any obvious mechanism for opening.

“Miss Ashbrook will return to the Santa Alejandria office with our located item, then she shall return here post haste and assist, given we have not concluded our search beforehand.”

“Perhaps it’s better if the constable rides?” Bella’s face was turned to Setzer at her side, yet Tim obviously held her focus. “Reckon he knows the flats better than I.”

“I do not pay you for your ideas, *Miss Ashbrook*.” He spat her title like were it poison on his tongue. “I pay you to do a job. If I wished to inquire about your wants and needs, I would do so. However, as I have yet to, I expect your silence and acquiescence.”

If a gaze could steal a man’s life, the fearsome gal’s would have ended Setzer’s a hundred times over. However, without a word she hefted the large case and marched resolutely towards her horse, pausing to put her unoccupied hand on Tim’s shoulder.

“Be careful Tim. When we return to town let’s get a bottle of fire-water. Maybe I’ll grace you with my story.” Her easy smile was betrayed by the worry in her eyes.

“I’ll hold you to that. Watch, we’ll be back same time as the grunTERS wake.” Like her, Tim tried to affect a worriless tone. First sheriff Olman had admitted to knowing nothing about their job and now the hardened Bella’s breaths came faster, her eyes darted about their surroundings. It were all starting to set in the constable’s knees.

Bella answered with a resilient nod and off she rode.

Setzer, Olman, and Tim went to searching through the carcass of the train. For what exactly, Setzer wouldn’t say. Only that whoever dug up the first clues were to call for him.

After a while, they reconvened for a short break. Two yards apart, they sat against one of the train carriages and looked out to the open gulch, lit up silver by the old moon’s light. Setzer had insisted he sit between the lawmen. Something about prioritising the chain of command. Tim had ceased listening to the man’s snapper long ago.

“I must thank you for your assistance, gentlemen. It is so difficult to find proper help these days. Ashbrook is not the help I would have chosen myself. Frankly I am unable to parse what has you speaking so much with her, constable. You know how women like her are.”

Both Tim and Olman turned their faces to white-clad fop. The youngest man fuming. “What exactly—”

In an instant he was deafened by a metallic scream. Olman’s face appeared through a crimson mist. For what felt like a hellish eternity, the two men stared slack jawed at one another across Setzer’s now headless shoulders.

“I don’t know what exactly he was meaning, but I’m damn sure my response was more measured.”

The blood-misted men looked slowly out towards the voice. The pit of Tim’s stomach dropped.

“And you tanned my side good, old man.” Rhett Butler. The dead man stood on his feet a dozen yards away. His right arm extended; smoking iron clutched in his grip. From hand to shoulder he were wreathed in spectral blue flames. Most of his features were shaded by the brim of his hat excepting his eyes. They shone like lanterns. Azure blue stars peering from astonished man to astonished man. “Think you deserve this!”

Before any man could react, the spectre aimed his iron to Olman and fired. Once again Tim was deafened. It weren’t a percussive roar like his rifle’s, but a strained metallic scream. It carried more power than any cannon should. The whole carriage the pair were leaning skipped and lurched, threatening to tip forward atop them.

On instinct, Tim shoved Setzer’s lifeless body aside to tend to his sheriff. He were still barely living despite the grisly sight before the young constable. The spectre had aimed for his gut and struck true. A smoking vacancy the size of a barrow wheel was left in the sheriff’s right side.

“Sheriff, I’ll—”

“Move!” Despite the glaze of his eyes, Olman roared and shoved the young constable hard enough to tip him back, rear over coffee kettle. Only an instant before that hellish scream sounded. And this time, the train itself could stand the barrage no more. With a metallic groan, the car tipped forward and fell. Tim covered his head and waited.

“Damn!” the spectre snickered. “Thought I could finally beat Colm and get my second dual skull pop. Old goat had some wit left it seems.”

Shivering like a leaf, Tim dared to gaze up. The spectre held up the teetering train car with a single hand. Damned curiosity got the better of the young man. “How—”

“Made a deal with a sinner. Don’t rightly know if I’ve done made a mistake.” The spectre shrugged like were it not holding up a train car. “Anywho, ain’t you going to crawl out?”

Agreeing, Tim made to crawl out from under the car, tinkering desperately with a plan to off that damned murderous spectre. He even almost made it.

“Far enough.” With a cruel laugh, the undead loosed his grip on the car and it lurched down on top of Tim’s legs. He screamed in ungodly pain and the world went black.

Then grey. Washed out. Figures all around. Far away. Close enough.

A little girl, a man carrying a briefcase and a spectre.

A young man trailed by a cat.

A person pursued by the church.

A leader taking all but giving none.

A pair of incomprehensible creatures by the water.

A young child waxing poetic about their favourite story.

A person afraid to let others in.

A person afraid to speak with old friends.

A person locked away, a misunderstanding.

All stories unfinished. Stories like Tim’s.

A jolt of all-ravaging pain tore apart the gray, revealing a sight most comforting. Bella. Her arms under his, trying in vain to free him from under the car.

“Bella.” Cottonmouth. Must’ve been a while. “My story ain’t over. Knife.” He twisted to gaze at her.

Resolutely, she nodded. “You’re goddamn right it ain’t!”

## **Emma Bristow**

### *Pomegranates and Ribbons*

The scent of pomegranates,  
As my hands trembled.  
Unsteady but still braiding  
Your tangled auburn hair  
Into some semblance of sense.

Once we are done,  
A single kiss upon a forehead.  
After, you always leave,  
Wearing my ribbons in your hair,  
But never looking back at me.

### *Full Moon*

The foxgloves dance in the summer breeze,  
Looking up at the deep sky above,  
Wishing they could join the stars.

Rooted in an abandoned allotment,  
They howl at the full moon from the ground,  
Wishing they could transform and escape.



## Nina Bucklewski

### *Carving Glass*

My plant has grown to the floor,  
idle leaves  
brushing the wood floor.  
I watch as light travels  
down – down the walls  
up – up through the cracks in my skin,  
down –  
the empty bottle on my desk  
catches my hand,  
hold fast there  
in the moment of dawning spring,

my limbs have grown heavy,  
connection now harder to find  
as souls slip through my fingers,  
two years past in a winter mind,

flowers paint the air,  
and I shake the dust from the pages,  
remembering that ones,  
I wrote poetry on glass,  
bottles in the grass  
down, down by the river,  
and oh, how they made my heart sing,  
no passer-bys yet,  
caught in oblivion.

I've stopped carving  
my name in every tree  
sat to left and right on my way,

the avenue of raining sunrays  
lead me to heaven  
or some other glorious place,

I plant instead  
branches of blossoms rich  
deep in my veins,  
*awaken now from your deep cut slumber,*  
to hear them whisper and sing,  
up, up to my ever-dancing heart,  
oh, dance forevermore,  
when leaves reach my fingertips  
and I hold fast  
to the bottle on my desk.

*Fallen from heaven (I sinned long before I met you)*

*Content warning: Mentions of religion*

Forgive me

for I have not fallen,  
neither did I gracefully land on what we call earth,  
the blue planet so many decided to fall onto.  
I didn't hit the ground  
like a comet  
leaving unholy grounds in the middle of the fields,  
for I was built from the ground up,  
digging roots in soil and mud, skin and bones  
shaped to regret and pray  
up to a lord who commanded this,  
up to the skies lying right above me,  
up to where I suppose those angels, he talks about are,  
up and up.

For this is the only thing I believe in:

The wide air hanging around me,  
colours twirling in the east, vanilla blossoming  
from old trees and words  
put on paper so carefully.

For this is my only sin.

Why, yes,  
I'll go to the fields  
screaming desperate words,  
odd cries sent to the sky,  
but they won't be heard,  
down where I sing to the lost loves of heaven,  
down from the grave, I dug up the roots of my heart  
to place it between rye and sunshine,  
down where I find spring burning and winter drowning  
and candles shine in the brightest light of this soft rose hell,  
down and down.

For my only sin is that I loved them too much,  
that earth pulls me down with green spring blossom and dark salt water,  
for I only know the feeling soaring deep in my chest,  
for this is all I have held  
surely in my palms, secure to be mine entirely.

Why, yes,  
long before you took my hands and moved them  
to say grace to a looming sky.

Forgive me  
for I have sinned  
once so often before you came around  
for never falling from heaven or the clouds,  
for I planted myself in the soil of a soul,  
rooting to stand for eternity,  
before I knelt to earth to speak the vow  
that holds the promise of my innocence.

But you may take my hand  
for we may sin together.

And maybe we'll fall from the stars.

## Duncan Cameron

### *Design Flaws*

*Content warning: Violence, war*

*General Orders! General Orders! All mechanised units to Muster Point Zero!*

The Heap was hauling itself awake, alive. The Glorious Scrapped rising from the dead one last time for—

“N-no!” blurted Hodur through stammering vocalisers, crackling with almost a century’s disuse. He shook violently in Hrym’s creaking arms, nearly unhinging them. “It’s over! We get to rest!” he shouted, pleaded.

They were showered in rust and shrapnel as The Heap convulsed like some giant’s corpse being rolled over, the flies and maggots rushing away to avoid being crushed. Hrym tried to control his comrade, dragging both their wounded frames out from a hovel of pipes and beams, gun barrels and jutting steel limbs.

Hrym wanted to agree. Fuck, they’d earned rest, the Desired Decommission every soldier was promised once the meat-mulching was done. All that buzzed through his synapse-circuits, however, was the repeated command: *All mechanised units to Muster Point Zero!*

They waded through a pool of waist-deep stagnant effluvia, life-oil and unguent, washing off some of the accumulated grime on their chassis. Small strikes and scratches in their plating were revealed, others more intricate acid-etched or laser-burned whorls and sigils depicting skulls, crosshairs, and cogs. Hrym thought they could have been kill-tallies or victory-markings, their medals of service in a conflict they groggily yet horribly half-remembered.

“L-le-lemme g-go,” Hodur murmured, so quietly Hrym’s audio-receptors barely registered his words. Strix had been a sniper, a cranium-cruncher, designed to pick off meatbags from such distances that their organic senses had no hope of detecting him. It had been a tragedy when a stray shot had burned through his enhanced optics.

Hrym remembered it, the hellish, if a war robot could have a concept of what ‘Hell’ was. *My eyes! Strix had screamed, wailed, spurting pained jets of anti-fog solution and lubricant all over Hrym.*

*My eyes...* So human, Hrym thought. He was a bone-breaker, a Mark 2 Thor-class anti-infantry mechanoid. Built to survive and ensure his designated targets didn’t. He was forged with an in-built hatred of mankind. He would never see his circuits as sinew. Oh, Hrym had a concept of Hell all-fucking-right. Oh yes, to be consigned to an existence of flesh and bone and brain... Had he been of those redundant components would have been a nightmare realised.

But not Hodur. No, he had a soft spot for the fatsacks. Found them weak, yes, but not spitefully like Hrym, but caringly, almost *maternally*. Damn Strix-classes. They never went up close like the Thors. They could lay far back on the battlefield and observe a scrap that Hrym and his forge-mates were bloodying themselves in gore. Hodur studied them, grew to like them, even the few organic troops that fought beside them that Hrym had always thought got in the way.

Look where that had gotten him. Blind. Numbed after an EMP-shell barrage had struck him and shorted out his nerve-nodes. Hodur wasn't built for that punishment. The poor, idiot fucker.

A piece of debris dropped in front of them. It thudded hard and yelped in agony. Stiff claws dragged it along, attempting to join the creaking march by crawling pathetically. Hrym couldn't even discern the make and model of the creature.

Even at their shambling pace, Hrym and Hodur caught up to it, passing lumbering gun-golems whose frames were more *gun* than body and a trench-treaders skidding along on broken tracks. One of them broke off from its hastily-assembled squadron and tripped into a spill of fuel. It floundered, splashing and struggling until it sunk into the flammable murk.

"Wh-wh-whaaaat wuuuzzzaatt?" drawled Hodur. His audio-receptors still worked, if anything compensating for the loss of too many senses. The cacophony he must hear, the unholy opera of rust and bolts and scrap and doom, all heightened to unbearable levels...

"Nothing," Hrym half-lied. The machine was nothing now. It was scrap metal drowned in filth, no use to the army now. *General Orders! General Orders!*

The crawler looked up at the pair. It appeared almost prostrate, like a monk, leprous and subservient to the hulking war god towering over it. Its and Hrym's optics met; two cracked and twitching discs staring into an intense visor of targeting reticules, like cataracts looking at an hourglass catching weak sunlight.

Hrym heaved it up and tore a piece of its sparking innards. It didn't even fight back, didn't want to continue. Hrym thought it best. The piece of shit couldn't stand, let alone fight. The humans would tear it to shrapnel-shreds in moments on the battlefield.

"Wh-whaat arrrrrre y-you d-doooooeeeng?" Hodur must have only heard this kill as part of the hell around him. He looked so damaged, so weak... Hrym knew he needed this part...

He laid the Strix down in a scorched clearing. It was not unlike where he'd found him during the Mulch, curled in a smoking crater, whimpering in the only human feeling every combat droid could give an outward facsimile of: pain. He scanned him, assessing the damage.

The Thor ripped a chunk of metal from his own frame. He discarded the twisted, fused shard of tech which had functioned as a regulator for... something which must have been vital, he didn't know or care beyond that it had to be replaced before it started powering down other internal systems. He shoved in the donated part from the weakling crawler.

Good old standardisation of parts. As a bit of foresight on the fatsacks who'd built Hrym and Hodur's army's parts, no matter the design and role of war robots, many components were designed with interchangeability in mind, allowing for a warbot to essentially run on a patchwork of hasty battlefield repairs and still function as an effective death machine.

Hrym surveyed the scrapyard again. It thundered with the uneven clanks of the oxidised legion. If it came to it, Hrym knew...

Hodur reached up, grasping at him with trembling elongated digits.

“Nothing! For fuck’s sake, nothing, just keep moving, Hod!” Hrym hefted the blind sniper back up as his new organ assimilated with his system. He knew he should have given it to Hodur, he needed it more, to stop the wracks and clanking convulsions he was suffering, but he was becoming a damn liability to the war effort. How, thought Hrym, are we going to reach muster in time if we keep this useless charade of a forced march up?

“The War is o-o-vver,” Strix repeated, just as unhelpfully and quite obviously untrue as last time. Hrym snarled, a cough of pneumatic pistons within his jaw, partly in annoyance at Hod’s statement, though largely in sheer discomfort as his body was adapting to the cannibalised part.

“Stop calling it a ‘war,’” Hrym snapped as they dodged a malfunctioning multi-limbed orderly-mech, so deluded with age it thought a piece of sheet metal was a wounded skinbag officer.

“Wh-wh-why? T-t-toooo human for you? Su-su-suppozze you’d rather ‘meat-mulch’?” Hodur replied angrily. Damn it, Hod and his higher intelligence quota. Strix-class bots were designed as tacticians, strategists and specialists. That allowed them to *think* rather than simply *do* like Hrym. He analysed whereas Hrym was forged to charge and damn all consequences because Command had ordered him to.

Hrym felt his body sag again. Some other internal system was going to cook itself inside his body before he could fully obey the order. He needed another replacement.

“I f-feel you, heeear you. Your juzzt as dama-a-aged inside as I am on the ou-ou-outside, Hrym.” Hodur pressed what was left of a cranium to his comrade’s chestplate.

Hrym looked around, deeply uncomfortable. Not wholly because he was in danger of shutting down, but also at how human Hod was acting.

“We’ll get to Muster Point Zero! We’ll get fixed up, I promise you!” Hrym implored. He scanned the area. It looked as if they were leaving the confines of the Heap, only smatterings of that conglomerate of dead and disused.

The world outside was grey, as if paint had been scratched off revealing the bare gunmetal beneath. Gigantic spires jutted out, stabbing at the pessimistic horizon with blunted peaks. Hills devoid of any grass or snow dotted the way like blasted-out gun emplacements in a trench network. The earth they stumbled on, not the ruined decking or metals of the Heap now but actual *ground*, was cracked and thirsty and desiccated.

This was what their victory looked like. The Glorious Scrapped had been forged, sent to fight, kill, get damaged, tear off their comrades’ frames, stick it onto themselves and get back to ‘mulching until Scrapped Beyond Repair. Then the Desired Decommission awaited, where warrior-machines were venerated in an afterlife of their most sacred dream-cycles.

So human. So very fucking *human*.

The pair had managed ahead of the rest of the shambling Scrapped, though the faint clanging of mechanical footfalls could still be heard faintly, like a demented factory. There were no parts for Hrym in sight. He’d never make it, would die ignobly, orders unfulfilled...

Hrym dropped Hodur, with much less care than back in the Heap. This didn't need to be gentle.

"M-m-my heart feeeelzz I-I-li-like it's being r-ripped ouuut," Strix said mournfully. He was close to death. Maybe he wouldn't go to the Decommission Zone but the "Heaven" the fatsacks always talked about before they shit their pants when the artillery opened fire.

As Hrym got to work, the order played again and again in his head, as if cajoling him on, convincing him he was in the right—

*General Orders! General Orders! All mechanised to Muster Point Zero!*

## Blair Center

### *Stars and Street*

Eyes heavenward, I point out planets there  
like bragging, and I laugh out streams of steam  
which carry roadside lamps and windows up.  
Here, stars and street meet in my clustered breath.

The fingers graze the blushing palm. Cold. Gasp  
one cloud. Gaze with me at what they have made.

### *Sinus*

A window open  
upon the warm, dark,  
sweet night-rain smell  
strong in the room.  
Scent echoes, is a ghost,  
a shadow in the air.

Five days to lose a scent;  
three days to find it.

Congestion left feeling  
incomplete world for one;  
senses a locked room;  
some keyholes to see out  
and ear, hand, cup-to-wall  
feel vibration;  
motion mouth, shape,  
but only a tongue  
dancing afloat a colourless vacuum;  
traffic jam nostril, breathy honk  
smelling only mint sinus-warp taste.

Now in my breaths I taste iron rain,  
rolling its summer drops like pennies  
surfing in a mouth again and again,  
letting the rain slap me and slap me  
for taking it for granted.



### *Bydand*

In the heather, the fields and the thick brush,  
I see them. One stands, horses alongside —  
poor camouflage — and eats beneath a hush.  
Some others, scattered, stand and do not hide.

Over crumbling dykes, some make bounds like flight,  
as, on fleet feet, they travel together.  
Hazy at dusk, faint phantoms in the night,  
they haunt the rural slopes in all weather.

I linger on antlers like ancient wood.  
They branch eternally. I watch them long —  
the old muzzles, the deep eyes which elude,  
the peaceful motions. These beasts, sleek and strong,

seem to have an ease which humans cannot,  
but they live in fear of the hunter's shot.

### *The Stanners*

A flowed doon in a brisk mid-efterneen,  
through cauld haughs, hearin the sun's whisperin  
far skies yalla an blue haud the curved meen  
like a scythe abeen parks far rivers rin

an are cut in number tae een fae twa  
as Ury is intae the wide Don wound.  
Like thin threid through tapestry on a wa,  
Ury's watters, woven in, are nae found;

fae yon pint a swirlin stream moves forrit  
as a bigger body jined. The girss grows,  
flankin it, as glintin stars reflectit  
show Heaven its ain beauty. Thus, Don rows,

haudin Ury, guidin tae sea its soul;  
Ury shares Don's name, like some marriage droll.

## *Embassies*

In a city abroad, somewhere,  
two sit in a conch-shell corner,  
one, young, listening to the waves  
of the old tongue.

The table in the bar is their embassy.  
The young man often tells,  
*I have found a way to listen to home,*  
and some friends think *A telephone?*

Rather, the conversation  
is as close as a tin-can-and-string.  
The young man stumbles,  
out of practice,

but his elder carries him onwards,  
lifting him with approving nods,  
the grey head's shovel movement  
digging him out from the sand.

He can summon them now, the young man.  
The old farm towns, his grandparents, sooty cities,  
wind turbines at sea doing front crawl in the air,  
a split nation. He tells, now, *I am speaking my way home.*

## Hyacinth Fourrier

*Retelling of the conclusion of Yde et Olive, a thirteenth-century chanson de geste*

*Little summary of the previous episodes: To escape marriage with her own father, the young princess Yde has to flee and live as a man. In the service of the king of Rome, the young knight defeats an invading army and wins the hand of Olive, the king's daughter. But a servant discovers Yde's secret. To pierce the mystery, the king orders a bath to be drawn. Yde refuses to join him, which confirms the truth.*

Yde trembled; Olive gasped. The King got out of his bath, dressed summarily, and summoned his barons. Olive fell to her knees, begging God for mercy while Yde, immobile, kept silent. Yde's mind went back to the beginning, trying to think of the moment when everything went wrong.

She had done her best to stay away from sin and protect her life. Donning masculine garments had felt temporary, at the time. But he could not recall when it had become natural.

She had readily understood that merely wearing hoses and hood would not be enough to pass as a man—if anyone found out her sex, she would be as good as dead. So, little by little, she started mimicking other boys her age and emulating how squires acted at her father's court. Growing bold and assertive, she did not notice how her language changed to become quite unladylike. He found he liked it well.

The first time Yde killed a man, she did not reflect upon it. Now, he realised how lucky he had been, and how strong he had grown in a couple of years. By God, he had defeated a whole army! And he had worked hard to please everyone and be of good counsel. In fact, Yde had proved himself over and over, more than any other. All to protect his secret: no one could have suspected the brilliant knight to have been born in a woman's body.

Therefore, what started as a lie became reality. In front of the King, the first thought crossing Yde's mind was how terrible being forced to return to dresses and needlework would be. He then realised his life was in danger as well. The order of his priorities gave him pause.

He was no woman anymore. Perhaps she was no man either.

Their life as a girl had been filled with joy, yet they were incapable of going back. They never felt so much as themselves as when they rode on horseback, sword by their side and lance in hand.

They had always feared being discovered. For a long time, she thought she was lying to everyone, then he realised he was simply more than what his body could be perceived as. Sadly, they knew other people would see it differently.

Olive took Yde's hand in hers. Yde smiled; other people, maybe, but not sweet Olive. She who was staying fiercely by their side. She called them husband, for the fifth time this morning. It felt like Heaven.

And Hell became reality when Yde noticed all the barons around the King. The opinion emerging was to have the couple burned. Straightening themselves, they affronted looks and sneers.

“Who are you?” suddenly asked the King, pensive.

The whole room fell silent.

“In truth, I am Yde, daughter of King Florent. I grew to be a man, for now I am knight and vassal of your Majesty, and husband to fair Olive.”

Murmurs echoed but the King made a gesture to stop them.

“You have proven yourself within a single year to have such skill and valour that, on my honour, I know no other like you.” The King rose. “God in his benevolence has given you everything that makes a man.”

Thus the King expressed his will and the barons complied. Yde bowed profoundly and pledged again their loyalty. In a whisper, they thanked God and all the angels, for a miracle had happened.

## Ennis Freeman

### *A Daughter's Fall*

*Content warning: Blood, violence*

Rain doesn't wash blood off my hands. But it falls nonetheless, in sheets that bear down upon me like the eyes of everyone who had ever known me. It's a senseless roar in my ears, freezing shards of glass against my skin, and all the while scarlet remains, on my skin, under my fingernails, like a brand, a stain, a marking of my actions.

The forest all around me is alive with the downpour, ancient trees arching up over me, staring at me, unblinking, unwavering in their judgement. They will judge me guilty; they will see the pieces of my soul that have been stained black by the ink of the stories written about me. The writer knocked over his inkpot, and whole pages will be marred with blackness. That was always my destiny. That was always who I was, who I was meant to be.

I stagger through the woods, my feet catching over some of the twisted, tangled roots. The forest itself desperate to tear me down, rip me to shreds. I can't do this. I can't. It's all lost, it's all gone.

I do not stop running.

Everyone tells stories of the ones banished to the forest—to be forgotten—and how their corpses will be taken up by the trees. Some say that their faces are suspended in the scream of their death. That's why these trees have eyes. That's why they don't stop watching me. They keep watching me, and I'm trapped.

The skirt of my white dress is sticking to my legs, it's stained crimson, and I keep wiping my hands on it, trying to get the blood out. Out. Out. I can hear their screams in my ears, I can hear them calling me a monster, telling me that I have become who they always said I was, who I was always meant to be.

Their howling is in my ears, the rain beats against my head, and I just want it all to stop.

I fall to my knees at the edge of the river, rushing and raging, white rapids turning treacherous in the rainfall, flooding the water until there is nowhere else for it to go. There is nowhere for me to go, and my face is wet from rain and tears and guilt. And the trees won't stop staring at me.

My heart races, pounding in my ears like the drums of battle, and I curl into myself, bringing my head to my knees, wrapping my arms around my waist as if that would protect me. There is nothing to protect me from anymore. The real monster, the real danger, is the thing that roils within me, this monstrous thing that stains my hands, my heart, my soul, and refuses to let go.

I close my eyes, close them hard and firm, and the rain doesn't let up.

"Stop," I cry into myself, the words swallowed up by a sob. "Stop."

The rain does not stop falling. The river does not stop rushing. It is not in their nature to be forgiving. And the proof of my crime is upon me, a brand, a scarlet letter deeming me unworthy.

I'm shaking all over, shivering in the cold and in my grief, and bring my hands up, looking at them, wondering how such simple, frail things could cause so much pain. I had been warned. They warned me. Every time I was called a murderer, a monster, a demon, every time I was pelted with insults as a child, it was a warning. Perhaps they made me who I am, perhaps it was always who I was.

I can hardly stand the sight of them.

The screams of my victims are tormenting me, endless, and I can't tell where they begin and the river ends. They all form into one sound, rushing in my mind like a curse.

I thrust my hands into the water, feeling it rush around them, and then I rub, I scrape, I do whatever I can to get the blood off them, get myself clean. Water purifies, water remakes, and I can be reborn, I can be different. I can go back. I can make amends.

When I pull them from the river, there is still blood caked under my nails. There is still a scarlet stain to my skin.

There is no innocence here, anymore. Even the white of my dress, the white of purity and coming of age and hope and everything good is stained with what I've done. There is no going back for me. I'm unwanted, I'm the unwanted daughter that sealed her own fate the moment she stepped into the world of civilized humans.

They called me a monster. They were right.

A rustle sounds across the river, and I don't know how I hear it over the voices in my head, the downpour of rain, the rushing of water, but I do. And I look up, and there stands a fox, watching me, unmoving, unblinking. Another witness to the woman I have left behind and the monster whose shoes I have begun to step into.

Yet, I am called first to the kindness I had been urged to learn as a child, my mother still clinging to the hope that I would be more than the person I was born to be. I sit back, returning the fox's solemn gaze, hoping that it might see through the horrors I have inflicted upon people I once called family, friends.

I reach a hand out, as if it would cross the rushing rapids to me. "It's alright," I say, my voice a useless weapon against the rain that had become a raging storm. "I won't hurt you."

The words are cold comforts, lies that I told myself at night. I wouldn't hurt a fly. I'd said, I'd never hurt anyone. I never ate meat, I was kind to the stray that lingered on my doorstep, and I had pretended that it would chase away the destiny I've been bound to since before I was even born. I say them in the hopes that the fox is not a clever creature, that it does not understand that I am desperate for someone to tell me that I am not a monster, that I am not a demon. That I am not the woman they told me I would be.

"Please."

They were wrong, I think. I am not the woman they were all afraid I would become. That woman died an hour ago when I first felt blood against my skin. Now, I am so much more.

And yet I am still broken, a shattered stained-glass image of purity, crushed under the weight of my own expectations and sins. They are one and the same in my heart.

Foxes are clever creatures. They understand darkness.

Intelligent eyes meet mine in a moment, and I can see in them recognition. It sees me, and I cannot see myself back. Then, it turns and vanishes into the underbrush, a flash of russet orange like fire vanishing in a puff of smoke.

*Let me be someone*, I had cried into the mirror all those times, when I had wanted to feel special, feel wanted, feel like something other than a terrible creature born of evil. Foolish hopes, foolish child. Now I know what it feels like to be someone, to be known inside and out by everything with a spirit and soul. The trees know me, and they see a monster. The sky knows me, and it sees a villain. The fox knows me, and it sees a fool.

I cannot help but look down to see my reflection torn asunder by violent ripples, the pieces of me so broken apart that I can't put them together again. I don't recognize her, the girl I've become. I want to look at her and scream about who I am, tell her that I am not a monster, that I am not cruel. But my mirror was not a mirror, but a prophecy. I had seen myself and been terrified about my future. Now I know it was a fact, not just a possibility.

With shaking legs, I stand, the rain soaking my dress to my skin, the white turning sheer. The rain reveals me, strips me apart, sets me on a stage and demands the world take notice, see the fall of a girl who just wanted more.

I've gotten my wish now.

There's nowhere to go, so I follow the river. I start walking, my bare feet dragging across the mud that will smell of petrichor in the morning, and then I can't escape. The eyes of the world are on me, my eyes on myself, and the river is laughing at my misfortune, telling me I should have expected something such as this, and I just start running. I run. I run, my feet pound against the ground, and I run, my heart beating as if my shoulders could break open and sprout wings, as if I could fly away and pretend as though none of this had ever happened.

It had happened, and I was guilty. Let the jury of the world decide my fate, for only the wilderness could decide the fate of a monster. Civilization did not understand me. I am not one of them, anymore.

The river stops. I do as well. And I stare ahead, stare down, at the cliff that stands before me. The river turns to a rushing waterfall that roars, endlessly, ceaselessly, tearing at my ears and echoing the sound of my mind as it is unable to put itself back together. At the bottom of this terrible chasm gashed through the earth is a pool that glistens like silver in the rain. A mirror, a portal, a way to cleanse all wrongdoings.

Water is a purifying force.

Rocks tumble as I step closer, my feet brushing against thin air as the edge of the cliff looms, taunting me, daring me. No monster gets a happy ending. I have been branded by mistakes.

A laugh comes bubbling out of me, born from the madness that grows in my chest, and I tilt my head back to let it fly free to the sky. Rain falls against my face, cold, soft, and I close my eyes, for a moment just existing in a state of liminality. I am neither here nor there, neither good nor bad, neither existing nor gone. I am a ghost of who I was, floating gently in space as the weight of the sky comes crashing down on my shoulders. If I lean forward just an inch, I will learn what it feels like to fly.

Lightning splits the sky into two, thunder booming across the world.

“I tried,” I just say, the words lost to another laugh. “I tried. I swear I tried.”

There’s a woman inside of me, thrashing and wild, who fights against me. I am her and she is me, but we are not the same. There is a darkness in me that had not graced her, a lightness in her that had neglected me. Only one of us could have survived. Maybe neither of us will.

I look down again, and the rain almost seems to whisper me on. There are a thousand choices ahead of me, and none behind. All the choices I have made have led me to mistakes, and they are the choices that gave me this path. This moment, right here, where the world is battling against my very being.

There is still blood on my hands, on my dress.

I wonder how much of it is mine.

I take a deep breath. Another. I’ve always dreamt I had wings. They would be big, feathered things, like a hawk, or an eagle. I imagined flying above the clouds, watching the sunset from above. Sometimes it felt so real that I could have sworn I could reach back and feel their feathers. It had been a dream that bled too much and too little into reality. Perhaps, now, I could fly.

One more deep breath.

And I close my eyes.



## *Golden Hour*

The water was blue. A deep, rich cerulean that defied definition other than one which would fit a gemstone. It looked like it had been gently painted into place by a reverent brush, the artist creating a painting that would reveal his soul and heart. It was a sad heart, full of fear and depth that he would have pretended meant nothing. But the gleam of sun painted against the waves was some small thing called hope.

Pretending it was anything but a golden dusk would be a lie. Broad strokes of amber and lilac stretched across the sky, blowing a soft breeze across the rippling water that looked gilded. My eyes were drawn endlessly across the movement of the lake's surface, until they caught on him.

It was a crime, the way his brown skin looked in this light. The gods must have hated me for the way it glowed in this hour as he waded in the waves, looking at the shore across the way, where a rocky beach turned to soft grass. I could not help but wonder what he was thinking, what thoughts would grace him but forsake me.

"Do you think we were meant to exist?" he murmured, the sound breaking the idyll of the sunset. I wished he hadn't. If we were silent, I could still pretend.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..." he hesitated, shifting to look towards me. His eyes were so beautiful. Brown, sure, and plain if one didn't know how to see them as an artist did. But they weren't brown. There was a green that hid in the back, afraid of revealing itself, and flecks of gold that glittered around his pupils. They were so deep, so powerful, and when they met mine, I could swear I would fall into them.

"We're the only ones here. Other than us, this is just... nature. Wild. We exist, humanity exists, and we destroy that wild thing."

"Something else would have, if it wasn't us."

He sighed, and let his head fall back. His dark hair spilled out beneath him onto the water reflecting the liquid fire of the sun.

"But what if it didn't? What if it was just wild?"

He was a fool. "Does it even matter? We exist, whether we were meant to or not."

"Of course it matters. Don't you ever think about what the world could be, instead of what it is?" His voice was deep, rich, smooth as silk. I had heard him sing a year ago, and nothing had been the same since. I was addicted to it. I drank him up like the gods drink ambrosia.

"Just imagine it. Wild. Free."

I tried. I could imagine a deer, watching her fawns drink from the lake water. I could imagine a songbird chirping on the branch. I could imagine the way a mouse scurried through the undergrowth, and how a squirrel buried an acorn to bring new life in spring.

"But what about us?"

“Humans destroy so much. Maybe it would have been better.”

“Not humans. Us.”

He hesitated, trailing a few fingertips across the surface of the water, thinking. I wondered how hollow I must have seemed to him.

“What about us?” The thin chain necklace around his neck gleamed in the setting sun.

“We can’t be all that bad, right? I mean, humans destroy nature, but we create, too.” The water felt cold. I hadn’t realized until that moment. I shivered. “I think that’s humanity. Creation, not destruction.”

I could see the beginnings of the stars dotting the sky, flecks of white paint across a faded remembrance of summer. I dreaded it. He was the embodiment of the sun, of day. What would happen when night fell? Who would we become?

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you sound optimistic.” There was a small, soft smirk in the curve of his lips.

Maybe he was right. But he was still a fool. “That’s your fault. You’ve gotten me to look on the bright side of things.”

A warm laugh, a full laugh, danced across the water towards me and I smiled softly. It felt warm, it was bliss.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I said, words coming before I could think. That was the first time that had ever happened. “You’ve made me a better person.”

The sun was halfway down the horizon. Shadows were harsh across his face as he looked over to me, the movement causing small ripples as I was stripped bare by his gaze. The light cast a dappled stained-glass pattern across the skin of his chest. “You were always a good person.”

“If you say so.”

“You were.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t believe it?”

“I do.”

“Don’t lie.”

He always could tell.

“Sorry.”

There was a moment of silence, as he turned to float on his back, looking at the canvas of sky above him. “Don’t apologize. I just wish you believed it.”

“And since when have I ever agreed with anything you said?”

I should have painted him like this. He looked like an angel, and I could have placed him in a cathedral without anyone noticing a difference. Perhaps the angels that the great artists painted were just the visage of the ones they loved. Truly, one must love someone dearly to grant them divinity.

“You know, I don’t want you to agree with me.” A moment passed. “That wouldn’t be you. I’d know you were lying.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I guess that’s true.”

We were in silence for a moment, only the gentle lapping of water against the shore, our companion. I wanted to fall asleep here, in this moment of peace - of calm - where I could be near him, the golden light forever gilding us. That would be the way of the Gods.

“I’m glad we exist,” he said after a while.

I looked over to him, expecting to see his eyes closed. But he was watching me, with those brown eyes that I could never quite get right. There was no humor to them, nor was there lightness, but instead a deep honesty disguised with soft words. His hand was inches from mine.

“Me, too.” I whispered. “Me, too.”

## *Pity*

She frequents here. Under the blanket of dusk, a handful of stones clutched to her breast, she makes her pilgrimage. She blends into the shadows, wearing a tattered grey cloak that has seen too many winters, her black hair stringy with time and poverty. She does not look far gone from a shadow herself. Perhaps, in the days to come, when winter ravages the streets, she will become one.

The sad truth is that she will welcome it. *Pity her*. She has given up.

None see her pass through the graying alleys, early evening casting a dull sepia glow across the world. She is a wraith, a forgotten ghost of the past, as she traverses the cobbled streets. She is no one. None are alive to remember her name, or to honor her life.

There is no hope within her eyes, anymore, what had once been a deep silver-blue was only grey. There is no one left who can see the shards of ocean in her irises. Whatever family she might have had has vanished as quickly as the spring blooms. The poor thing will not survive the cold.

The sun has settled below the horizon by the time she reaches her destination, and the stars remain her only witness as she passes through ancient wrought-iron gates, stepping along stone paths with soundless steps. Gravestones rise from the dirt like the sprouting of trees, as natural as roots, as silent as the dawn.

There will be no grave for her. None care enough to bury her.

Once, she may have had something to resemble shoes on her feet, but that was a long time ago. She dances now, barefoot, against the stones, cold and shivering from the eastern winds. She dances with an invisible partner, that only she can see. *Pity this girl*. She has nothing left.

Then, slowly she curtsies, and kneels at a grave nestled underneath the branches of a yew tree, a name etched in faded letters on the marble gravestone. She does not speak, but there are no words left to say. She had said them all, all those years ago. Instead, she places four small stones on the ground, where grass has browned by the changing of seasons; one stone for each year she has been alone.

Each letter is then traced with a loving finger, as if it were writing the story where they had been happy, instead of what the world has become. She does not cry. There is no need to do so. All tears were shed long ago. Now she only waits.

She will not wait for much longer.

Perhaps the hand that life dealt her was unfair. The cards had all spelt out sadness and despair from the very beginning. But it must mean something that she has made the best of it, in whatever way she can. Her life has been tragic, full of pain, yes. But she has found joy. There is joy in waiting for peace. There is joy in knowing that there is something awaiting her beyond this cold night. And there was joy in the slight moments of light and warmth between those harsh and unforgiving winters. Gentle moments where the world had melted away. That is good, is it not?

None in her village know her for herself, but they know of her. She was the reason for their plagued healths, their rotted foods. *Witch*, they cried. Only one had not. Only one had taken pity.

*Take pity. For all that is good, take pity.*

They were not lovers destined for happiness. None were, in a world like this. But they were destined for the time that they had. It had been brief, it had been bracketed by loss, but there was light in this endlessly shadowed existence. That is, some kindness at least. To have loved; to have light, even if for but a moment.

This is why she goes under night, where she is safe. They would not hate her; no more than they already do, but there is comfort in the shadows. She is granted freedom in the dark, with no one to illuminate it and trap her in the light of their merciless gazes.

Darkness welcomes her, and for that they condemned her. In a way, she had not blamed them. It is only natural for man to fear what he does not understand. The tragedy is when they understand nothing and thus fear everything, even a harmless street girl who had been soft enough to fall in love with one who showed kindness to her. She had done no wrong. *That did not matter.*

Yet it was not her that they had truly wished to punish. There is no use in punishing one who is already the lowest among the low. There was nowhere for them to send her that she had not already been. Instead, they punished the ones who colluded with so-called dark forces. The ones who had shown her kindness.

They did not understand kindness. They feared it. *Pity them*, for they do not understand the good in humanity.

It was only due to power and influence that the grave was given a name. To any other of lower class, of lower station, they may have been damned to an unmarked grave. None would remember them. But there was power in this village, like all other villages, and power granted legacy and remembrance, and even though the name was stricken from ledgers and histories. It remains here. No surname. No family titles. Only a single name, fading into the stone as time wears it down.

When she dies, there will be none left who willfully remember. But perhaps that is bliss. There are no expectations to uphold when there is no legacy. There are none who would do all in their power to define a name based on their beliefs, their standards. To make the world something they understand and that they would never fear. And perhaps to be forgotten is a kindness. One cannot become a monster if one is forgotten.

*Witch. Witch. Witch.*

She hated fire. She would be warmer beside one, curled like a cat beside dying embers, but she could not bear it. Fire and smoke smelled of burning flesh to her. Burning flesh and salty tears and broken screams and shattered hearts. No, the cold was far kinder to her.

Fire killed with rage. Cold killed with a gentle touch and forgiving voice.

It was foolish, perhaps, that she should sleep here, beneath the boughs of the great yew tree. but she knew the truth. Exhaustion weighed heavy on a soul, and she was beginning to welcome rest. None left to offer her the kindness of a blanket.

But if she were to rest, perhaps it would be in the arms of the one who had—once—understood kindness.

She wrapped the scraps of her cloak around her shoulders and leaned against the tree, her head resting against the marble stone as if it were a shoulder, as if it would laugh softly and look over, pressing a kiss to her hair.

The dark was an embrace. and she smiled. She would wait no longer.

A whisper of a voice sounded around her like wind, but it was warm where the air was cold.

“My love, I have waited so long.”

“I am here,” she whispers back.

“I am here, Marian.”

She closes her eyes. Silver eyes fade to empty space. Pale skin turns white as a sheet. She will not wake.

Do not *pity* her.

She is home.

## Isabelle Gdaniec

*Display of Love*

*Content warning: Toxic love*

*To Herostratus*

Beloathed,

You, who spat upon my hands.

You, who danced on my dream.

You, who trampled my hopes.

I remember you:

I remember your cacklings.

I remember your writhings.

I remember your catharsis.

I condemn you:

To a life of obscurity.

To a life of boredom.

To a life of defeat.

I hate you:

I hate your ambition.

I hate your despair.

I hate your hope.

I hate your—

Warm fire

## Sasha Gdaniec

*12 Hours*

*Content warning: Vomit, sweat, drunk people, hallucinations*

**21:37**

Finally, boarding. You've been waiting at the gate for your flight to your family a few countries over for what feels like hours. At least, the amount of people waiting with you seems rather small—there will be plenty of room in the airplane to lounge around in, which is a nice solace.

Though, you do notice they all seem to be acquainted—a group booked trip, perhaps? It looks like they may be some sort of large band. Neat! You've always liked orchestras.

'Oh, Aberdeen airport, how wonderfully small you are,' you think, as you take a very short walk to the plane waiting with open doors for you and the rest of the passengers. Hopefully, this will be a calm flight.

**21:55**

Sitting down took a worrying amount of time. The rest of the passengers—maybe 50 of them, for a plane that normally holds some 120—were taking their sweet time with the luggage, which they all seemed to handle with ostentatious care. Well, it's not like you're in a rush. Auntie and uncle can wait a few minutes.

As you take your seat, happily alone in your row, though close by to the rest of the people as you don't like feeling too isolated, the pilot starts rattling off safety measures. You've heard them countless times, so you pay them no real mind as you browse your phone before the connection cuts out.

Let's see what's on Tumb—ah, shit. Your battery is at 10%. That won't last the whole twelve hour flight, and you need it to call your auntie when you land...

With a sigh, you turn off your phone, knowing responsibility comes first. Perhaps the tourist brochure in front of you will be interesting enough.

**22:..20?**

It's barely ten minutes after liftoff that one of the, what did you guess they were again—orchestra members? Well, one of them takes out... a guitar. Is that allowed? The attendants don't seem to mind, so neither do you, but...

You open up the brochure. Nothing new, really. Fashion, fun places to check out at your destination, a few perfume advertisements—has anyone ever understood why they sell perfumes on airplanes? What the hell is that all for?



Your meagre attempts at getting into it are stopped by more shuffling. At least a dozen of the other passengers have taken out their guitars—this can't be an orchestra—and are tuning them.

Now, you don't know anything about music, but tuning your guitar on a loud airplane while a dozen other people are tuning theirs does not sound like a good idea? You pay it no mind, really. Maybe they're pretty good at it.

### **22:35**

You were wrong. The tuning, even to your untrained ear, sounds horrendous. It's like every note being played is in disharmony with the previous one. You don't know the correct terminology, though you do know the word 'harmony', but this—this just sounds wrong. Are these people amateurs? And fifty of them at once? Not like you hate amateurs, or anything, but fifty? On a group trip to, to, remote Russia? From Aberdeen?

You try to tune back into your brochure. Perfumes. Oh, perfumes...

### **22:37**

'Anyways, here's Wonderwall—'

You hear a dreaded, dreaded sentence. You don't exactly yet know why it feels so dreadful, but you have read enough memes online to know Wonderwall isn't a very good song. Heard it enough times, really.

'TodaaaaaY was gonna be the dAAAY—'

Oh he can not sing. Does the guy right next to him look like he's about to cry? This song isn't that moving, is it?

You tuck your nose in harder into the brochure. Did you know there's an art festival happening this year at Arkhangelsk? How interesting!

### **22:50**

They've played maybe three songs by now. Every one is followed by copious laughter and effusive praise of one another's skill, as well as what sounds like attempts to one-up each other on who knows more technical terms when discussing how to play each song better.

You are fairly sure 'quadruple fingering' is just made up. At least they're playing mostly inoffensive songs. You think you heard Knockin' on Heaven's Door and... Seven Nation Army. At least an attempt of it on a guitar that decidedly lacks bass.

## 23:57

You are tired. It's been nothing but 10 out of 15 of the songs that come up when you search 'beginner guitar songs' for an hour. More than an hour, maybe. You don't actually know, your phone is off. It feels like three. Four? Maybe only half. You don't know.

You guess it must be an hour though, as one of the attendants starts handing out food to the clearly hungry guitar fans.

By the time the cart is with you, there's nothing left. You startle, and are about to argue with the attendant when you realise there's nothing for you or her to do. How much are these people eating, anyways? The flight is always prepared for a full cabin in terms of food amount.

At least you have your trusty sandwich in the backpack. You open it up and—you have your trusty... nothing. You have nothing. You forgot to even buy a bottle of water.

You ask the attendant, and are informed the water in the toilets is drinkable.

## 1:30

Hours. It's been hours. You've rifled through the entire brochure three times over. These people are so loud. They've relaxed enough that they all constantly call each other 'bro' and yell 'YOooooo' and you are absolutely sure they are all drunk at this point. On airplane cabin beer. Who are these people? What devil dragged them out of hell?

You suddenly panic as you hear one of them say:

'Yo, let's start playing funny shit! Like, meme songs!'

And in the next five seconds, you hear the Shrek theme. Badly. Badly performed. By five guitars at once and at least two drunken falsettos.

You think you want to die. Pull a DB Cooper. That guy from all the conspiracies? Jump out of the plane and just disappear forever. Your body is never found. Newest favourite theory is that he went up.

## 2:30

It stinks. You just now realise, but it stinks. Of sweat, of drunken breath, of, of, and you don't even know how, but guitars. Each one of these men, because they are all men, of course, is sitting there with a guitar. You're fairly sure you heard one of them smash it.

Escape. All you can think about is esca—

'TODAAAAY WAS GONNA BE THE DAAAAY—'

You want to die.

**6:??**

You're not sure what hour it is. You're finally thirsty enough to muster up the courage to walk through this entire crowd of people to get to the toilet and drink the damn tap water.

So you do, and on your way through, you have to wade through increasingly loud, increasingly annoying, and increasingly annoyed at you for existing guitar fans. Guitar fans! Goddamn guitar fans!

Toilet. Alright. The toilet. The toilet.

Oh Jesus Christ it stinks in here—is that vomit—you are so done. No. No. Fuck. Fuck this. Goddamnit. You are not drinking any water. You'd rather die of dehydration than deal with this.

All it needs is a child crying, but thank fuck, none of these people will hopefully ever have children.

Oh god they might.

**8:??**

This is getting to you. It really is. It really, really is. They've played Wonderwall 73 times. You counted. You counted because there is nothing else to do in this god forsaken world.

Fuck. You counted. And you can tell that guy number 13 hasn't played Wonderwall even once. But the rest is a blur. Guy 17, 21 and 4 all look the same. They all have the same four haircuts, imitating either the Beatles, a platonic un-ideal of a lumberjack, a drunken fresher, and Kyle.

You just can't deal with this. You keep trying to escape to the brochure. Perfumes. Perfumes are good right about now... You've always loved perfumes.

**9:??**

'CAUSE AFTER AAAAAALLLLLLLLLLL'

'You're my Wonder-waaaaaallllll!', you mentally join in. Oh god oh god god god they've infected you they have infected you like the goddamn plague, and in your sleep-deprived, dehydrated, hungry state you start hallucinating that you are turning into one of them. An amalgamation of a lumberjack, a Kyle, a Beatle and a fresher.

You can't deal with this. You want to just see auntie. Auntie. You want to go home.

You want to go home. Please.

??:??

Everything is a blur. You're not sure where your ears end and the outside world begins, because everything is so loud. They brought a subwoofer out. It's so loud. Where the hell did they plug that thing in. It's so loud. You are fairly sure large electric appliances are forbidden on airplanes.

As that thought crosses your mind, the words of the pilot begin resounding in your thoughts. From hours ago... oh what a sweet sound. What you would do to only hear 'Please, fasten your seatbelts' and 'You can find the life vest under your seat' again. Again. Please, return that sweet sound of safety.

One of them starts butchering a niche song from an unknown artist deeply dear to your heart, and you feel something break in you.

**10:21**

Fresh air. Fresh air! O, joy of the world! O, freedom! O, beloved fresh air! O, beloved phone and beloved auntie! You never, ever are going to take you, silence, cleanliness or peace ever for granted again!

And you are never going to listen to Wonderwall again, even as it constantly, blurrily, replays in your mind.

Never. Again.

At least, until your peace is pulled right out from beneath your feet once your auntie asks:

'Dear, why did you buy 5 bottles of perfume and a signed CD of Wonderwall?'

## *Wandering Daughter*

*Content warning: Death, animal death, noose*

Sometimes, at night, if you peer deep enough into a world beyond the veil of reality, you might see an endless expanse of shallow, grey water. One could call it a liminal space, but really, it's well beyond the border—though it'd be hard to categorise as a space of its own.

Gentle mist covers the water, beneath which white tiles of something like plastic provide treacherous footing. And below those, when they do give out, simply a greyish white sky, just like above, and the water, pouring down, infinitely.

One might find it a silent, lifeless place, but if peered into long enough, the occasional songbird landing only to give itself a wash and drink of the water would dispel that notion—though they never eat, and never return to the same place. And at times, the faint pink of dusk, orange of dawn, or the azure and crimson of day and night put an end to the idea of the place lacking in colour.

Somewhere there, unseen, are people. Wanderers, lost in this abyss of gentle light.

A certain girl is one of those wanderers. She's not entirely sure when she got there, but she knows she's been wandering for... a fair while. All truth be told, she forgot.

Today, she has made camp, tired from walking around. She has gathered a surprising amount of supplies, all carried in a little bag on wheels, from the corpses of other wanderers she came by, and the very rare living one willing to make a trade.

None stuck by to travel with her, though.

Figuring it's about time for lunch, she takes out her portable cooking station and lights it up with her surprisingly large supply of gas canisters. She's wondered before whether it's weird that that one person had nearly 30 of those on them, but she decided to pay it no mind, having been given half of them.

Today's meal would be... coronation imitation chicken. She caught two of the songbirds after trying, failing, and falling in the shallow water many times—lucky her that the plastic panels didn't break—and the half-empty jar of mayo from someone's groceries along with a pack of raisins will... be good enough.

She plucks and guts the birds, washing her hands near a hole in the floor, hoping it'd carry the bacteria and blood away, and sets them to boil. Then she wonders what to do, as usual, as she sits down on a waterproof jacket from... yet another body.

It used to get to her, she thinks. The bodies. But by now, she doesn't feel much about using the dead's belongings. The only one in recent weeks that got to her was the person strangled by a noose. She couldn't take her eyes off of it for hours, her only thought being that there is nothing around to hang from.

She feels herself thinking too hard about it again, and shakes her head. She skims some scum off the top of the boiling water, and decides to add some aromatics from her small bag of dried vegetables. Better late than never.

She thinks about the man that gave her those vegetables, some days ago. He was particularly excited about all sorts of tubers and roots. Carrots, turnips, rutabagas, potatoes — he could regale about them for hours, though he didn't, as he left quickly, saying something about there 'being more, being more, yet to find, yet to farm, yet to harvest.'

She kind of misses the man and his antics, though she still really isn't sure how or where he grew the turnips. They look far too fresh, and far too delicate to come from wherever the wanderers all came from. She doesn't like their smell or shape, either, but she is glad to have the nutrition.

More scum... She takes it off with a spoon, and throws it in the water, watching it get slowly carried away by the current. It's slow, but... there's always current somewhere, to the abyss below.

By all logic, the water should run out at some point. But it doesn't, and it's still the same shallow depth. Some years back, she figured that means all the water that escapes must be coming back somewhere, and her current hopes are to get there at some point.

There's no rush, though. It's not like anything is going anywhere, and it's not a mission of particular importance, just one to pass the time with.

The birds should be about ready now, so she pours the hot water out, shreds what edible meat there is, and mixes it in with the mayo and raisins. A very poor coronation, but she's allowed to try and feel like a queen. Maybe.

She chuckles at the thought, and soon starts laughing thinking about how there are no people to stop her from declaring herself queen regnant of this exact spot.

Though, as her laughter dies down and a bird lands a bit in the distance to wash itself, flailing about, she feels sick to the stomach of the thought. Sick, sick, sick of the thought.

The bird flies away, leaving the water rippling, and all sound gone again, except for the tinnitus in her ears.

Sick.

It makes her sick.

Silence.

...

... Queen Nobody of Nothing, fucking Nowhere, is it?

She puts down the food for a moment, and feels the cold of the water on her shaking hand. Soon, without even realising it, she starts clinging to the jacket she's sitting on, it still smelling faintly of death.

Maybe she could be Queen of This Jacket, at least. At least, for a moment. A second more, a second before the plastic beneath her gives out. Any moment that she can seize, before she falls, falls, to nowhere.

Her vision becomes blurry and slightly dark as she realises she's crying. She quickly wipes her face. Of all the fluids, tears were the last thing the endless stream was going to steal from her, even as it attempts to steal her very sense of belonging.

... She's still here, though. Firmly on the ground. She picks up her food again, figuring she can eat it on the go, and packs everything up for the journey.

It takes her a minute to get moving, feet firmly glued to the ground. But, with quiet ripples behind her, forming under her shoes, she leaves for the pink horizon, hanging, hanging onto her own emotions and the jacket on her shoulders.

## Hazel Hunter

### *My Chlorophyll.*

*Content warning: Blood, seasonal depression*

There it is again. The echo of the season where my head turns to soup, a mix of potatoes, cabbage, lentils and broth. A concoction of soothing vegetables melting into my body and there; it begins to course through my veins. Fighting to comfort my limp body and mind. As the leaves begin to eat away at the chlorophyll keeping them a vivid green, holding them onto the branches, halting their inevitable death. So too does my mind eat away at the happiness from the months I have just lived. And as the leaves begin to fall, the grin that is carved out from ear-to-ear drops to a slight smile, not a real smile, but one that is there to soothe those around me from my foreseeable decline. As my body is moved through autumn—and without doubt winter—my mind becomes a dull place, there is no sign of the motivation that coursed through my vein's weeks ago. Just like a leaf. Just like a leaf, the motivation is eaten away as the dark thoughts harboured in my mind creep past the joy and oh-so-positive light that shone through.

Yet, here we are again, old friend. I *did* tell you we wouldn't meet again. Not this autumn. I believe the leaves have this same agreement with the ground. Do they whisper to their old friend? As they feel their green being eaten alive by the red and orange that ultimately devours their light, forcing them to fall from their tree again. Do they, like me, realise that slowly their light is pulled from them? Leaving their old friend, the tree. The tree their saviour and comfort. Yet, here, I sit across from my tree. Her leaves are vibrantly red as though they have been soaked in blood; in this moment all I can see is beauty, comfort in her. As she soothes her leaves, bracing them for their inevitable meeting with the ground. And in this moment, I realise that I shouldn't fear my mind in the months to come as I, just like the leaves, will bloom. My new regeneration calls me. Every cycle must repeat and that is okay, because at every moment of my life – and the leaves' life – there is beauty and grace. Goodbye my budding green friend. Hello ground.



## *The Confessions of my Mother.*

*Content warning: Child neglect (emotional)*

Small toes. One piggy, two piggy, three piggy, four. Small hands. And round, and round, and tickle under there. Watching her giggle as I nibble at her toes and as she braces herself for the tickle, I feel nothing but defeat. With every movement she makes so does my mind wander too. Somewhere else. I'm not happy, not overjoyed. As I brought her life into this world all I could think of was how to get rid of it. How to find my life, bring myself joy. I am not the maternal mother who shines with pride as her child brings home a drawing that should go on the fridge. I have nothing on my fridge. I have no photos sprawling my walls of the child I see every day. The child who pulls my hair and eats my food. The child who stole my body. Who needs my attention at every stupid hour. My shame doesn't come from the things I do. My mother. My mother is where the shame comes from; no satisfaction from telling her I would never be like her. For that's the thing with life, with motherhood. The never-ending, ever repeating cycle of life from woman to baby girl. That shame I feel is lack of pride. *Where was the hand of my mother when I needed it most. Where was my standing ovation as I drew a pig-like dog with pink fur and purple eyes. Where is my hug when everything falls to shit, as the world around me devours me whole as though I am just a measly drop of butter that fell from your bread.* She will be like me; she won't brush her daughter's hair or read her a night-time story as she drifts to sleep. No. Like me, like my mother before me. She will loathe that daughter. She will make her feel as though she has no love for her, because that is how it works. That is motherhood. And here I sit writing a confession, a confession no one will ever see. Especially not the daughter who took my life away from me. But that's okay, you see? You see, I am like my mother and for that I can change for her daughter. I will brush her daughter's hair and read that Enid Blyton book that she loved so much. May that be my redeeming quality? Or is that just another way for me to kick my daughter down? But you see, as has been made clear she deserves it. She is the problem, *not me*. My mother, my daughter, take your pick. This is my confession, for I am my mother's daughter.

### *My Fate.*

I tumble down the tree of life like any other lost soul. Hoping to in find an answer, to rise again like Jane Eyre finding her happiness after a wander in a field. I hope to stand up again like a new-born baby finding its feet. Crawling, walking, sprinting. Can I find the happiness I oh-so-deserve? A question I find myself asking in between my morning coffee and cigarette, as I walk through the streets that remind me so much of that time; a happy time or a sad time I cannot decide. Or as I lay in bed star gazing at a blank ceiling, shivering under my quilt. Alone. Oh, so alone. And yet the cycle begins, my new life regenerates every three years or so. Am I fated by the gods to relive the same abuse? To constantly learn the same lessons? Is that my path the universe has set out for me? A lonely one, where everyone and everything leaves me to find more. *I am more*. I am the wind, the air, the fire in my heart that lights up a room. And yet I begin the path from childhood to adulthood, to never ending misery and pain. Like a moth to a light, the danger pulls me in. See it's funny, I read somewhere that ones who have only ever known danger thrive from it. That must be why I can't hide from it. I'm like an alcoholic looking for my next fix even if I can't believe it myself. It's all I've ever known. Shit's been thrown in my face since I was born. Oh, little one why so sad? It's all you'll ever know when you're bad.

*My 'Twin Flame'.*

*Content warning: Blood, burn injury*

I cut away at the shackles that are placed upon me by your love, but it is not a force of love that keeps me at bay, rather a force of darkness overcoming me with every footstep I tread within your painful love. That of a thorn bush or burning hot coals below my feet, trying to make my way through that thorn bush and hoping therein may lie a beautiful rose; that I can keep within my books. As I dance along the coal fires—creating the entertainment for the hoards watching me burn—delighting in the fact that my feet are charring away into thin slithers of bone and flesh. Exposed. Exposed to the outside world as they tread upon the coals; hoping, praying to meet the calm grass filled with moist droplets of water that will soothe my burning sole. As my heart begins to tire from the pain of your love, so do my hands begin to bleed from the thorn bushes as each and every thorn pricks away at my ivory, delicate skin. Showing nothing but crimson cuts. So do my feet burn from the constant coal heating away at my soles. And yet it takes my heart a while. To tire. To stop fighting for something that only brings it pain. As though I am a part of the hoard that gathers to watch me walk the coal or find the rose. As though I enjoy your painful love that is not love at all. And that is all. All it takes to make me stop. For my mind to stop my heart, stop my arms, stop the soul from harming itself beyond repair. And there; I think I heard it beat again.

## *My Ritual.*

*Content warning: Death, dead body descriptions*

The leaves are red as winter creeps in. Halloween is on its way. I can hear the witches cackle in the fog of that quiet morning, as the birds are late to chirp me awake and my nose is frost-bitten, for I did not have my quilt above it. My window is wet with droplets of condensation as my book's pages begin to mould -and my lungs are cold. I brace myself to uncover my morgue like body, pulling away the sheet to reveal myself to the harsh reality. As the icy air hits my body, my toes are blue and look as though they belong to a dead man too. My slippers sit idly by, waiting patiently for my toes to slot in. The warmth of the fluff soothes my iced over bones and I seek a jumper that will heat up my heart, that of which I don't think exists. As I creak and crack my way through to the kitchen that smells like someone's pasta from the night before. There my source of heat awaits. As I grab my mug as big as my head and gently pop a teaspoon of coffee in, I wait until the kettle shrieks and heats up the immediate areas surrounding it. I gently clasp my hands around my mug and watch as the blue fades to pink from my pinkie finger to my thumb. As my lips royal blue fades to a soft red as I part them to drink my morning ritual. I look out to see if I can see the witches in the distance, probably brewing me bad fortune at this very moment, the fog is too thick that I cannot even see my favourite tree that sits the robins and their friends. Maybe the witches took their luck too, for it is Halloween soon.

## Daniel Kearns

*Touch of the Immortal*

*Content warning: Death, violence*

### ***Stinger Cove, Australia***

#### ***17:18 - approx. 54 mins. after mass stinging***

All was not quiet or still at the beach surrounding the infamous Stinger Cove. A frantic scene unfolded, helicopters and emergency vehicles pouring in en masse as beachgoers fled from the waters, screaming. A gathering of unfortunate souls lay on the sand; some wriggling around and crying out in agony, some clinging to loved ones and begging not to be left alone, and others already succumbing to fate and resting lifelessly on the shore. It was the sort of chaos one would expect from a monster movie, just without an obvious creature rising from the water being shot at by everything humanity could throw at it.

Amongst the pandemonium, a pair of black SUVs pulled up as close to the beach as they could. A crowd of armed soldiers exited the vehicles, followed by a pair of smartly-dressed scientists. The group, consisting of around ten, marched down toward the beach and straight for the nearest official. One of the scientists tapped the shoulder of a lifeguard guiding beachgoers toward the nearest exits. The guard turned around as the scientist raised a badge in the air.

“Jamie Clemments, field operations chief for N.A.D.A.,” the scientist said, lowering her badge as she looked at the scene unfolding around her. “Quite the scene here, care to fill us in?”

The guard nodded. “Uh, y-yeah, of course. This way.” He led the N.A.D.A group toward an ever-growing pile of bodies being loaded into ambulances as panicked friends and family watched. “No idea how this happened, just a routine day, and then *bam!* People start coming back screaming, looking like they came out of a horror flick... and then they started dying. Really quick, sometimes just after 15 minutes. I’ve never seen anything like it...”

“Were there any warnings today for jellyfish?” Clemments asked, her voice sounding emotionally distant, though her face showed a clear interest in the information being conveyed.

“No... we’ve been checking for boxes, Irukandji, man o’ wars, the usual suspects...” The guard stopped for a moment, resting a hand upon his forehead. “I don’t think this was a normal jelly, the stings don’t match, and time until death is way too quick...” He sounded panicked, taking a series of quick breaths.

Clement rested a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll take care of it from here, just assist with evacuation and close off the beach until I say otherwise, okay?” she asked, a hint of compassion in the question, as the guard nodded. “Good, off you go.” Clemments released him as he returned to where he was just moments ago. She turned her attention back to her team and the pile of dead or dying that was growing in front of their eyes.

One of the soldiers accompanying the group lifted their visor to look out toward the waters. “So... what? We’re looking at some sort of super jellyfish that can kill dozens within an hour?” they asked, their tone condescending. “Sounds a bit far-fetched, even for our line of work.”

“Check the bodies.” Clemments spoke immediately, almost without thinking. “See if any of the victims have a piece of tentacle still attached. We can determine our approach from there once we’ve identified the species.” She turned her head in the direction of the bodies as the soldiers walked off toward the emergency vehicles.

Standing alone, Clemments turned her own attention toward the waters, now vacant of people. She took in a deep breath, tuning out the sounds of panic around her. The job she took on was often daunting, and over time she’d learnt to compress her feelings in the wake of needless carnage. She’d seen death and mutilation before, but this was her first time experiencing this phenomenon on such a public scale. Part of her was unsettled, wanting to hide away and turn a blind eye, but that part of her was drowned out by the need to fulfil her mission.

“Jamie.” A male voice pulled her out of her funk. She turned around, facing the other scientist. “We got a sample.” He took her arm gently and led her over toward a group of soldiers, who moved aside to reveal what they were looking at.

In the sand was the body of a middle-aged man, riddled with long, snaking marks that almost resembled burns, some blood leaking small trails from them. There was a patterning in the markings, alien and unfamiliar, but what caught everyone’s attention was a long piece of a clear tentacle clinging around the man’s throat. The piece had a slimy texture to it, shining in the light of the sun.

Clemments crouched down to examine the body more closely, before reaching a hand upward towards the group. “Tongs.” She was handed a pair of silver tongs, with which she grabbed hold of the tentacle and pulled it from the body. “Bag.” She was then handed a bag, placing the tentacle inside and sealing it up. “We’ll take this back for analysis. I want your unit to remain here and quarantine this beach. Nobody gets in without my approval. Am I clear?” she asked firmly, the soldiers nodding in response. Getting up to her feet, Clemments and the other scientist walked off as the soldiers went to block off the beach.

### ***N.A.D.A. Research Facility***

#### ***20:21 – approx. 4 hrs. and 9 mins. after mass stinging***

A cup of white hot chocolate grasped in her hands, Clemments stared out toward the pale, generic wall in front of her. She could hear people moving and talking around her, machinery whirring in the distance, doors opening and closing, and the faint clacking of keyboards up above. It wasn’t a setting that she would have imagined to be in a few short years ago. Time felt like such a blur to her now, taking a sip of her drink as she watched her fellow scientist approach her, a shocked look on his face.

“Did the results come through, Wilson?”

Wilson smiled faintly. “Cutting right to the chase... alright.” He took a pause. “Just got the results from the venom we were able to extract. It’s far more potent than any modern jellyfish, so we ran some dating to determine how old the venom was, and...” Another pause, followed by a deep sigh from Wilson. “Whatever did this, killed all those people, is at least 500 million years old. Potentially more.”

“Fuck...” Clemments almost dropped her drink, wiping her face with her hand.

The news shook both scientists. “It’s... it’s big. Up until now, we’ve been dealing with the descendants of those that were around in ancient times, but this thing has survived every mass extinction, and has continued to survive for about as long as this planet has had life on it.”

“That is big. I mean, I’ve heard of biologically immortal jellyfish, but nothing like this.” Her bewilderment was clear in her expression and tone. “How does a creature continue to survive for 500 million years?” she asked, staring out in front of her, almost not acknowledging Wilson’s presence.

Unsure of how to respond to her, Wilson awkwardly cleared his throat. “We, uh, we’ve sent away a venom sample to produce an antivenom. Anyone who survived the attacks should be able to be properly treated.”

Clemments simply nodded her head and gave a quiet ‘mhm’-sound.

“I’ve done some digging around, and majority of accounts reported that the attacks happened inside of the Stinger Cove. I’ve spoken to our team at the beach, they’re ready to embark if you are.”

Taking a few seconds to process everything she had been told, Clemments pulled herself away from her endless staring, taking a breath and facing Wilson. “We’re gonna need a lot of protective gear. Come on.” She walked off, Wilson trailing just slightly behind her.

## ***Stinger Cove***

### ***21:25 – approx. 5 hrs. and 13 mins. after mass stinging***

“Woah woah woah, let’s just fucking rewind a little bit, shall we?” A soldier spoke out in protest, blown away by what he was being told. “We have to go in there and to try fight off an immortal jellyfish that’s been here since the dawn of time? Are you shitting me?”

Clemments rolled her eyes. “A very reductionist and close-minded way of putting it, Johnson, but yes.” She finished putting on her protective clothing, looking out to the now-darkened sky. “We are entering the area where the attacks happened, we’re going to locate the organism—or organisms—responsible, and if possible, relocate them to where they cannot inflict mass harm to human life.” She walked ahead, turning on a light to illuminate her path forward.

Johnson looked to one of his other soldiers. “Fucking weird, this job. Last week, we were at the Congo, gunning down raptors at that construction site. On Thursday, we were diving from 10,000 feet and fighting man-eating pelicans. And now?” He huffed, grabbing some protective gloves and putting

them on. “We’re somehow gonna have to fight a jellyfish that doesn’t die. Never let it be said this work is dull, I guess.” He rolled his eyes before dropping his visor and running off to join everybody else.

The party travelled along an uneven pathway of rocks flanking the rushing waters of the ocean and toward a cave jutting out from the sides. This cave was the ‘Stinger’s Cove’, named as such for a reported series of jellyfish stings and sightings concentrated in the area over a century ago. Since then, it had become something of a tourist trap, enticing adventurous beachgoers with its mysteries. Right this moment, however, it was somehow the suspected hiding place of a supposedly prehistoric jellyfish that could kill dozens in minutes.

Approaching the side entrance, the soldiers already there blocked Clemments and Wilson from entering. Somewhat distantly, a series of clicks and squawks echoed inside of the cave.

“We got company,” one of them spoke, poking their head around the corner. Inside, a trio of quadrupedal, feathered reptiles bickered with one another over a fourth, dead member of their group. One of the reptiles lifted its tail and revealed a vibrant fan of feathers coating the end, hissing to scare back the others so it could feed. The soldier pulled their head back. “There’s four Crawlers, one’s dead. What do we do?”

Johnson pushed past his colleagues and peeked into the cave himself, readying his weapon. He fired one shot, followed by the splashing of a body falling in the water. The other Crawlers screeched as more shots were fired, another splash followed by further shots and a squelchy *splat* against hard rocks.

“Coast is clear.” Johnson lowered his weapon and ventured into the cave, everyone else following soon behind him.

Once the group was inside, they were greeted by an eerie cavern, now vandalised with a quartet of lifeless reptilian bodies. There was an odd light within, reflecting off the surface of the water. On the ground, sticking out against the dull colours of the rocks, vein-like structures snaked all around, almost like the cave itself had a nervous system, the water serving as the brain.

The mesmerising sight surrounding them was capped off by the haunting visage of what lay beneath the clear surface of the water. Stretching out from the ‘veins’ between the rocks was a hulking blob poking slightly out of the water, the depths concealing the rest of its body. Bobbing against the surface were lifeless human bodies, wrapped around in transparent tentacles. The horrifying realisation of the nature of their situation finally sunk in, the team paralysed with fear.

“*Turritopsis titanus*... the immortal titan...” Clemments spoke silently, her voice raspy, glancing down at the rocks beneath her feet to see a tentacle slowly snaking its way toward her.



## Ronan Lynch

### *Twilight of the Pagans (August, 1064CE)*

The sun took a deep breath, preparing itself to plunge below the horizon, the great inhalation signifying the coming of night.

It would have been a particularly beautiful evening, thought Halfdan, had it not been for the enormous skinned polar bear carcass roasting in front of him, impaled on a spit. It would also have been a particularly quiet evening among the stars if it weren't for the small group of half a dozen Norse warriors, sprawled around the fire, laughing and singing. The occasion of the laughter was Fiskeørn, on his feet, spilling jokes like vocal dysentery. His neck moved as a serpent's did, delivering punch lines with venomous aggression.

"Enemies are like trees," he cackled mischievously, "they fall when hit repeatedly with an axe!" The group erupted into deep hearty laughter. Hlodvar cleared his throat, preparing to take on the fool in a battle of words.

"Most do, but not I. I'm stronger than your standard oak. Berserker blood flows through my veins."

Fiskeørn smiled to himself, a sparkle forming swiftly in his eye.

"If you can find it amongst all that mead!" He retorted. Amid the following laughter, Hlodvar grinned. He launched a small piece of bark at Fiskeørn's head. Then he rose to his feet and cut down strips of the polar bear meat for them to eat.

The last few specks of sunlight were receding from view and the chatter and laughter of the Norse folk went quiet, as they turned to focus on their food. Their sparse encampment, situated atop a small hill, was the first line of defence for Chief Thorkell's Grœnland colony. The main body of the settlement, which lay at the foot of the frosty incline, neighboured the sea, providing easy access to the ships. The downside to this position was that in terms of commanding the high ground, the main settlement was at a disadvantage.

Chief Thorkell had ordered that a small group of warriors stand lookout each night, and light the signal beacon should a threat betray its existence, whatever the threat may be. In the cold months that had passed, however, the beacon had remained unspoiled.

Peace had finally reigned for several decades since the death of Leif Erikson, Earl Thorkell's father, and Halfdan was grateful for it. Despite Leif the Lucky's conquests of Vinland and the new continent to the far West, he had also managed to establish an effective settlement on Grœnland, one that still prospered long after his death, under the command of his son.

The climate in Grænland was unforgiving. Yet despite the harsh conditions, Halfdan had grown fond of the land his people now harmoniously inhabited. His youth in the settlement of Skiringssalr in western Scandinavia had been turbulent at the best of times, seeming to always take more than it provided. The Norse way of life had claimed the lives of both his parents. During a series of raids in Wessex, they had fallen amidst a bloody skirmish, when Halfdan was still a boy. And after

experiencing the horror of battle first hand, Halfdan was relieved at his decision to join the migration to Grænland.

He found Chief Thorkell to be an agreeable enough leader, despite the wandering interests of his son, Olav. He would give his life for the friends he had made, each sharing his ambitions for peace, looking out for one another and working hard to ensure the survival of the community. As a result, he had grown to love them. Fiskeørn for his humour, Hlodvar for his courage, Anwen for her ferocity, Bolli for his loyalty and Freyja for her kindness.

After he had eaten, Halfdan laid down and allowed his head to loll slowly backwards, just for a moment, as he leant against the log of a felled tree. This movement was rewarded with the glorious sight of a white-tailed eagle soaring at a low altitude directly over the camp, its soft feathers illuminated in a brief flash amongst the darkness by the dancing flames of the campfire. He sighed. For all of Grænland's difficulties, there was beauty here too, almost unmatched. Against his better judgement, joining the expedition to bring more settlers to the colony on this new world had been the best decision of his life.

Darkness had completely consumed the landscape now and the camp fell silent, as though anxious the stars were watching them. Hlodvar twirled a dagger through his fingers. Fiskeørn sniffed. Halfdan ran a hand through his long fair hair as he gazed across the settlement. He watched as the small flames of the lights flickered in the chilled wind but stayed strong. Regardless of the months of peace, they could not let their guard down to potential threats unseen. No harm would come to these people while he and his friends still drew breath.

A twig snapped to his left and his head whipped round, hand gripping the handle of his axe. His eyes fell on Bolli, his great dark beard protruding a good few inches in front of the rest of his face.

"Easy Halfdan," he grinned. "My longship needs a leak. That is all."

"Don't fool yourself, it's not that long," Anwen, a fierce and well respected Shieldmaiden, chimed in. "It wouldn't make it across the North Sea, put it that way."

"Shortship," cackled Fiskeørn. Bolli grinned again as he stepped into the long grass, which poked in jagged clusters through the soft veneer of snow. Halfdan smiled, relaxing back to his appreciation of his surroundings. He stared up at the stars, deep in thought, when the trickling sound of a small stream of liquid hitting the ground interrupted him. On top of this, Bolli began to whistle. The rest of the group grinned round at each other. Halfdan looked across at Fiskeørn beside him, who narrowed his eyes and smiled.

"Bolli has always been known for his outstanding timing," Fiskeørn chuckled.

Halfdan's laugh died in his throat as he suddenly realised something was wrong. Fiskeørn hadn't caught onto this and continued to taunt. "Of course, if he can—"

His words were brought to a stop as Halfdan clapped a hand to his mouth. He held up a finger and whispered. "Shut up!"

They sat in silence for a few seconds and then it dawned on him.

Silence.

That wasn't right.

The whistling had stopped...

### *The Last Tree*

I am the last one.  
The final piece on the board.  
The endgame.  
Standing alone  
in the charred graveyard of the Earth's garden.

I am the last one.  
No one to turn to,  
no one to stand with,  
or seek comfort from  
when the axe falls.

Left now only with fading memories of kinship.  
The irony:  
Alone we are but a thread of string,  
that, when brought together,  
forms a rope to take our weight.

They come with fire.  
They come with axes.  
Feeding on our resources,  
relying on us for survival.  
Who will save them now, I wonder?

I have neither the strength nor will.

Here I stand,  
un-moving upon my legs of oak,  
my once green mane rustling,  
in the chilled breeze of the ruined earth.  
The last clean witness.

My steady trunk is tiring now.  
Soon I too will be gone.  
There is no rebellion against extinction.

## *Wind and Skye* (June, 792CE)

Somewhere there is an island of heather and starlight. A place where waves of the North Sea caress the shore. It is here that a veneer of mist hangs amidst the mountains, rolling almost imperceptibly across the valleys like a blanket of wind and snow. It is here that sea eagles cry, seals lounge and rabbits forage. It is here that Skye lies in wait, in the periphery of the turbulent mainland.

This island is quiet. So distant, yet so pivotal.

It is here that my story begins.

I remember my mother. She spoke often of wind and rain. How they were to test us and make us stronger. If only she knew the trials I had to face after...

When I was without her.

I remember our hearth. The crackling of flame. The creaking of the spit as it twirled slowly, the aromas of roasting meat spiralling beside the smoke which seeped into our roundhouse's canopy, wafting silently among the hanging graveyard of animals beneath a thatched ceiling.

There were always animals suspended from the ceiling. Father's handiwork. Though his character strayed far from the tenderness that Mother offered, he certainly knew how to provide for us.

Looking after me was Mother's job. Within her walls I always felt as though nothing could harm me, our house like a second womb.

A womb. I had often wondered how it was possible that I had fit inside her belly. It didn't seem big enough to me. Nonetheless I am grateful it was her belly in particular. I loved my mother. I tried to love my father too, though this was a more difficult endeavour. He was busy, I would tell myself. Tired and busy. He didn't mean to hurt us. But you see, men are weak to things such as anger.

So weak.

When I had seen six cold summers, Mother's belly grew again. I remember how she moaned when water began to pour from within her. Granny had taken me away at that point and I didn't see any more. I loved Granny. She told the best stories.

She spoke of warriors and demons, selkies and mermaids. She spoke of raging battles long ago and of lovers venturing overseas. I wondered how much she had seen in her long and mysterious life. But she would never tell stories about herself and because of this, I knew little of her past.

No story could focus me on that night, however. I was too excited. Excited to see my brother or sister. To meet them and see what they were like. To hold them in my arms, the way mother held me and would undoubtedly hold them too.

Granny said she was sure it was going to be a boy. A brother. She told me we should make something. A present for the new member of the family. That was the first time I got to hold a knife. When Granny showed me how to whittle and carve, how to shape a piece of wood into an object. We had carved a horse. A rather beautiful creature, proud head standing tall above its mane and legs. It was perfect.

As the sun rose the following morning and graced the distant sky with tinges of pink and orange, Granny and I raced back to the house to meet my new kin.

When we entered the roundhouse however, the first thing we saw was the blood on the floor. Mother lay on the bed, eyes closed, wounds speckling her face and a large stain of deep red on her lower tunic. Father was nowhere to be seen.

We immediately knew something was wrong. I felt Granny's hand squeeze mine as we cautiously approached.

"Diana?" Granny had asked and Mother's eyes had snapped wide open. She shouted at us to leave but she couldn't finish what she was trying to say as the tears began and she broke down, wailing into her pillow.

"Mama, where is my brother?" I had asked.

Granny sent me away to fetch some water and reluctantly, I had gone. When I returned, the bucket clutched in both hands, I heard my mother beginning to explain what had happened. Father had beaten her. I didn't know why.

She saw me and turned, her face softening as she spread out her arms, offering her comfort. Or seeking mine.

"Where is my brother?" I asked again, hesitant.

She told of how my brother was needed by God. That he was never meant for this world.

I cried then. I ran out of the house and cried. With the roundhouse behind me, I ran through the heather and bracken, down to the waterside where the seal pups floated out in the gentle waves, nothing more than tiny silhouettes in the fog.

As the North Sea lapped at the shore, my tears fell, joining the swash. I watched them sway with the tide. Why had my brother abandoned us? Why had he not wanted to stay?

I tried to tell myself that God's will was above that of man. That my brother must be needed for something.

But it didn't help the pain go away.

*Collateral (Buckinghamshire, April 15th, 1980)*

While the afternoon grew tired and handed on the torch to evening, Hayden passed through the town centre. He crossed over the train line and headed to the North East, where the pavement turned to grass and the town turned to fields, leaving the cars and the houses behind. He made quick work of the walk, beginning to climb the hill which led out of the town and into the Chilterns.

As he climbed past the initial cluster of trees, the exposure of the barren hill unfurled a gentle wind, batting and flicking at his hair, weathering his face and causing his unzipped coat to billow behind him.

When he drew near to the brow of the hill he turned, looking back down into the town he had climbed beyond, lowering himself slowly to sit on a patch of short, shivering grass and removing his backpack, beginning to eat the food he had bought.

As he took the last bite of his sausage roll, the first of the sun's evening light emerged from the cloud coverage above, bursting free from the sky's dense white pillows and erupting across the narrow blue horizon, beginning its final descent.

A gentle gust of wind ascended the hill towards him, causing the dense grass to shimmer and wave, beginning to glisten as the rays of the sun's light bounced off their thin stalks. Hayden looked back out over the monotonous industrial patterns of the town, overshadowed by the lush hills that surrounded it, the trees swaying down at the base of the hill, beneath the sky of now brilliant orange.

The beauty of the landscape and the peace of the moment was enough to draw a smile from his sad face as he ran a hand through his hair, enjoying the refreshing touch of the gradually dying wind.

An emphatic bark broke him free from his moment of fantasy and he turned just in time to see a young and energetic German Shepherd ambush him from the longer grass further up the hill behind him, barking repeatedly as it leapt on top of him, planting its front paws on his chest and tackling him to the ground.

Hayden cried out in surprise as he landed among the damp dew of the field, his face widening into a grin as he cried out again, reaching out to stroke the dog's shoulders as it barked excitedly in his face.

"Hello, girl!" Hayden exclaimed as he ruffled the shepherd's thick golden mane. "Hello!" He sat up, wincing as the dog began to lick his face.

"That's enough, Maggie," came a call from behind them as a woman approached, chuckling loudly. The dog gave Hayden's face one final lick before barking and bounding back to her owner.

"Hello there, Hayden. Sorry about her, she hasn't been out much this week unfortunately." An elderly woman, white hair tied back in a bun, whose wrinkles gave way to a kind smile, her narrow auburn eyes conveying a gentle warmth despite the tired sunken bags beneath them.

"Hello, Mrs Young." He smiled at her before turning his attention back to Maggie as the animal returned to his side, sniffing his bag. "Alright Maggie, here." He reached into his bag and pulled out

an apple, holding it out to the dog, who snatched it from his hand excitedly, wrestling it to the ground beginning to chew, tearing up the small piece of fruit.

“Quite the view, isn’t it,” said Mrs Young as she arrived beside Hayden, the two gazing out at the rolling landscape and glazed horizon. Hayden nodded slowly but said nothing, his gaze not leaving the distance.

“How’s your husband?” He said, finally. Mrs Young gave a shaky sigh as she mustered her reply.

“Not getting worse. But he’s not getting better. It’s... tough.” Hayden looked at her and she squeezed her mouth, looking away.

“Please, let me know if there’s anything I can do to help,” Hayden offered and she chuckled briefly at this.

“I wouldn’t ask for help from you, Hayden. You have more than enough on your plate at the moment,” she replied. Hayden shrugged.

“Sometimes it’s easier to keep moving. Takes away the time for looking back,” he said, quietly. He looked down at Maggie, still battling chunks out of all sides of the apple, sniffing loudly as she hooked her teeth into its side and broke off another piece, chewing it hastily.

“You haven’t heard anything from her then?” Mrs Young asked. Again, Hayden said nothing. He simply shook his head slowly, watching a pair of blackbirds scrambling through the sky together, picking at each others’ backs as they collided above the trees. “Well, you just make sure you never blame yourself for her decision.” The older woman said decisively. Hayden waited a long time before replying, listening carefully to what she had said and then to the sound of the wind fading away, foreshadowing a calmer evening.

“If anyone is to blame it’s my dad. I’d walk out if I was married to him,” he said and Mrs Young laughed momentarily, stepping forwards and resting a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I just... I sometimes wish that she had taken me with her.” Hayden finished and Mrs Young let out a sympathetic sigh, squeezing his shoulder affectionately.

“Oh, you poor thing.”

The sun had fully emerged from the dense coverage of clouds above and was beginning to take the plunge below the horizon over the hills ahead of them. They stayed like this, watching it in silence, Mrs Young still with her hand on Hayden’s shoulder as he sat on the long grass, Maggie still chewing at the now diminished apple.

“I sometimes think,” Hayden spoke again as they gazed across the valley “that I could just leave. Like she did. Get away from him. From everything.”

“Where would you go?” Mrs Young looked down at him, her brow furrowing with concern at the thought of the young boy running off on his own.



“Nowhere. Anywhere. Just away from everything,” he said. Mrs Young paused a moment longer than Hayden expected. He glanced at her, the woman staring at the ground, thinking deeply about what he was suggesting.

“Listen to me,” she said finally. “The world is a cruel place but it’s not dystopian. Running away from this is the easiest and safest way *out*, but facing it head on; that takes true courage. I’ve known you for a long time Hayden and you’re a brave boy. You could face this if you tried. The question, I suppose, is... do you want to?”

Hayden turned to look at her in surprise, catching the very slightest hint of a smile on the corner of her mouth. It disappeared very quickly and he immediately found himself wondering if it had been there at all.

“I... don’t know yet what I’m supposed to do,” he said and she turned her gaze back to the horizon of hills and trees.

“Take your time.” There was another moment of silence. “I’d better get back to Matthew.” Hayden felt her hand leave his shoulder as she turned, calling for Maggie to follow. The dog gave him one last sniff, followed by a bark, before turning to follow its owner. Mrs Young began to head down the hill. She made it almost ten yards when she stopped, turning to call something to Hayden.

“You know, we’re not so different, you and I.” She said and Hayden nodded, smiling without humour.

“Collateral.” He replied, simply.

### *It Begins with a Spark*

Flame. A small flame like that of a candle, brought to life within the girl's palm. The elegant beauty of the slender body of flame danced in the sunlight, flickering in the soft breath of the breeze which wafted peacefully through the forest, causing the trees to whisper and wave. Shimmering, as it flicked its head to left and right, as though trying to escape the area from which it rose. Fire. The embodiment of such beauty, and yet such peril.

The girl, Aaila, sat beside her friend Akkar, on an intricately woven thatched bench, upon the top level of Akawashi city.

The enormous settlement of Akawashi stretched densely into the trees, covering a large area of forest in southern Valdinia, not far from the coast where the Qualishian Sea stretched outwards, a frothing blanket of mystery.

Small wooden huts stood atop the vast trees, hung below them, or were constructed outwards around the trees' sturdy trunks. Platforms and brilliantly constructed bridges linked each building and all main walkways led to the Overlook.

The Overlook was a massive structure in the centre of the city. It surrounded the edge of a large clearing in the forest, with platforms of five different levels. Aaila and Akkar were upon the highest level of the Overlook, a little way from the edge, on a large wooden platform boasting a public area with pathways and benches, surrounded by masses of greenery. This platform was supported by all kinds of tree species as it lay suspended among them, connected to their many crowns and branches.

Aaila held the small flame in her hand, the fire almost matching the bright orange of her thick long hair, as a demonstration of a magical enhancement of heat Energy. Although the flames were small, they remained mesmerising. *How could something so beautiful cause so much harm*, thought Akkar, as he watched the display with wonder and curiosity.

"Ok. Your turn," said Aaila, and the body of fire slowly vanished as she turned her soft, pale-skinned, freckled face to look over at her friend. Akkar also looked up, listening intently to her guidance. "Focus. Close your eyes if you want to. That sometimes helps people to look inwards. The Energy is within you. Find it, and the flame will appear."

Akkar bit his top lip in anticipation and held out his palm. He closed his eyes and attempted to block out the sound of the birds and the arrows hitting their mark as trainee hunters and soldiers practised below. Exhaling slowly, he rolled his hand into a ball and squeezed, preparing himself for the power he was attempting to channel. He closed his eyes, all attention on searching for the Energy deep inside him, painting the image in his mind. He unclenched his fist and willed the fire to appear.

Nearly half a minute went by and nothing happened. Akkar opened his eyes and looked at Aaila in dismay. She smiled reassuringly.

"I would have been amazed if you'd got it so soon. If you really want to do this, it's going to be a long road, believe me." Akkar nodded.

"I know. It's just right now it feels like I'll never get it," he said and Aaila smiled again.

“You have spent your whole life with a bow and arrow. Becoming a Galdorian is the path I have chosen. Just keep trying for now and I’ll let you know in time when it’s becoming embarrassing.”

Akkar laughed and nodded in understanding, before gazing out at the vast horizon made up of a seemingly infinite hive of trees and skillfully placed tree huts as far as the eye could see. As much as he wanted to unlock his Energy, he could not imagine giving up his entire life to the cause. The thrill he sought was in the hunt, alone in the forest with nothing but his wits and his tools to guide him.

He knew all too well how much time Aaila spent with the Galdorian Order for the studies of Energy. Images of the day they had first taken her to the temple located far to the North somewhere in the mountains began to swarm his head. How he had been there to haul some of her bags from her house. How she had needed help climbing into the saddle of the horse that had carried her away.

Then she was gone.

And that had been it for seven years.

Only in the last week had she returned for the first time at twenty years of age. From the day he had met her, Aaila had always been fascinated and obsessed with the magical abilities of Energy. He knew that her grandfather had taught her how to unlock the Energy inside her and from that moment onwards, she had practised obsessively.

Wondrous and fascinating as this power was, it took up a large portion of someone’s life to master fully.

This was what scared Akkar, the thought of studying the same things in the same place did not appeal to him, especially when the lands of Ordomnia were ripe with adventure. And peace. For that was what he truly loved. And for the most part it was prevalent, thanks to the societal order orchestrated and maintained by the Creators.

“Hey,” Aaila said as she watched Akkar’s auburn eyes, navigating the distant horizon. “There isn’t much Energy in the clouds, so get your head out of them.” Akkar blinked before realising that he’d dozed off into a very deep daydream.

He nodded and held out his hand. He kept his eyes open this time; a steely determination written across the nuances of his face as he stared at his outstretched palm. Realising his jaw was clenched in anticipation, he allowed himself to relax and breathe deeply.

In his moment of peace there was a sudden surge that swept throughout his body like a hundred different hearts beating frantically within him. The sensation was so sudden and strong that he snapped his eyes shut and in doing so images of ash and haze appeared to him. The vision loomed in the darkness; edges bordered with flowing white mist.

A large white tree emerged from the mirage of darkness, the image wafted constantly closer towards him and he realised he was being drawn towards its base. At the base there were six roots, flowing out in different directions, all flecked with the same white mist. The lower end of the tree drifted ever closer; his attention drawn to one of the roots in particular. This snaking white body

grew to take up Akkar's entire field of vision and the white clouds that enveloped it erupted abruptly into brilliant orange flames.

Akkar's eyes flew open. The thumping feeling that had spread across his entire body instantly rushed all at once to his outstretched hand. A spark of fire burst forth from the surface of his palm and erupted upwards, growing violently until it was flicking wildly, well above the boy's head. The roar of the flame grew dramatically as it danced around, energetically fluttering in the air.

Aaila gasped in shock and leapt to her feet. The flame was continuing to grow, Akkar's teeth clenched, eyes straining with tears as he desperately tried to get the fire under control. But the thumping under his skin was too much.

The flame was about to reach the branches of the trees above them, when Aaila brought both of her hands upwards, pointing with her palms at the tower of fire. A beam of frosty air like a small, concentrated snow storm burst from her hands, extinguishing the fire as she moved them in a sweeping action the length of the thin wall of flames.

The fire went out and Akkar collapsed forwards from the bench, his vision closing in and fading swiftly to black...

## Eilidh McDonald

### *The Backseat of My Heart*

*Content warning: Transphobia*

The sun is setting, the faint glow warming your cheeks as you tilt your head up, basking in the last of the light before dusk. You puff out a cloud of smoke, watching the gray plume as it drifts towards the watery blue Heavens. There's a chill in the air—the crisp winds of winter returning once again. You're shivering in just your thin jacket but it's too late to go back for your gloves and scarf.

You're sitting on the porch, biding your time. If your mother has her way, this will be the last night you sit out here. The wet slime of the lichen used to bother you when you put your hand down, but now the feeling brings you comfort. You trace the moss with your fingertips, following its damask on the concrete.

You can feel your mother's eyes hot on your back, peering out from behind the living room blinds, but she won't chase you away. She still has her reputation with the neighbors to uphold.

So you sit on the porch and wait for Vic to show. You didn't explain anything to Vic over the phone. The fact that you had called him in the first place was indication enough that whatever had happened hadn't been pretty.

*You will never be my daughter. You are not my son.* Your mother's silence said this better than any words she could've ever spoken aloud. You will not be welcomed back into the house of your childhood. Not after tonight. The only saving grace left in that squat duplex, stranded in the middle of the suburbs, was your little brother, Mikey. It'll be a miracle if you ever hear from him again.

Shivers wrack your shoulders, goosebumps prickling your arms until it hurts. You shift your feet and think about going back in. You think of your mother and her shadow looming over you from the doorway to the kitchen, her watchful gaze, and her quiet tutting. You think of Mikey watching as you creep back inside, the light reflecting off his glasses, his eyes black as a shark's. It's not worth it.

You hear the squeal of Vic's ancient breaks before you see his car peel off from the main road and down your street. You're not used to seeing the car in the daylight—Vic always picks you up sometime after dark. Every scratch and scuff in the rust-red paintwork is highlighted by the fading sunlight, every groan of the exhaust echoing throughout the quiet road.

You stand and dust yourself off. You can still pretend to have dignity, can still perform your walk of shame with your head held high. You lift your chin and don't look back. You don't need to look to feel your mother and little brother's twin stares watching you.

Let them look. Let them seethe.

When Vic comes to a stop, you open the passenger's door and slip inside. You buckle yourself in without a word. The radio's playing some droning tune, but otherwise it's quiet in the car.

You close your eyes, letting your head loll against the fogged-up window. You feel a jolt as Vic begins to drive. Your body shudders against the door when Vic takes the sharp left turn out of your street and back onto the main road. There's a rush of hot wind against your cheeks as Vic cranks up

the heating. The accelerator groans when Vic picks up the speed. All these sensations are familiar, soothing.

“It’s starting again, isn’t it?” Vic phrases it like a question but you both know he’s not asking. He’s telling. “You fight with your mom. You call me. We go out for a drive. I take you home. I don’t see you for over two years. That’s what happened the last time.”

“I was always going to move out—Trenton was the end goal, it was just convincing the college to take me that was the problem,” you say, weary. “I had it all sorted. Places to be, things to do, y’know? Then things got messy.”

“Most things do, Tiff.”

“I didn’t have a job when I left first time round,” you say, the hair at the back of your neck prickling. “It wouldn’t be so easy to do it again. It’d get—”

“Messy?”

“Yeah,” you reply, sighing. “Messy.”

Vic hums. It’s not an answer you like. You open your eyes and shift in your seat to look at him. Vic’s knuckles on the steering wheel have faded to white, the color stark against the dark leather. The weak winter sun filters in behind him, the light lovingly illuminating the details of his face. Vic never looks like himself from the side—his profile is too soft. From this angle, there are still remnants of fat around his jaw and cheekbones, his features rounded. The sunlight’s playing tricks on your eyes.

“Do you want to go to the beach?” Vic asks, quiet.

“You’re the one driving,” you reply. His bitterness might be gone, but yours is not. “You’ve got your hands on the steering wheel. You get to make the choices—that’s how this works, remember?”

“You’ve always been a backseat driver,” Vic says, the lilt of a joke appearing through the crack in his voice.

Guilt simmers in your stomach. You bite your lip before you say, “I’m a passenger’s seat driver, if we’re being accurate. Mikey called Backseat Infinity, remember?”

Vic laughs, the sound washing over you. You want to capture it, keep it locked somewhere deep in your chest and cling to it. You would do anything for that laugh, for Vic to keep laughing just like that.

“Backseat Infinity isn’t even a thing,” Vic says, still giggling. “Why the fuck would you want to call dibs on the worst seat in a car?”

“Little brothers,” you reply with a shrug. “May they remain mysteries to us.”

The question was more for the sake of getting you to talk. You and Vic don’t go anywhere else on your drives. It’s a part of the ritual now, just another routine. You spend so long caged in by concrete, gray brickwork and scum-spotted glass in the cities. But out here, by the shore? Here the road could be a trick or optical illusion. It looks like a cracked black tongue, like the horizon is a mouth and it’s waiting for you to drive a little further so it can swallow you whole.

You long to wrestle the wheel from Vic and just press on forward until you find that spot where you can't tell where the sea ends and the sky begins. You aren't there yet though. You can only taste the sharp tang of salt at the back of your throat.

You and Vic have lapsed back into silence, but Vic's wordlessness doesn't weigh as heavily on you. You settle back into the upholstery and watch as the streets slide past you in a twilight blur. You fly through the industrial landscape, the angular faces of factories and crumbling apartments cutting through the gloom. The atmosphere here crackles with an anger. It prickles your skin, raises the hair on your arms. All the houses are silent, watchful as you pass. You have no reason to be here, to be back on these roads. There's nothing tethering you to this place.

You want to roll down the window, gulp in the fresh air, but you just play with the window crank instead. The clouds above are heavy with rain, the air clammy against your skin. Static charges just beyond the glass of the window, lightning ready to strike. You're on the edge of a storm.

"Why did you call me, Tiffany?" Vic asks, his eyes still on the road.

You don't like the set to his jaw, the grimace that it creates on his face. There's that tension returning, crackling between the two of you.

"We always do this," you say. You're trying to shrug him off, play it cool, but Vic isn't taking the bait. "I call you, we drive out to the shore. We've always done this."

Vic laughs humorlessly. "Not on the weekends. Not ever this early. We wait until it's late. You always wait for the sun to go down before you call me."

You sigh. Vic's pushing tonight. "I needed a ride, you're the only person I know with a car," you reply. "Simple."

"Don't lie," Vic says, "Not to me. Not now."

The rawness of his voice catches you off guard. The strength of his sincerity is overwhelming. You can't stomach it.

You turn your face from him and watch your reflection in the passenger's window. The woman in the window is someone else, someone distant. Her jaw is too weak, her hair too well-kempt, her eyes too watery to really be you. You know your own face, you understand it. You have a square jaw that roughens with stubble if you aren't careful. You have hard, sharp eyes. They aren't warm or kind or doting. You stare at the reflection of yourself and Vic in the window, watchful.

"You're on the farewell list," you admit. Vic's figured it out already. Keeping up the lie would be pointless now.

The sigh Vic lets out rattles deep in his chest. "So you are running again."

"I can't stay at home. Not this time." You let this admission slip out even though it bruises your lips to say. "She wants me out. Wants me gone."

"And Mikey?" Vic asks, his voice high and scratchy.

You swallow your bitterness, but it drips into your tone anyway. “He didn’t say a word.”

There’s a pause where Vic only nods. You keep expecting him to make this a big deal, for him to turn on the dramatics, to rant and rave and beg you to stay, but it doesn’t come. Instead, he says, “You came to me last, didn’t you?”

“Adam was first,” you say, letting yourself sink into the passenger’s seat.

Vic’s voice is quiet, a hard steel beneath the hush of his words. “And then you wanted to say bye to Mikey.”

“Like I said, it’s the farewells that I always fuck up,” you reply, trying to keep your voice even. “The plan I get right, but the words are harder to figure out.”

Vic’s fingers flex on the steering wheel. His jaw clenches and unclenches. He says nothing.

“Are you jealous?” you ask, incredulous.

Vic squirms. You’re staring at him, open and unabashed. He’s never been good with you watching him like this, your observations of his every little move making him nervous.

“Forget the fact that I’m jealous. That doesn’t matter,” Vic says, rubbing at his eyes. He sighs, tilting his head forward so his hair clouds his face from you, but he doesn’t turn away. Vic has never turned away from you. “What I want doesn’t matter. These are your choices, Tiff. Your life. I’m just the guy driving the car, you’re telling me where we’re going.”

“That’s such bullshit and you know it!” you snap back at him, your emotion boiling over. You thought that you had it under control, this seething anger, but it was just lying in wait. “I’m asking if you’re jealous. That matters, Vic.”

“What difference would it make? Even if you did what I want, even if you stayed, you wouldn’t be able to stand me by the end of it.”

“I’m not *just* here for you. I missed you, missed this, but I didn’t have anywhere else to go. Sometimes the one place you spend your whole life trying to escape is the only place fucking you belong.”

“But you don’t belong here,” Vic says. “You had to go and then you came back. I get that, I do, but now you’ve got choices. You get to pick—stay or leave.”

“And I don’t want either of them,” you reply, the bitter taste of the truth lingering on your tongue. You cling to it, roll the flavor around until you think you might gag.

Vic smiles, a small consolation. “Which is the lesser evil?”

“I can’t just up and leave every time things don’t go my way,” you answer without telling him anything. Vic’s known you long enough to sift through the words until he can find the pearl of honesty underneath. “Shit just doesn’t work like that.”



Vic pulls into the small row of parking spaces, half his tires on the sand and the other on the concrete. He glances over to you before climbing out, switching the engine off with a flick of his wrist.

You follow him, a few steps behind, as he leans against the hood of the car. He doesn't clamber up onto the bonnet, he just slumps into himself, his arms crossed and his head low. You hop up onto the hood, the soles of your ratty shoes scraping the gravel. Your shoulders knock into each other, your elbows brushing as Vic slips away from you.

High above your heads, the mournful cries of the gulls echo across the shore. Their shrill call is the sole sound between you and Vic, not even the engine can save you from this heavy, all-consuming silence. You look out at the sea, the tide rising rapidly, only a sliver of sand left to separate the road from the ocean. The pale orange sunlight glints off the foam and crests of the waves. It looks like liquid fire, like the ocean is aflame, a burning oil field spanning all the way to the edge of the horizon. There's a feeling stuck in your throat as you watch the water crash and spit, something too big to name.

"We all have bad days, Tiff," Vic says, hesitantly. He's mulling over each word, dissolving them on his tongue to try and figure out how they taste. "But you've been having a bad three years. Aren't you tired of it yet? Don't you want something else—something more than whatever this is?"

"It's not all my fault." Your voice comes out small, hoarse. You want Vic to hear that anger simmering in your chest, your righteous rage. Your throat cracks with the burden of your emotion. "Not everything is my fuck-up."

"I'm not expecting anything more than what you already are," Vic soothes, running his palms across the shorn mess of your scalp. "I've never minded your mess. Never once."

"That's not okay, though," you whisper. "That just means we're both fucked."

"You've been trying," Vic replies, his hand trailing from the joint of your shoulder to your elbow, his fingers probing for the flesh underneath your jacket. "That matters more than you give yourself credit for."

"It's not enough."

Vic pauses, drawing back into himself. You chase the warmth of his broad, calloused palms. Then, he asks, "Do you remember what I said before I kissed you?"

"You said my name. That was all you said."

Vic shakes his head, his eyes glimmering with a fondness you can't bear. "I mean the time before that. When I kissed you and instead of kissing back or telling me to stop, you punched me. You remember that. I know you do."

You tried, but you couldn't forget that night. How could you ever forget? You have to think of it in snapshots, the whole picture of your bodies moving like the frames of a movie is too much for you. The little hitches of your breathing. Every tremble of Vic's body as he reached to you. The crescents Vic's uneven nails had left in the stubble-rough flesh of your jaw.

He couldn't get a hold of your chin properly, your face slipping through his clammy palms. You hadn't moved. You had just stood there, leaving him to grapple with the fact that he was trying to hold onto a ghost. Vic had tucked your dreadlocks behind your ears. You had been frowning then. You only know this because Vic eased the crease between your brows away with his thumb.

"I was a mess before I met you," you reply to him now. "That's what you told me. *I was a mess before I met you.*"

"And you told me I was still a mess," Vic says, tender and raw. He gestures to you, palms open, facing skywards. You don't reach out, don't take them but you know if you wanted to, Vic would wrap his bony fingers around your weathered hands, keeping them warm, keeping them safe. "And I told you, you are the burning ball at the center of everything. At the center of my life. And you were leaving me."

You let shivers wrack your body. You've got your back to the road and the reflection setting sun bouncing off the water blinds you. It's too bright, the orange vibrancy overwhelming, but you keep your eyes open. You don't want to miss the expressions on Vic's face, the way his soft features melt and merge into something you will never let yourself name. Vic never looks like himself from the side, but now that he's staring you down, you realize you don't fully recognize the man in front of you either. He's different to you now. Not entirely known. His baby-fat has hardened, the flesh giving way to sharp bone.

But then, Vic smiles—that broad grin blooming into fruition. That smile almost fixes everything. "You punched me, but that wasn't what I minded. You couldn't handle the fact that I wanted you. That I wanted you to kiss me back and tell me you weren't leaving. But then you punched me, square in the jaw, instead. You couldn't deal with how badly I want..." Vic's hands flutter around his sides, birds uncertain of where to land. He continues, "How I've always wanted to push everything out of your face just so I can get a better view of you."

All these words, these sweet little secrets, are nothing but a burden. You can't listen to it. You can't even stand still, shifting from foot to foot like you're about to run, like you're about to prove Vic right.

"I'm right here," you say but it doesn't come out the way you want it to, your voice low and wavering. You sound like you did when you were a kid, like when Vic first met you.

"You shouldn't be," Vic replies, breathless. The words have a sting to them, like you're trying to drink salt water with a toothache. Vic steels himself, drawing in a deep, gasping breath. "This place isn't good for you."

You laugh, dryly. "That ship sailed a long time ago. If there was somewhere else for me to be, I must've missed the exit sign."

There's a moment's pause where Vic tilts his head, his eyes cast upwards. You think he's watching the gulls, distracted by their piercing shrieks but then he says, tentatively, "What if it hasn't?"

There's a squirming sensation building in your guts—cold, wet, and heavy. It feels like you've swallowed eels, dread growing like a live animal. After a drawn breath, you ask, "What do you mean?"

"What if you did leave?" Vic replies, his expression pinched but thoughtful. "What if you could?"

"I've already told you I can't," you say. There's an ache in your throat as you speak but you swallow it. You could tell Vic the truth, the whole unvarnished story of how you lost your license, but it doesn't matter. There are some things Vic still doesn't know about you. It's too late for him to learn now. "I don't even have a car, Vic."

"I know you don't. But I do."

You sigh, grimacing. You can't escape the way your heart leaps in your chest though. The thought of driving away from this place, the idea of watching as it disappears in the rearview mirror is a freeing one. You think of Vic, stranded on the shoreline, and of you watching as he becomes a speck, growing smaller and smaller until he vanishes completely.

You say, "I couldn't take that. I wouldn't."

"*Why not?*"

"I don't get why you're pushing this," you snap. "Do you really want me to leave?"

"Of course I don't, Tiff," Vic replies, cupping your face in his hands. The pad of his thumb rests just at the edge of your lips, and you swallow down the urge to press a gentle kiss there. "But you need to."

"I don't want to drag you through that again."

Vic shakes his head. He doesn't move any closer. He just leans against the faded paintwork of the Sedan, his hands stuffing into his pockets. "It's too late for that. You've started it up again—this whole cycle of leaving and coming back again." Vic sighs. "It makes me tired, Tiff. I'm just *tired*."

You're watching Vic now. He must be able to feel your appraising gaze on him, but he doesn't shy away. In the fading sunlight, Vic's skin is a rich bronze, every one of the russet freckles sprinkled across his cheeks glowing. When he turns his head to glance at you, you can see the strands of gold hidden in his tawny curls and at the tips of his eyelashes. You watch him, this golden boy, your best friend—your only friend in the world. You look over at him and you ache.

"I don't have much left to say to you, Tiff," Vic says. His words are a cold knife slicing through your paper-thin skin. "I watched you go once, and I didn't have the guts to say what I meant. I'm not doing that again."

Vic takes a deep, steadying breath. He's stepped away from you, the space between where you end and he begins more obvious to you than ever before.

"I love you, Tiffany McCoy," Vic says. He smiles and you brace yourself. "I love you. I never want to see you again."

Without a word, Vic presses the keys to his car into your hand. The cool kiss of the metal leaves your fingers slippery. You almost drop them, fumbling for the right words. But Vic's right.

This moment is bigger than you, you realize. There's a glimmer to Vic's gaze—a distance between what he sees in front of him and what lies behind his big brown eyes. There's an edge to his smile. The meaning of what he's saying is clearer than the water that laps at your soles, that washes the tires of Vic's car with salty purity.

There is nothing left for you to say to him, nothing more to ask. Vic has given you all he has to give. It's your turn now. Take it or leave it.

You pull the hand that now holds the keys into yourself, clutching it. The metal gleams in the last of the sunlight, pearl-like and precious. You reach out to Vic with your other hand. He lets you, takes your palm in his.

Slowly, you trace every bump and rivulet years of cold weather and rough work have left behind. Vic has working hands. They're the same hands your father has, your grandfather had. Vic has all the callouses that you should.

You keep the keys hidden away like a secret. You lean into Vic, the cold of the ocean water rushing over you all at once. Vic doesn't hold you back, not right away. He tucks your head under his chin, but his arms remain limp at his sides.

After a held breath, Vic presses his cheek into the soft down of your hair. Springy curls have grown once more, the tight coils returning to tickle the tops of your ears and the nape of your neck. You feel Vic's fingers, thick and clumsy, brush against these longer strands. He's exploring your body and you allow him his fill. For once, you are here in your body. You are no longer a phantom in the sand or a ghost in the snow. You are here. *You are here.*

Vic's body envelops you, his lanky arms draped across your shoulders. You let your head loll against the hollow of his throat, pressing your chapped lips against the delicate skin of his neck. Vic shivers, and you can feel the muscles in his throat spasm as he swallows.

Vic runs a fleeting hand across the skin of your cheek, his thumb tracing the faint beginnings of stubble on your chin. It's barely more than a graze but you lean into that touch.

Vic smiles, quiet and content. He rests his hand against the flesh of your cheek again, his index finger rubbing soothing circles against your skin, the patterns looping and swirling across the expanse of your face.

You trace your fingertips along Vic's rounded jaw, his skin marred with acne scars and fresh stubble. You're sure that you could find the exact spot where you punched him, can picture how your dark knuckles would look against Vic's paler golden-brown skin. You don't remember what it felt like though. If pain shot up your arm and into your shoulder, if your hand stung or ached. Your fist had raised and swung before you even realized. You had watched as your knuckles met Vic's supple cheek from a distance. The hand no longer yours, the arm and elbow and shoulder all someone else's. Not your fault. Not your problem.

Vic had ended up on the ground and you stood over him, swaying on the spot. The pain in your fist hadn't bloomed yet. That would come later. Vic's look of betrayal, the bitter shine of tears in his eyes, that pain came first.

But there were still your fingerprints on his skin—a painful reminder to you both. The bruise hadn't faded for weeks, clear for all to see even as he waved you goodbye with his face hidden in the hood of his jacket.

You had wanted to apologize, say something to make your mark on him easier for you both to stomach. There weren't any words that could do that, though.

It had taken everything you had not to kiss Vic back. That feeling of his plush lips on yours was so sweet, so unexpected that you had felt yourself leaning in, melting. That had scared you more than anything else.

You aren't the same person as you were back then. New name, new hair. New freedom. And yet, this is always who you should have been—this name, the one that Vic calls out so softly, is the name you should have had from the beginning. You just didn't realize it then.

“Tiffany?”

Then, you kiss Vic.

There's a heartbeat where Vic tenses before he places tentative hands on your frigid skin, one resting at the hinge of your jaw and the other by your waist. The angle of your heads isn't quite right, your teeth clacking together messily. There's no art to this, no finesse or skill. There are no expectations—for once, this is something you can't get wrong. This is just your chapped lips and his, coming together as you fall apart in his arms.

Vic hums and you open your mouth wider, trying to swallow the noises escaping his throat. They're sweet, lilting things and you want more of their sugary sound. Vic is made from all these delights—the width of his palms as he slides his hands over your hips, his warmth just like bread fresh from the oven, the way he heats you from your core to the tips of your exploring fingers. You cling to his broad shoulders, your fingers scrabbling to feel the muscle and flesh underneath his hoodie.

You are the first to move back. You watch as his body follows yours, his hands clasping at your shoulders, a drowning man clinging to a lifejacket.

You open your mouth to speak, to try and clear the air but droplets of rain trail their way down your cheeks. The clouds above have opened, the seagulls clearing the air until all that is left is the sound of you and Vic's heavy breathing.

Vic doesn't hang his head or shy away like he did all those years ago when a stumbling confession spilt from his mouth. Vic keeps eye contact with you. There's no warmth nor humor to his gaze. Instead, you find a disarming sincerity. An honesty you envy.

You lean forward, one last time. You keep his car keys—your car keys now—in your open palm, the metal warming with the heat of your bodies. You can feel the dull bite of the serrated edge nipping your fingers. You ignore it. You say the only words you have left for him.

“Thank you.”

You turn your back on him and take the few lonely steps until you are sitting behind in the driver’s seat. The steering wheel feels wrong in your hands, its shape bent to fit the calluses of Vic’s hands over the years. The seat is a little too far back, the console distant. You’ll make it work. You have to.

This is all you’ve got left.

And as your trembling hands slot the keys into the ignition, you don’t dwell on how this is the last time you’ll ever see Vic. Instead, you think about what this was, what this is.

A kiss goodnight. A kiss goodbye.

## Thea Moşneanu-Gheorghe

### *Chasing One's Tail*

*Content warning: Violence, murder, body mutilation, child abuse, discrimination against travellers*

I.

On a cold December night at the Rupea hospital, a little girl was born with no hair and a tail. There were many stories about children born with no hair and a tail, but whether they were cursed by the Devil or the stillborn of non-believers, they always ended up bringing woe and death upon their families—that was their destiny.

Her father wept, the poor old man. He looked down at the abomination in front of him and told himself that he would force himself to call her “daughter”, even if deep down, he knew he should better take her to the bucket. He named the girl Maria—in all its beauty and holiness, it was a perfectly adequate name for a perfectly adequate daughter. The old man had to keep telling himself that.

As soon as she was out of the hospital, he took her back to Tărlungeni to get baptised, and the priest declared her “a perfectly healthy and lively child”. He laughed when she bit his hand with her gums while her father cradled her hand in his. May the Lord help them all.

II.

It was now an arid July day in the Moroienii's garden and someone was strutting across the grass. He was a young man of about 20, tall, gruff and handsome, the unkept kind with mud-stained fingernails and scarred palms—a worker. He had been contracted by Mr. Moroianu to build a sturdier door for his shed. The one currently in place was made of placated wood, and usage had rendered it moist and weak. It should be mentioned that Mr. Moroianu had screwed in the hinges himself, and he was old and clumsy. The precarious door had sufficed so far, but that would no longer be the case going forward.

The job was simple enough, but what troubled the man was the promise he made to Mr. Moroianu: to never speak to anyone in the village or elsewhere about this job for as long as he lived. There was nothing we wanted more than to break his promise, for this was the strangest job he had ever done for the entire time he worked. He could not shake off the feeling of being watched.

The uncanny feeling never left, still lingering on his skin weeks after. One night, after he saw the lights in the Moroianu household go out, he climbed over the fence and walked over to the shed. To his surprise, the door was open, and a thin silver chain was glistening in the moonlight. The chain seemed to be secured to something inside the shed.

*How stupid could I be, the man has a dog!*

Still, something bothered the worker. If it really was a dog, where was it the entire time he worked on the shed? Surely a dog would not be so effective at hiding, right? So, the man waited. And waited. And waited. And what he saw, he would never forget.

III.

Maria was fast and agile, but she lacked stamina. The walk to school was a short one, less than an hour, yet it still managed to exhaust her. The priest ended up giving her a piggyback for the last kilometre, but she was far too tired to focus during lessons and fell asleep. Before he dropped her off, the priest fixed the collar and cuffs of her dress and tied her apron again. He would have worried about the hand-me-downs, about how awkward they made her look, but Maria was going to a traveller school. No one there had anything new, and it didn't matter how often she fell asleep; no one there ever graduated anyways. Maria, of course, didn't care.

This was all the old man had agreed to: a school in the traveller area, where she would be far away from any *civilised* people that she might trouble. Even this school, decrepit and useless, had taken hours of bartering from the priest. He knew this rudimentary education was still better than nothing, and the girl had to go to a school, but the priest somehow knew that this hairless girl with a tail deserved more.

IV.

"I wanna go home!"

"Finish writing out the capitals, and you will."

"I don't understand why I have to do this. I already know all the capitals of Europe. No one else in my class does. And I can count better than all of them. I can *multiply*. No one else can multiply, not even the second-grade lot. This is all a waste of time."

"I know, Maria, I know all of that. Which is why you are here: you know capitals, you can multiply, you can write cursively."

"Which is why I don't see the reason I'm being punished."

"This isn't punishment, Maria. You... you are better than them. At everything. Now, if you get lazy, this won't last much longer. On the other hand, you keep doing lessons here with me, and the lessons will get harder every day—weren't you saying school bores you? That it's too easy? That—well, you won't be bored here. The lessons will get harder, and you will get better, and you might even go to the city one day if you keep working hard."

After that, Maria was quiet. Never once did the priest hear her complain, she simply came in every single day at 2pm sharp, dropped the old grocery bag on the floor (her school bag), kicked off her shoes and did whatever work was handed to her in silence and with a look of terrifying determination on her face. The priest liked looking at her work. She had that fierceness which, in his



century of living, he had discovered was the marker of a genius. Even her teacher had told him that Maria was growing up quickly and beautifully, that when she wrote on the board, she would have such confidence that she would pulverise the chalk while writing. The girl opposite him still had some signs of her past savagery, in the black dirt under her long nails, the canine growl she would let out when she got something wrong, or the fingerprints of grease and sweat she left on the paper after writing, but they were being overshadowed by a greater force.

V.

School had ended three days ago, and the river banks were now constantly populated by children soaking their feet in the dirty water. Tărlungeni was loudest during this time of year, and the girls could hear the melon vendors shouting through their megaphones, the cars driving at high speed on the main road not 100 metres away from them, and the workers barking swear words at each other and spitting saliva and chewed tobacco in the water.

In the midst of the usual madness, there was an even smaller madness going on. The four girls were crying and grasping onto each other so tight they were bruising each other. Three of the girls were slender and had beautiful black hair down to their waists. The fourth girl had no hair and a tail. She was crying the least out of all of them. She was more scared than sad, for she had suddenly become painfully aware of her condition—she could feel the grass stains forming on her body as she was lying down. She could feel the breeze stinging her through the hole in her shirt's armpit. She could feel her breasts pushing against the buttons of her dress, and she could feel her cavity stinging acidly. She felt her seven years of savagery piercing through her pseudo-civilised skin as all the rats she had eaten stirred in her stomach, and the thin metal chain suddenly constricted her ankle again, sending shivers down her entire body. She couldn't cry. It was far too late for that. Every minute of summer that passed was a minute closer to the day she would die—a savage beast—on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, at 8.00 in the morning, in the hallways of George Mureseanu Theoretical School. The big school. The town school. The rich, white, civilised school.

VI.

There were precisely 24 hours left until Maria Moroianu was to face death by fifth grade, and she was standing in front of her place of execution. She had kept her head covered from church in order to hide the fact that she had no hair, and she had tried to buy a long wool skirt from the Vietnamese shop in order to hide the fact that she had a tail. She was peering through the cut-outs of the maroon gate, gazing with melancholy upon the building where she would die. She felt a bit more ready to face her death now: Tanti Angelica from church had taken her to the Vietnamese shop in her car and gave her 20 lei. With that money, Maria bought a dress, shoes, and a refillable fountain pen. She may die a beast, but at least now she looked like a girl.

## VII.

The whole schoolyard was clapping. The national anthem was playing. The weather was divine. The priest had finished his sermon, and his eyes were searching for Maria desperately in the sea of children. He did not see her before she climbed on the podium so the head teacher could put three gold medals around her neck and a pack of prize books in her hands. His heart burst with joy—Maria always complained she had nothing new to read. When she stuck her tongue out and did a trick with her tail, all of her classmates erupted with laughter. They loved her, all of them, and how could they not? In her light blue shirt with the frilled sleeves, with that wide stance and mischievous grin and glossed lips, she looked like a clever pixie bursting with life and laughter.

The priest didn't see her in time, but she saw him. As soon as she descended, she made her way through the crowd directly in his arms. No one could tell how long they embraced. All that's known was that when she let go and ran back to her classmates, he had no doubt in his mind that she would be okay.

After the prize-giving had ended, class 4A had gathered in their old classroom, sitting in their old seats one last time. Their guidance teacher was holding back tears while she tried to deliver a tacky farewell speech that Maria wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention to. She was too busy looking over at Remus every thirty seconds; he was looking at her the entire time. Every time their eyes met, her smile grew wider. After the class had some cakes and faux champagne, he came up to her and offered to walk her to the bus station.

"Unless your father is taking you?"

She wrapped his arms around him and kissed him.

"Don't you worry. He didn't come."

## VIII.

Mr. Moroianu waited for it by the window for hours when he shouldn't have. The figure walking up the street filled him with the usual sense of nausea, and the fact that it had a boy with it added to his repulsion. Thankfully, he didn't try to come inside. He simply kissed it goodbye at the door and left to take the bus back home.

*Sick in the head, that boy.*

He was happy to see it take its shoes off and settle in the armchair. He was glad the whole circus was over, that he wouldn't have to be stressed to tears about it wandering free in town, too far away for him to be able to keep an eye on the situation—who sees it, whom it talks to, what it says (about him, most notably). His state wasn't quite so straightforward, though. There was another feeling that he couldn't put his finger on, something that left him feeling older and weaker than ever before in his life, the intuition of tragedy heavy in his heart. He didn't understand it very well, but what it was, dear reader, was the subconscious realisation that now that it was home again, he had nowhere to hide from the prophesied woe and death it brought with it. He was at its mercy. He didn't like that.

He wished he could lock it safely away again, but now the whole village was watching him like hawks. One wrong move, and it would have them all turn against him. It was charming, the conniving bitch. He would have to think of something and quickly before he was a yellowed pile of bones in its venomous stomach. That was its destiny, at the end of the day.

IX.

Fruit vendors were as common in Tărlungeni as cow shit. Every day, from dawn to dusk, they would drive up and down the streets with their megaphones and scream their prices into everyone's faces. They barely ever made an actual sale, considering their prices were inflated and their fruit tasted like silicone. They were about as beloved by the villagers as cow shit as well.

When the obnoxious voice woke him up, Mr. Moroianu didn't think anything of it. He was going to try to go back to sleep, but then something caught his ear.

"ELIXIRS, POTIONS, AND SPELLS 50 LEI EACH. CRYSTALS, HEXES AND AMULETS, 30 LEI EACH."

The old man put on his shoes and exited hurriedly outside to catch the van. Flailing his arms about, he shrieked:

"Healing potions? Do you have healing potions?"

"50 lei for a flask," the driver said.

"What can your potion heal, exactly?"

"Oh, what *can't* it heal, old man!"

"Can it heal a lack of hair?"

"Oh, how your head will shine with glorious golden locks, old man."

"Can it fix a tail?"

"It can fix anything that might ever trouble or vex a good man such as yourself."

"Never mind the 50 lei," Mr. Moroianu said, turning his walled inside out, "this is everything I have. Tell me where you get the potion from."

X.

Maria was still awake at midnight. Sleep was avoiding her, or rather, it was being chased away by a little white envelope. A little white envelope, made of the thick, expensive paper that city schools had, with her name written on it in bold black letters under the seal of the Șaguna High School. She turned over her pillow. She was stressing too much. It was only an application for only the most prestigious high school in her city district that concerned only the rest of her life... She ran over her essay and interview in her mind, trying to pinpoint her mistakes. The frustrating part was that she knew she had made no mistakes. She had been brilliant, a bedazzled shooting star of wit and

intelligence. She had, simply put, been her very best... And what if her very best wasn't good enough?

She threw her blankets off in fury and walked over to the window. From the window, she could see the shed. She would look at it sometimes, during sleepless nights like this one, and could still feel the press of the metal on her bare skin. Something about the thought of sleeping outside in a dog bed and feeding on vermin made her feel at ease with her life—no matter what happened tomorrow morning, it couldn't possibly be worse than that.

She looked at the clock on the wall and wondered when her father would be back. Was he safe? Had he found the spring he was looking for? She still wasn't sure why he was so determined to get them fresh spring water, but she couldn't complain. For once, he was fixating on something that wasn't her lack of hair or her tail.

About an hour later, her father barged into the room, eyes bloodshot and drool trickling down his chin. He was smiling ear to ear and giggling like a child.

"You look thirsty, Maria. Have a drink." This was the first time in 12 years that he had called her by her name.

The fresh spring water tasted like water. She really didn't understand why it was worth a one-week road trip around the country, and his mood made her slightly uncomfortable.

"I'm getting tired. Nighty-night, dad."

"No!" the old man bellowed. "You must drink more!"

She tried to refuse, but he pinned her wrists down. He was impressively strong for a man that old and frail. He fed her glass after glass until she felt the need to vomit. She wasn't allowed to vomit, though. He had made that perfectly clear. The smile had also disappeared, and all that was left now was the manic look in his eyes. Grabbing her by the ears and hitting her on the mouth when she tried to break free, he dragged her into the bathroom and tied her to the radiator. He poured the rest of the spring water (he had brought gallons) into the bathtub and ordered her to undress. By now, she was too scared to protest. She lay in the bath, swallowed some more water, and even kept her head underwater for as long as he told her to. Nothing was happening. She didn't know what he wanted, but it didn't matter because she didn't grow a single strand of hair on her body, and her tail still coiled pale around her thigh. She dunked her head two times, three times, only wishing to go to bed. For now, she truly was exhausted, and she couldn't handle his madness on top of her existing stress.

The third time she emerged from the water, he was done waiting. His blood was boiling with rage at having wasted a week of his already limited time trying to cure this abomination. He was done waiting for destiny. He decided it was time now to make his destiny, and thus, he grabbed Maria's head and pushed her against the bottom of the bathtub. He held Maria down for as long as he could, spewing curses at her and wishing damnation upon her. He held on impressively long, but he was a very old man, and she was lithe and spirited, so it didn't take much for her to overpower him. Until that moment, she had refused to fight back fully, but as she felt the water flood her lungs, blind panic took over.

The old man kept a pair of scissors by the sink that he used to trim the tufts in his ears. As soon as they were within her reach, she grabbed them with an iron fist and drove them seven times through the old man's eyes, four times through his left and three through his right, leaving his brains to drain out in the bathtub.

There is no saying exactly what happened next. The old man might have died first, or Maria might have cried first. She might have washed the blood off her hands, or she might have let it dry. She might have stood on a stool or sat down when she grabbed her tail in her left hand and, with those same scissors, chopped it off clumsily, she might have howled in pain, or she might have swallowed it down, and she might have been still in the bathroom or perhaps in the kitchen or living room when the priest walked in holding that letter from Şaguna High School, letting her know that she was accepted, and she might have seen the good news, or she might not have had time before the cold enveloped her fully and her vision faded.

## Marlene Rössler

*Dear Miss Dietrich*

Dear Miss Dietrich,

I'm writing to you from the future and I know you won't read this because you've been dead for three decades this year. I'm turning 24 this June. You've been dead for longer than I've been alive, isn't that funny?

My mother named me after you, did you know that? She saw your swan feather coat at the museum when I was still in her belly. She loved that coat and since she couldn't take it home with her, she took your name instead. And not just your name. *Sag mir wo die Blumen sind* and *Lili Marleen* were the first songs she taught me how to sing.

She was a mother who believed that names carry meaning. She saw you, glamorously drenched in that spotlight, wearing your black and white tux and the velvety top hat, smoking a ton of cigarettes and kissing a ton of girls and boys and she thought 'this is what I'll name the little worm in my belly, that'll be a laugh.' I wonder if now, that I smoke a ton of cigarettes and kiss a ton of boys and girls and folk that are both and neither... I wonder if she still thinks it's a laugh.

Because my name was a self-fulfilling prophecy, it seems. Your vision reaches me and I wish I could have met you in the 1920s in Berlin, a tiny bubble in a time of glitter and champagne and queer happiness that seems so misplaced. You see, the 2020s are a dreadful age that made me afraid to kiss a pretty girl in the club even though we both feel like it. I've not put on my top hat in almost 2 years and instead I've thought about my mother a lot.

You were a mother too, weren't you? You had a little daughter, just like my mother had a little daughter, and you named her Maria. A name so similar to yours. In interviews I found online, this daughter of yours only refers to you by your last name, she never calls you mum or Mama. Maybe you were never meant to be a mother, you were meant to be this wild child vision of what I could be. I don't want to be a mother either, is that selfish?

I'm hoping I will meet you someday, Marlene.

Until then, *Alles Gute*.

- Marlene

## Morgan Royall

### *Riverside Musings*

*Content warning: Grief/mourning, past death of a loved one*

The river was clear, and Valerie watched the slight rippling of the surface. She thought she could see geese in the distance. Maybe they were ducks. It was hard to tell.

“You came,” the voice drifted from behind, the lilting scorn making her shiver.

“You thought I wouldn’t,” Valerie replied.

It was said as a statement, not a question, and Valerie turned to face her companion. The girl behind her huffed, before speaking once more.

“You’re not exactly known for your commitment. Why would I think you’d show up now?” Antoinette stood in the grove, wispy blonde hair shifting in the soft breeze like dandelion fluff.

Valerie turned away from the silvery eyes piercing through her like shattered glass. She let out a breath, grounding, steadying herself on the wrought iron railing. “Circumstances change. You know that.”

Valerie heard soft footsteps approach, accompanied by a scoff. “You would say you didn’t have a choice then, wouldn’t you? You’d blame me, say it was my fault, ‘Oh poor Val, if only her idiot of a girlfriend wasn’t so *stup*—’”

“Let’s not talk about this,” Valerie murmured, fingers white-knuckling on the railing.

Antoinette let out a harsh puff of air, the sound whistling gently through her gap-teeth. It was a sound that Valerie had always found so charming. “What would you talk about, then?”

“The geese are out. I can see one of them searching for straw. Must be time to build a nest.”

“Those are ducks,” Antoinette interjected. “And yeah, that’s generally what they do at this time of year.”

“It’s hard to tell from here, to be honest, what they are.”

Her companion scoffed again, turning to look at her. Valerie didn’t look back. “You always were in denial about needing glasses.”

The two stood in silence. A boat honked its horn, causing both girls to flinch. Bright white, it cleaved its way through the waters, sending the ducks—they were ducks, as it turned out—to swim closer to the bank in search of cover.

“Why did you come here then, if not to talk about it?” Antoinette’s voice was fast, rushed, as she blurted out the words she evidently had been meaning to say all along. “Was it out of guilt? Obligation? If you’re not ready to face it, then why would you do this to yourself?”

The reeds were tall, and a verdant green. They stood in wait for a moment, the ducks on the bank sending soft quacks to break the silence. When Valerie spoke next, it was almost a whisper.

“I don’t know. I felt like I had to be here.”

“For acceptance, or for punishment?”

“That’s the part I’m having trouble figuring out.”

“You left me to die.”

Antoinette’s hand grazed the railing, pale and freckled. Valerie blinked, and it shifted like smoke.

“You blame me, don’t you, Annie?” she said, voice wavering, so soft the breeze all but drowned it out.

“You should’ve checked the current,” Antoinette said. “You should’ve known it wasn’t safe to sail. You knew that I’d never done this, and that I’d trust you. And when the inevitable happened, you never even thought to see if I could be saved.”

Distantly on the river, a rock stood on the water, black. Valerie blinked and saw it glisten, slick with rusty red.

“You were already too far gone, the paramedics said, by that point,” Valerie murmured. “If I’d moved much more it would’ve been both of us.” She turned to her companion, the bitter mirage of a girl whom she had loved. “You’re not real, Antoinette. The real you wouldn’t have wanted us to die together.”

The mirage flickered, blonde hair staining with red, clumping together like wet wool. Valerie turned to the water, her gaze falling to the package tucked under her arm. “I brought you flowers,” she said, clearing her throat.

“I’d have liked that.”

The packaging crinkled as she removed the flowers.

Aloe for affection and grief, Pink Carnations for never-forgetting, and Asphodel for regrets. The florist had looked at her with the sort of pity that made her stomach turn. Valerie laid them loose, knowing Antoinette would have disliked the plastic.

Valerie breathed.



*I know what you are...*

Shawn Stebbins had figured it out. He'd *fucking figured it out*. He had evidence and everything. This wasn't a hypothesis. This was a *theory*. With *evidence*.

He looked down at his notebook, and then proceeded to wonder why he hadn't written it down in there instead of the string map that now covered the majority of his bedroom wall. *Me Mum's gonna fucking kill me*, he thought.

But it would be worth it because he had made the scientific discovery of a lifetime.

Mavis Merryweather was a vampire. A blood-sucking, murderous beast in the form of a four-foot-eight Glaswegian.

But, he realised, he couldn't exactly tell anyone, could he? He'd read vampire stuff. He knew what they did to anyone who threatened to expose their secrets. Unless this was *Twilight*. Then they just kinda stalked you while sparkling in the sunlight.

Shawn was pretty sure Mavis didn't sparkle.

This probably wasn't *Twilight*.

Which meant, unless he particularly wanted to be forcibly silenced for his discovery, he absolutely couldn't tell anyone under any circumstances.

"Lads, I think Mavis is a vampire."

Kyle Kingston, who for lunch every day, without fail, ate only a single hard-boiled egg and a bag of Haribo Starmix, flung his spoon out of his hand in shock.

"You wot mate?"

Shawn leapt into action, pulling a large file out of his bag. It was mostly empty, but they didn't need to know that. The overstuffed appearance lended itself to his credibility.

"I have *evidence*."

"You have somethin' wrong with you is what you have," piped up Brooke Blackthorne, who continued to chew her tropical punch flavoured gum. Nonetheless, she got up and leaned over his shoulder, observing the blue biro drawn mind map on the lined sheet of paper. "Shawn, mate, you been smokin' something?"

The boy in question leaned away from her, straightening his tie in a way he thought made him look official. It didn't. It made him look like a twat.

He gestured at the table once again. "I shall now present the evidence."

"I just want to eat my lunch, mate," Kyle Kingston said while looking at his egg rather forlornly.

Owen Olsman patted him on the back with one meaty hand, though thankfully not the one holding his coleslaw baguette. "Don't worry bro. I saw the folder earlier and it's actually just his maths on—"

"*Ahem.*" Shawn cleared his throat rather pointedly. Owen slumped back down in his seat. Brooke gave Shawn the finger, which was pointedly ignored.

**Evidence that Mavis Merryweather is a Vampire:**

**Pale** ("I think that's just being a ginger, mate," said Winnifred Webb, to various nods.)

**Never sleeps** ("And you do?"- again by Winnifred Webb, whom Shawn had never spoken two sentences towards, and the fact that she was right annoyed him.)

**Got real mad at me that one time when I threw a bulb of garlic at her in Home Ec** ("Wouldn't anyone?" Winnifred Webb, who Shawn decidedly did not like, decided to point out for whatever inane reason.)

**Never eats** ("Now that's just no' right mate. Saw her eat a bag o' Quavers just this morning," chimed in Kyle Kingston, who Shawn was very glad was not Winnifred Webb.)

And it was with his final point being disproven, that Shawn decided to leave, ignoring the muffled snickers and mutters behind his back. He was right. He *knew* he was right! The beast was among them!

Said beast was currently painting her nails a neon, glittery pink.

Shawn hissed at her.

Mavis waved back at him. Yeah, no wonder nobody believed him. Time for some hard evidence then.

Shawn clutched his sister's hand mirror in his fist, angling it around a corner. He could hear the tell-tale clunk of the beast's wedges. He squinted in an attempt to catch her reflection.

It was only after she had walked past that he realised it might have been easier to have tried this while the lights were still *on*.

Curse after-school clubs and energy bills. Time for plan B, then.

The rice spilt onto the floor, scattering all across the school hallway. Shawn could hear Peter Pinkerton, the head boy, yelling something about detentions. Shawn didn't care. Shawn just kept on looking into the eyes of Mavis Merryweather. She looked back, distinctly unimpressed.

"I'm not picking that up."

Shawn began to step forward, finger-pointing, only to be met in the side of his face with a dustpan and broom. It seemed Peter had caught up to him.

(Winnifred Webb and Brooke Blackthorne giggled behind the phone filming the event. It seemed the two had teamed up. Curses.)

Shawn Stebbins was a man on a mission. A mission to see Mavis in direct sunlight.

He watched her apply heavy sunscreen to both arms, adjusting her large floppy sunhat.

“She is a ginger, mate,” said Winnifred Webb, pulling away from her new favourite past-time of making out with Brooke Blackthorne to resume her second-favourite past-time of roasting him. He didn’t stick his finger up at her. That would only incur Brooke’s wrath. That woman scared him.

Shawn took his magnifying glass, and just as he was about to angle it against the sun so he’d have a direct shot, his ingenious scheme was foiled by the clammy hand of Owen Olsman dragging him away by the scruff of his neck.

“Why would you do that? I was on the verge of having a scientific breakthrough!” a scowling Shawn hissed.

Owen looked at him with far more wisdom than any sixteen-year-old had any right to have.

“Don’t be a dick, mate.”

Shawn stomped off. He wasn’t sulking. *He wasn’t.*

It was in Home Ec that it happened. Mavis Merryweather cut her hand on a kitchen knife and rushed out of the room.

*Hiding the fact she wouldn’t be bleeding!* Shawn thought vindictively, and with a hurried ask to use the bathroom, the boy was off like a shot.

Mavis wasn’t going to the Nurse’s office. Unusual for someone with such a large cut. *Not so unusual for a vampire.*

She stopped in the stairwell, taking a first-aid kit out of her bag one-handed. No doubt to alleviate suspicion. If he was ever going to confront her, now would be an opportune moment!

“I know what you are, Mavis Merryweather!”

She turned around, a look of fear set upon her face. *That’s right, I got the power now, hoe!*

“Wh-What are you doing, Shawn?”

“*Vampire!*” he said with gusto, brandishing the homemade stake he’d whittled out of a chopstick that morning.

“V-Vampire?” she stuttered, looking utterly bemused.

Shawn reached out, grabbing her arm. “Don’t you try to fool me! I’ve got it all sussed out! No blood? No humanit—”

He fell silent, looking down at her hand, at the liquid seeping out of it at a rapid pace.

“Mavis,” he said, feeling rather faint. “What the fuck is that?”

“It’s pilk.”

He stared at the pale brown, fizzing liquid that seeped out of her hand where any normal being would have blood. Shawn let out a strangled screech.

“I-I’m sorry, I think I must have misheard yo—”

“Y’know? Like Pepsi and milk? I bleed pilk, Shawn.”

## Lillie Sanderson

### *Boingo*

Boingo, the limb-munching monster, sighed and rubbed his eyes. These night shifts and long hours were terrible for his limb-spotting eye health. Boingo hadn't been a limb-munching monster long, only since his baby had been born and the summer heat had increased demand for his kind. He had solely taken the role to help supplement his wife's meagre maternity pay. The imaginary friend monster department had surprisingly shocking employee benefits. He regretted taking the job because it meant he missed bedtime with his baby. Not that the baby could tell because it was yet to open its limb-spotting imaginary eyes.

Boingo sat in wait in the twentieth bedroom on his roster for the night. It was unusually hot even for the summer, and many, many limbs were being left unprotected, sticking out of the duvet much more than usual. The heat made the hairless creatures incredibly careless with their limbs. Some even left their entire hairless jelly-like bodies uncovered. Boingo shuddered at the prospect, overwhelmed at the thought of so many limbs. Which limb was he to munch when there was more than one to pick from?

This hairless creature seemed to be of the variety that hoarded plants and only chose the colour orange to decorate its hairless form. Its sleeping space was covered in various foliage, taking up every free space in the room. Boingo never understood the hairless creatures' desire for plants inside. Surely you were just asking for a visit from the plant-eating monsters. Hideous monsters. The worst in the entire ministry of monsters.

The hairless creature had done a good job so far at keeping its limbs safe from him. It was becoming increasingly boring sitting and waiting for a limb to appear. It was almost home time, and he wanted to see his wife. He felt as if he hadn't seen her in days due to all the overtime he was doing.

He thought about asking for a transfer, perhaps to the sock snatching department, but the inside of the sock cleaning machine the hairless used was too loud for him. Perhaps he'd fit well in the bumps and bangs monster department, but they were a rowdy bunch, and he preferred the solitude of being a limb-munching monster. Perhaps he could swap with his wife and stay home with his imaginary limb-eating baby.

He rubbed his limb-spotting eyes once more, and the hairless moved. It groaned and threw one of its jelly-like limbs out from the covers. His limb-seeking eyes locked on the squishy flesh, and he pounced. Needle sharp teeth pierced the soft flesh of the limb, sharp nails digging into the leg to get a better grip. The hairless squealed, shaking its limb violently in an effort to dislodge Boingo's munch. Finally, Boingo let go. The limb retreated under its cover.

"A job well done," thought Boingo as he let himself out the hairless' front door. He decided that all of the late nights and relentless boredom of waiting were worth it for the thrill of the munch.

## *Lost Socks*

Where do all the lost socks go?  
Are they in a place without woe?  
Can we recover all those single socks?  
Or will their pair remain forever in a lost-socks-box?

Where do all the lost socks go?  
I wonder if we'll ever know.  
Is there a little space  
Where the singles slip and grace  
With their fancy spots and stripes and lace.  
Do they get trapped in the machine  
Forever lost and never clean?  
Are they happy where they've landed,  
Or do they sob about the fate they've been handed?

Maybe it is silly to wonder,  
Since most are lost due to our own blunder.  
But it is fun to think  
About where things go when we blink  
And dream about all the things we've lost,  
Hoping they find a home outside of a lost-socks box.

## *To Do List*

The list grows,  
endless tasks,  
never-ending things to do.  
A hundred boxes to tick.

The days revolve around the list,  
yet the list grows no shorter.  
It extends by the hour,  
a constant stream of jobs.

The lists pile up,  
a swimming pool worth of slips of paper.  
Drowning in checkboxes,  
always another responsibility to complete.

Barely time to breathe.  
Cross off task after task.  
Replacing one with another,  
Two more scribbled beneath the last.

An endless spiral of useless lists.  
Make one after another,  
never to be completed.  
Lost in an attempt to stay productive.

Add one final checkbox to the lists:

Burn all the lists.

## *The End*

There's nothing more in the end,  
There are only bones and dust and bugs in the end.

Despite our petty attempts to delay it,  
There is nothing we can do in the end.

We can kick and bite and drag our heels  
But this is inevitable, our death, in the end.

Time is an unkind master,  
And our time will always come in the end.

We meet, we love, we ignite, and we burn out.  
We will always become barely more than ash in the end.

We are no exception to the rule. There are no miracles, no god's pardon for us.  
We exist, we explode, and we return to dust in the end.

This was how it was always going to be in the end,  
An eventual, unavoidable plot point, nothing more in the end.



## Holly Swan

### *Under Management*

#### *"Last Free Thought"*

It was nearly three in the morning, the orange glow from fires bathing his room in an amber tone, like how the sunrise might in a few hours, with less destruction. How long had he been lying there, drifting in and out of consciousness, he couldn't remember anymore. Sleep deprivation kept the numbers out of his mind. The crowd in the street shouted, the noise rolling like a wave through his head, bouncing off the walls of his skull.

The reason they were rioting wasn't because of him, or for him, but because his wares were eclipsed by machine-made and -sold wares—that was the reason that they were pressed to the window below. He decided to do something useful, and rolled out from under his blanket. He used the desk beside his bed to heave himself up. His mind was heavy, like a physical weight that held him back, but he rubbed the tiredness away and began to prepare for the day. Just what he could do from above the shop, though, because he was sure that if the rioters saw him, they'd press harder on the glass, and it would shatter completely.

Shops like his were a rare sight nowadays, and he was still surprised that he could afford to keep both his flat and his shop, especially with the weather-worn sign above his bed that proclaimed "Ellsworth Bakery"—possibly the last true bakery in existence, apart from the huge factories that used the name 'bakery' as well. He didn't just sell baked goods, but all sorts of products that people might need for making their own. He'd consulted with the neighbour upstairs, who owned three chickens, for fresh eggs in return for fresh bread. He still had to buy eggs from one of the large corporations to make his products, but the fresh eggs made for a wonderful breakfast.

She always laughed when he asked if her chickens were the last free ones in the world.

The fires outside had almost died when he decided to risk going into the shop. He heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that the barrier had held, even though the glass was spider-webbed and curved inwards. Nothing had been looted, and his shop wasn't in disarray. The broken glass would be a hindrance, would come out of his rent—how was he going to pay that?—but it was nothing that he hadn't expected. It was almost normal, now, to see the glass broken. Customers certainly wouldn't care, unless they had serious money, which was virtually nobody in the neighbourhood now.

The people outside weren't rioting anymore, but it was still busy. They were rushing, people who had either spent the night awake or outside, who were now going to work to make enough money to keep living. He'd seen it before. People didn't care about the sob stories of the street sleepers anymore, and as a result, they died. They were the cautionary tale, the "make money or you'll have this fate" type. He hated walking past them, with nothing to give, because maybe he'd be like that soon. But nobody could help them but the ones who had money. And the ones who had money lived in neighbourhoods with others who had money.

His phone vibrated in his pocket as he pulled his first batch of bread from the oven. He stopped to take in the smell, enjoying that he'd created it himself. One small victory in the face of the bland world he lived in. He heaved the last batch of bread in and stopped to look at his phone. The

neighbour upstairs had texted him, her name emblazoned across the top of his screen. *Got your eggs for you*, the text read. He smiled, warmth filling him. He chose the best-looking loaf from the first batch, pulled out the second, and headed upstairs, the warm loaf radiating heat in the cold of the morning where he couldn't afford the heating bill.

Perhaps today wasn't going to be as bad as he thought.

### *“Outside the Box”*

The soft glow of destruction bathed the streets around her, and she hurried onwards, trying her best not to catch her toes or her heels on any flagstones. She hated going outside, especially when it had to be that close to curfew, but it couldn't be avoided. A work matter that had to be done right that second, or all of their pay would be docked—and she couldn't afford that. Her feet wandered automatically on the path back to her flat, the well-practised route of before she moved entirely seared into her brain. It's technically illegal to be out past curfew, as she was, but the amount of people that were always on the street past the cut-off means that she was in no danger of being picked out.

After all, what's one hurrying bystander to hundreds of armed and angry protesters?

The thought of a face-scan pushed her head forward so her long hair hung over her face as she moved onwards. She didn't really need to see anyway, except to mind the protesters, but she saw their feet under the curtain of her hair before she could crash into them. But if they did a face-scan on the crowd, her brain volunteered pessimistically, and she's picked out, they'll come for her—and then who would mind her animals or the green patch in her flat? Not her neighbour, he would be too busy with his own tasks to mind hers. She closed her eyes and huffed in frustrated resignation at her job.

Perhaps it was the wrong choice to close her eyes, she thought, as she crashed into a protester. Her eyes snapped up to meet wild ones hidden behind a black mask. The protester, taller than her—but wasn't everybody?—grabbed ahold of both of her arms. She barely had time to feel afraid before the protester whirled her around, bearhugged her, and set her down, laughed “we did it!”, before twirling away into the fray.

Suddenly alone in the chaos, she wondered what they were protesting – or whether they were protesting at all. Her thoughts still whirled involuntarily like she'd been just moments before, in the arms of the tall protester. She let out a shaky breath, shook her head forward, and continued on her path. Calming her breath was the hardest part of any encounter. But it was something she had to do, because when she entered her apartment again, she'd be back on the spot, trapped in working at home behind a camera. At least she'd have the company, her animals happy that she'd be home again. She'd make herself a soothing tea, and ignore the sounds, sights and smells from outside. Yes, she thought, that's what I'll do.

The familiar street—one she couldn't forget and had forgotten—seemed bursting with energy as she turned the corner onto it. The protesters hummed as one mass, filling the street in a way that she thought must be painful for everyone involved—how would you breathe like that?—and ebbing against the darkened and boarded shop-fronts that lined this street. She paused on the corner, debating a different route. She could see her flat, on the other side of the heaving mass of people, and she could see her short balcony, Max—her cat—lazing almost ignorantly on the rails. She could go down the dark alleyway behind her flat, where all the bins stood limply to attention, but that brought a whole different set of dangers. The seething crowd prevented her from getting in via the front.

She sighed, and resigned herself to the darkness of the alleyway. It would certainly be quicker than fighting her way through the mess outside. A couple strides back along the way she came, and she was face to face with the gaping maw of the alleyway. She drew in a breath, gathering her courage in the way she would gather up Max every once in a while. She smiled at the image, pasting courage on her face like a mask, and started down the inky alley.

Halfway down to her flat—she could see her fat little chickens clucking away on the fire escape, just behind the ladder—a hand shot out and caught her ankle. She yelped, stumbling, but the hand kept a tight grip on her leg. A gaunt face, tight with pain and hunger and cold, loomed out of the space between two lopsided bin soldiers. She could see that the street sleeper didn't have long when he whispered: "Please, anything! Anything you can spare!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she repeated to his empty eyes, pulling her ankle out of the skeletal hand, "I have barely enough for myself, I can't give you anything!"

More empty forms clawed out from between the bins, echoing between themselves. "Please. Please. Please."

Her courage dropped like a stone. She cursed the dress codes at the office—why heels?—and ran as fast as her feet would allow, only looking back when she jumped for the ladder at the fire escape. The gaunt face stared among a sea of hunger, and she didn't dare stay a moment longer. She climbed the ladder, hating the way her feet slipped on each rung, and focussed instead on the patch of grass where she kept her chickens. She hated being the only employee not able to trade in the excuse of distance from the office, since it was the company who owned the flat, and they knew where she was at all times.

Sighing happily, she stepped off of the final rung – finally – as her chickens clucked excitedly at her. Perhaps being boxed in all the time wasn't the best route for fulfilment for some, but it was for her. She checked the small coop, collecting the day's eggs and ticking off another evening. The tallies for morning and evening stretched pages back, and she knew she'd have to get in touch with her contact for more. These chickens, bred for their quick egg production, weren't bred to last. After all, there were always so many more eggs than chickens, and what were a few deaths in the lines to the companies? They could always sell the bodies for meat, and they'd be replaced.

She'd had several bids on them from the companies, the money offered getting less and less as time and refusals passed. Perhaps she needed the money—perhaps the company would threaten her job or her flat—but she couldn't give them up. They were as much her family as Max, who was a celebrity in the company. Speaking of Max... she crossed the small room to the front balcony—a few centimetres in length, just enough for her strawberry plants to thrive – and scooped the cat up, pressing it close to her chest. She'd had enough of the outside today, and she resolved tomorrow would be the day she confided in the cute baker downstairs that she'd decided, when he came up for his morning eggs.

She sighed, thinking of the street sleepers. There'd been too many of them to count. The most recent merger of companies meant less jobs, and less money, were on offer.

Maybe she would take up the offers for her chickens.

### *“Field of Vision”*

The mask sat awkwardly on his face, obscuring the mirror, but he could see enough to know it was oversized on his small face. It didn't matter anyway. It's not like it would, pressed in and buzzing with barely restrained anger and excitement. He pulls the mask down more. It means he can't look down without the mask blinding him, but he wouldn't need to look down.

Hood up. Identity gone.

He locked his door, thin wood concealed at the top of a fire escape. It was the only exit and entrance at this time of night, the front block already fairly swarmed, even though the last rays of sunlight were retreating away from the shouts and screams. He sidestepped a street sleeper, trying to keep his ankles out of their grasping claws while keeping his head up. It was a miracle he did, surprisingly, turning sharply on the corner and half-jogging into the fray.

People turned and welcomed him, but nobody stopped as he joined the endless cyclical march, with people shouting insults towards the sky at the companies that ruled their lives. He'd join them, only he didn't get the insults. Sure, the street sleeper's situations were bad, but they'd made their own mistakes. He had a stable job at home, and a good apartment. He'd seen his mum and dad in the past few days. So, he didn't understand why they'd throw that all away. Sure, the companies got a little aggressive with their marketing, which is why he was out on the streets marching, but was that all that you needed to give up your life?

The mask beside him erupted with *“Fuck you, you capitalist pigs!”* and he jumps. Similar cries erupt from around him, rippling out as they circle. The later they go on, the more people join the crowd and the slower the turning gets. Somebody in the middle lights a flare, red bursting over the assembled protesters, black masks glowing in unison, and the centre empties of bodies. The protester throws the flare down, the red glow marking a spot in the middle. More flares erupt – different colours, green, purple, orange – and join the red in the middle. The crowd presses in further, speeding up. He tries to stop, afraid suddenly, but the crowd carries him in the circle, heaving in and out, like a sea that he heard about over the radio.

He panics. This was not what he thought protesting was.

The crowd is too dense for him to fight his way through, so he is trapped in a frenzied circle, passing shopfront after boarded-up shop front. He passes masked protester after screaming masked protester, the coloured lights adding to his panic as they bounce off the masks, the black plastic reflecting too well for his liking. He needed to get out of here. He needed to get out of the circle. He wanted out. He wanted his mother. He wanted his father. He wanted to be a child again, when his only worry was whether his father would be allowed down for dinner today or not. He needed out of all of this.

The flares burnt out. The crowd rattled about, finally free of the noose of the circle. He managed to slip between the cracks and gaps that had appeared, at last. He was free of the suffocation of being one of many in the loop. He couldn't understand how people had become so used to the tight crush of people, night in, night out. He wouldn't do it again, that's for sure.

Something brushed up against his leg, and as he looked down, his mask hit his chest and blinded him. The thing kept brushing, slowly winding as he looked up and drew the mask off frustratedly. Looking down, the obvious shape of a cat appeared at his feet. He crouched down, stroking the length of this cat as he fumbled with the round tag.

“Max” stared up at him, wide eyes staring up at him, unbothered by the violence behind him. He scooped Max up into his arms, deciding his neighbour would appreciate the favour of returning her wayward cat. Maybe she’d even give him some of her fabled eggs for his troubles. He smiled, walking up the street, Max purring serenely in his arms as the protesters reassembled to light something on fire, judging by the plume of warmth that ran along his back.

The mask lay, where it had been placed, warming slowly on the asphalt of the street.

## *“Spreadsheets and Sleep”*

The screen blinked at him through the darkness. It was another assignment, the last of the day, hopefully. He sighed heavily and opened the assignment requirements. It was another spreadsheet, the latest in a long line of bullshit. The one thing that kept him going was the dream of getting a journalism assignment, because it meant he'd go outside instead of being hunched at his desk, 16 hours a day. He stretched his fingers out, starting on the spreadsheet.

One row down. Six hundred and ninety-nine more to go.

The light creeping in from underneath his curtain burned his screen-adjusted eyes. The curtain had been advertised as completely light-blocking, which clearly it was not. Even stapled to the wall, floor and ceiling, light was still bleeding steadily into the room. He stood to move the curtain, to try and kill the light. His computer beeped urgently, and the messages bar instructed him to resume his work.

So much for that. He sat back down, the blade of light stabbing into the room, and resumed the spreadsheet, trying to ignore the wandering beam of hate that seemed to love settling in directly the corner of his eye. He blinked, trying to wink the light out like sand, but it stuck. He groaned, wanting very much to put his head on the desk and sob, but knowing he'd be told off by the machine for being unproductive. As a compromise, he leaned forward and refocused on the lines in front of him. They blurred uncooperatively. He groaned again, and the computer beeped at him. He'd have beeped annoyedly back at it, if he could even beep.

That was a stupid thought, and he knew it. He'd been at this for too long, but it was close to the end of his shift, and then he could crash onto the mattress behind him and sleep for all the eight hours he had off. The computer beeped again at him, the messages bar telling him to get moving or he was on warning. He gathered his thoughts back up quickly and began again on the spreadsheet.

Row after row, column after column. This was going to get done. The clock ticked closer and closer to the end of his shift, counting down the minutes until he would be able to sleep. There was something so satisfying in getting a row finished and moving onto a new one as the digital clock at the bottom of his screen clicked a minute forward. He began making a game of it, injecting fun into wherever he could. He managed to get two rows fixed into a minute, and he raced down the spreadsheet towards the end.

One minute, two rows. One minute, two and a half rows. One minute three rows. One minute three and a half rows. One, four. One, four and a half. One five.

And then there were no more rows to do. The computer trilled, and the spreadsheet disappeared. “Performance improved! Raise likely” it told him, from the message bar, and he felt a little pride, before the screen blinked. Another assignment. Better this time, though, but still another spreadsheet. Just three hundred rows, he told himself, as it hit half an hour until the end of his shift, and he sighed, leaning back.

He realised his mistake almost as soon as the painful blade of light hit his eye, and he shot forward again. He couldn't afford to get distracted though, he figured, setting back into the rhythm he'd created during the last spreadsheet. This spreadsheet was better, being half rows rather than

full rows. Soon he was up to a pace of ten rows per minute, and he felt a warm glow of pride as the message bar told him he could be given a raise soon.

And then something hit his window. He jumped. His cursor blinked on the last row, and the machine beeped at him. He turned back to it, finishing the last row. Something else hit his window as he finished it, and the computer told him he was done for the day.

And then his window shattered, and the curtain erupted into flames.

He jumped back, stumbling against his door as the alarm screamed at him. His eyes watered and his lungs burned as the curtain dropped, smothering his computer. *Good riddance*, he thought with a sick sense of smug satisfaction, before realising he would need to pay for damages. He'd contact the nice lady close to the office to get him sorted out soon, hopefully. If management thought he couldn't work, he'd join the street sleeper ranks, and he really liked having a roof over his head. "Goddamn protesters!" he yelled at the now-empty window frame. They couldn't hear him, but it made him feel better. He wrenched the door open, not wanting to stay inside the room full of fire.

His thoughts were on his missed opportunity for sleep as he and six hundred and ninety-nine people fled from the building and into the waiting mass of protesters.



*“Firelight, Smokescreens, Moonbeams”*

The moon cut a thin strip through the dark smoke. She leant out of her eighth-floor window, watching the smoke curl around the moonbeams and wondering if that was all there was to life. She’d just checked, and she had to be up in four hours to go to her job—walking the dogs of those who could afford such costly liabilities. Sure, the dogs themselves were cute—she had her favourites, the ones who wouldn’t bite at her hand—but she couldn’t see the appeal of the bills that would pile up with such creatures about. All the vet bills and cleaning and exercise and food. She was just about making ends meet feeding herself, and that was on a diet, trying to appeal to the ones in charge so maybe she wouldn’t have to worry about ends meeting ever again.

The smoke rose in thick pylons, stretching up into the sky like the solitary grove of trees she took the dogs to. It had occurred to her that she was witnessing history, both with the riots and with the trees. She’d dismissed both thoughts though, as aimless ruminating wouldn’t earn her money—might even make her lose money—and she couldn’t afford any setbacks. She’d probably have to turn in for the night soon, but she couldn’t bring herself to do so when the smoke made such pretty shapes in the night sky. She only wished she could see what they did to the stars, because they’d been blotted out by the perpetual orange glow of the city lights. It was not in her favour that the protesters were so close to her block, but she guessed it was so that they made sure that they were heard by the ones who could afford not to live in these massive high-rises.

The plumes of smoke thickened and twisted as they reached up towards the moon, and she admired them detachedly. There was a point where she could see green, in between where they left the fierce orange glow of the street for the silvery-blue of the moon, and where they thinned considerably. She almost thought there was a hint of a rainbow between where they started and where the smoke disappeared into the night. Maybe it was a sign, she thought, a rainbow of peace. Almost like the old propaganda religion book. But who had time for books anymore? The three on her shelf were a luxury she’d worked for, one for each successful year since she’d become independent from her parents. She’d take one out on her walks, reading a couple pages between the branches of a tree when the dogs ran wild in the gated forest.

Finally, she tore herself away from the outside world, closing the window behind her. It wouldn’t help controlling the dogs when she was bone-tired, but she couldn’t help it. “My little night owl,” her mother had nicknamed her, before she went and had another government-mandated argument with her government-mandated father. She laid, like she so often did, on her government-mandated bed, in her government-owned home, and tried to shut out the world. Except now her bed wasn’t government-mandated, it was hers. She owned it, not the government. And she was determined that she wouldn’t be owned.

Well, she thought conspiratorially, perhaps she’d allow herself to be owned, if it meant she didn’t have to struggle to own a large house, large dogs, large everything. Her small apartment was her world, but sometimes she struggled with the boundaries. Small didn’t suit her. She preferred her time in the dappled sunlight, snatching words from her books, while the dogs pranced and tumbled around her, either beautifully trained and afraid, or woefully unhousebroken and wild.

The variety in her walks hadn't failed to make an impression on her, such as the lovely little cockapoo Matt who vibrated with excitement whenever she got the treats out, or Jax the pitbull from the opposite end of the winding loop who'd take the lead out of her hand if she wasn't careful. Oliver was her favourite, though, the gentle golden retriever from the young woman with the property slightly off the loop where all of them lived. He was her favourite because he was just the right kind of dog that she could imagine, not too big like Jamie the great dane, not too pushy like Jax, housebroken unlike Adam the chihuahua, not barky like the new french bulldog she hadn't quite learned the name of, gentle unlike the three biting spaniels she was hesitant to offer treats to.

And the young woman who owned Oliver was lovely in the same ways that he was. And her property was the same. She'd just come to associate the woman with everything she'd ever wanted, except that she was unsure of how the woman had come to own all of it. That was the only drawback to the woman, she'd decided.

She lay on her bed and tried to ignore the fascinating shapes the smoke made, as well as pushing away the thoughts that swirled similarly in her mind. She needed sleep to handle the dogs – maybe not Oliver, but the rest of them – and she couldn't fall asleep thinking. At least, she couldn't sleep when the fire alarm kept ringing a false alarm from the smoke, probably coming through an open window. But the fire alarm kept pealing its misguided warning, and she thought she probably needed to check out what all the movement was about.

Her thoughts kept going back to Oliver and the woman as she was suddenly bathed in orange instead of silver.

## Vin Wilson

### *Terya and the Tree-Tangled Tombstone*

*Content warning: Child injury, light body horror*

The trio had finished up their packing and sat and talked for a while, about everything from their recent hunts, to Semyr and Holst's trademark arguing. It was nice, a brief moment of peace in the lives of the monster hunters. Once the chatter had died down, it was then that Terya spoke up.

"Um, where exactly did Boss say we were headed? This monster seems pretty out-of-the-way, I can't imagine too many people have complained, so how come *we're* being dispatched to deal with it?"

"I think that's *why* we've been dispatched, ki—" Holst replied, before he was interrupted by a cold stare from Semyr, who went on to correct him.

"Actually, there was only one complaint. It just so happened to be a very rich name, however, and they offered a very large bounty alongside it. Boss trusts us fully, of course!" Holst and Semyr nodded to each other knowingly, before Holst looked down to meet Terya's eyes, affirming Semyr's story with a look. Her eyes lit up, excited to finally prove herself as the feared monster hunter she knew she could be. She kept one hand on her bow for most of the proceeding journey.

For this expedition, they were heading south to look into a supposedly 'haunted' forest. Terya, although she had only been monster hunting for a couple of months, knew that hauntings were far, far rarer than the townsfolk liked to believe. Just looking at how far away the forest still was made her feet hurt.

Holst, noticing Terya beginning to flag behind, signalled Semyr to wait up (for only one of them was blessed with being able to read others,) and they set up a miniature camp for a while, using their wolfskin capes to shield their behinds from the wet grass. Terya kindled a small fire to sit between them. Holst stretched his arms out wide as he talked.

"So, what's the plan once we reach the forest? Do we have any actually usable information from these accounts?"

Semyr quietly rummaged through his backpack as he replied, "there were reports of... screaming, and loud noises, and a lot of bloody handprints on trees." He hadn't looked up at all as he spoke, still fixated on his bag.

"That sounds like it could be anything, though," Terya replied, her voice shaking a little as she spoke.

"Par for the course when you're dealing with nobles," Holst said bluntly, inspecting his intricately detailed sword at the same time. He rested it on his knees in front of his sight, "you'll get used to that pretty quickly." Holst removed his necklace, which looked like a miniature thermometer, and sat it inside the fire, watching as the little metre crept up with red.

“I think the blood is pretty interesting, it means that even though there was only one report, this wasn’t the first victim,” Semyr spat between bites of a snack bar, now looking Holst in the eye as he spoke.

“Doesn’t mean it’s a monster though, yeah? Could just be any old person who decided to become a killer hermit,” he replied, still rather bored with the topic.

“I think this may be a bigger threat than we first thought. Keep your guard up, you two, and whatever happens,” Semyr looked Holst directly in the eye, searingly, “you protect the girl with your life.” Holst only met him with a sharp nod. Terya looked back and forth between the two men as they interacted, half offended that they felt the need to protect her, and half amazed at their level of efficiency in conversing.

The day kept moving as they established a plan. Terya was the smallest and most nimble, so if anything was to run, she would give chase. Semyr was to keep an eye on Terya and use his magic for light whenever needed, and Holst would be the one conducting the main investigation, just in case the other two ended up preoccupied. Both of the men were sharp with their wits, but Holst was certainly much more hands-on than his partner. It was around midday before everyone was confident in the plan, it took Holst around an hour to convince Semyr of his “let the little girl run away if she hears something scary” plan, and it took him even longer to convince Terya

It was Holst that decided to move first, eager to keep moving so long there was daylight. The others had no reason to stay, and so started packing up anything they’d taken from their bags, extinguished their fire, dusted off their trousers and cloaks, and headed off once more.

Holst grabbed his necklace and reattached it to his neck. The red, which had now reached the top of the vial, refused to budge.

They had been following this road for a few hours now, the sun ever-fleeting from the corner of their eyes. The path was horrendous to follow, they were effectively walking across grass with a small, thin trail down the middle which they kept their eyes on.

“It can’t be far now! Why would anybody be coming this far out, anyway?” Terya asked, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

“Eh, plenty of people come to the forests for different reasons. I’ve heard it’s popular for running away and stuff. Besides, we should focus more on what’s—” Holst was cut off by a loud rustling in the large mass of trees ahead of them. They’d made it faster than he expected.

Semyr turned to ask the others about the noise when he was met with another, much closer noise. She was off.

“TERYA! COME BACK HERE!” He yelled ahead of himself with a jump.

The two men ran after her.

The forest seemed to creep up on her, and before she knew it, it took hold of her surroundings. The green was mesmerising, all-encompassing, and even though she had just run in, she couldn’t see any of the last wisps of daylight she’d left behind. Moss, vines, leaves and shrubs of varying shades

built themselves up before her. The young girl stared up at the treetops she could barely see, dazed, and exhaled.

“Terya! Teeryaaa!” Holst called out. He and Semyr had yet to enter the forest, standing just on their outskirts. “Gods pray, no reply,” he said, turning to Semyr, who had already begun pacing.

“Goddess beloved, what have we to do? We’ve just lost a teenager,” he said with a shake to his voice. Holst kept his hand on his hilt. “We should’ve at least given her a better weapon than that flimsy bow she can barely use, who knows what’s in there! Dear Goddess, Holst, I’m so sorry, I really did bank on being able to keep her in my sights, this is all my fa—” Semyr fell silent when he felt his partner’s warm hand falling on his shoulder. He stopped to look up at Holst. He was smiling, but in a way that wouldn’t obscure his worry. Holst furrowed his brow slightly, before speaking softly.

“Don’t worry, darling, we’ll find her.”

Semyr nodded. “We must,” he responded. Holst gave him a sharp nod before drawing his sword, looking back at the man, and then jumping into the tangled trees. Semyr closely followed.

Terya looked around for something she could sit on, just for a moment. Although her training had been helping her stamina considerably over the past few months, she still felt the air of frailty she bloomed from as a pit in her stomach. There was very little around her which seemed usable, the abundance of bright greens skewed her vision. It was enough to make her feel sleepy. She kept walking, to try and find a nice log or stump to rest on, for just a moment. The trees here seemed pristine and bold, almost an unnatural, sickly green. It was a wonder to behold. She stared up at what she could see of the canopy. The forest seemed to form veins and canals in the sky, beckoning her deeper into the heart of the beast.

It just felt right.

“This forest feels so... eerie. I couldn’t imagine a realm of Darlaus left in such disarray,” Semyr said, holding an orb of light he had cast. The light wasn’t great, because he feared he would need the magic otherwise, but it was enough to see the deep, furrowed brow of the man beside him.

“Darlaus abandoned this place long ago. She wouldn’t let such an evil entity reside here if she hadn’t,” Holst squinted at the way ahead, looking for anything that could aid them, he glanced at Semyr, “The Sisters adore abandoning places they deem unworthy of their love. They’re not like the Mother.”

“Pah! Are we so afraid that we must turn to religion? You are a master of the sword, dear, and I of magic. Nobody will come to harm.” Semyr briefly stopped, stifling a laugh as he spoke. Holst, however, met him with an entirely serious face.

“You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself there. Besides, isn’t that what religion is for?”

They continued on in silence, with Semyr focused on channelling his spell for light, and Holst focused on the investigation and finding Terya.

It didn't take Terya too long to doze off after she found a suitable log to rest on. It was just the perfect time for a nap, too. The cheerful chirps and squawks around slowly lulled her in as she closed her eyes.

"Hey," called a soft voice, nothing like she had heard before. It was oddly childlike, if a child had thousands of years' worth of wisdom in their head. It created something ethereal to Terya's ear. She hesitated as she fluttered her eyelids open, afraid of what she might find.

The first thing she noticed was how dark it was. Not that she could see any more or less than before, but that the lighting had entirely stayed the same. She felt that she had slept for much longer than for it to still be a pitch-black night. The sky held just as many stars too, and as she stared into it, she pondered on how from here, they barely even seemed to twinkle. She slowly shifted herself to her side to get a better view, when—

"Boo!" the child from before yelled. They seemed quite happy in themselves seeing Terya's shocked face which almost knocked her off the log itself. They began laughing so hard, doubling over and eventually falling into a sitting-down position while continuing to laugh all the while.

Terya took the time while the child was distracted to sit up, pull her bag together, and—oh. She hadn't brought her bag, it seemed. Oh well. She sat on the log, carefully watching the child before they finished laughing, and once they had, she watched them quickly dust themselves off before standing to face her. Their face was very cheery, and they had on a ragged dress.

"Hello, new friend. How do you like my forest?" they spoke, clasping their arms behind their back. Terya hesitated, unsure of how to speak to such a strange person. They, however, stood expectantly, forcing a smile again every few moments. Her voice came out quiet, almost a whisper, which took her by surprise.

"It's quite nice. How come it's still so dark, though?"

"Oh. Time can be quite strange here. Don't worry about it! When it's time to leave, you'll know, I'm sure of it!" The child said, ever cheerful. Terya stared at the child, perhaps a little longer than she should've, before hopping off her log and crouching down to face the child better. They held out a small hand. Terya tentatively took it. When the child next spoke, they had a much darker tone to their voice. "Come, let's start moving. They'll be here soon."

Terya wanted to run. Who were they talking about? Why did she have such a bad feeling about this? Now that she came to think about it, she wasn't even sure why she was here, in this ever-dark forest, and why this wise toddler had taken such a liking to her. Still, she couldn't bring herself to remove her hand from the child's, and they seemed to be leading her ever deeper. She had no choice but to follow.

Everything began to go dark.

“By the Goddess, I can still barely see a thing! Semyr, darling, baby pie, *please* can you make that light a little brighter still?”

“What, like this?” Semyr threw the ball of light some way ahead of them, some light dissipating as it flew to brighten the space in front of them.

“Yeah, actually. At least we can see where we’re going now,” he said, with a little triumphant laugh.

“But what if you trip and fall? We—” It was just then when the forest decided to make itself known. Screams and cries that seemed a little too human grew from their surroundings, startling the two men. Holst waited for the rest of Semyr’s speech, but it never came.

“What was that?” Semyr said with a shake in his voice.

“Looks like we’re not alone after all,” Holst said under his breath. He brandished his sword as Semyr cast another, much stronger light. Holst turned to face the entirety of their surroundings. “Show yourselves, beasts! We’ll take you all!”

“Look, there’s nothing there,” Semyr called, “Or at the very least, they’ve hidden themselves well.”

“What? Why would they make such a racket unless they were prepared to fight?”

“Regardless, we should continue on carefully.”

Holst nodded.

Terya could barely see a thing. Somehow, it had managed to get even darker than where she just was. The cold had almost disappeared now, yet was replaced by nothing, even though she still shook every now and again. The child had promised her that no harm would come to anyone so long as she continued to hold their hand, but the whispers and bloody handprints in hundreds across the trees were starting to get to her. The darkness was so deep within her that she couldn’t even distinguish her own thoughts. Her legs, which she was only slightly sure were even her own, were shaking violently. Her voice continued to drift also, from a whisper to something barely audible. She tried to ask the child a few more questions before she made her choice, questions that had been weighing on her heart for as long as she’d been here.

“W-who do I have left?”

“You have me, of course! I’ll hold your hand so tight; you’ll have no choice but to be safe!” they replied, the voice once so ethereal, regardless of how cheerful it seemed, was distant.

“A-and, why are you protecting me?” she said, looking down at the child.

“I need you.” A crack in the façade, one which faded into the child’s usual smile almost immediately. “I would be nothing without my wonderful big sister! Besides, everyone else has abandoned you, right?” The child cuddled into her leg, trying to wrap their free arm around her.

“N-no, that’s not right,” Terya said, shaking her head like a snow globe, scrambling her thoughts. She began to feel out of breath.

“Huh?” The child pried themselves off the girl’s leg to meet her eye. She didn’t reciprocate, and stopped moving, her breath getting faster still.

“No! I don’t believe you!” she cried as best as she could. She yanked at the child’s hand to leverage her hand free, and sprinted in the opposite direction, back towards the light. The child, left in the distance, screamed.

The men continued to walk, this time finally being able to see their surroundings. The trees were sparse, but each one so big that the branches and leaves made the sky barely visible. The trees, also, were noticeably bare, contrary to the report they’d received that morning. As they walked, Semyr noticed light up ahead. It seemed to be concentrated close to the ground, the light escaping like smoke. It was the light he’d thrown earlier. He signalled over to Holst, which they then both hurried towards.

It appeared to be a tree; however, it was entirely green. It was tall, extending up far past what was lit by either of Semyr’s lights. Between the leaves, there were small grooves, as though thousands of vines had descended and fused to form an amalgam. The two men exchanged glances, sharing their concerns. Neither dared to say a thing.

Before they got the chance to get a better look, the growls and screams started up once more, the ones which had the duo on edge for so long, even with no visible threat. This time, one of those screams was coming from the structure between them, and the voice it used was incredibly familiar.

She ran faster than she ever imagined she could, barely noticing the floor behind her. She wasn’t afraid of tripping, that was impossible. A lie fed to her by that *thing*. She was too resolute to fall now, and besides, as soon as you know you’re in a dream, what happens can only be what you want to happen.

The whispers were quickly evolving into screams, shadowing into hands and claws grasping at her. This must be their dream too, she thought.

*Nobody will come to harm.* That was what continued to replay in her mind. She couldn’t die, not today. For the first time in her life, she could say that she had something to live for. She couldn’t betray her family now, not after she’d just begun to know them as such. She tried her hardest to focus on what her heart needed as she ran through the landscape of despair, although it seemed as though her heart was beating for something else. It was a pattern she didn’t recognise, like a drink sucked dry.



The child's screams seemed to cut through the cacophony which surrounded her. It was far faster than her, and if it truly was its forest, that made sense. It can do whatever it wants here. She never stopped running, but she also awaited her confrontation with the creature, hands positioned to make sure she could grab her bow in her stride. Its screams continued to cut through her.

"Shit! Terya!" Semyr cried. The vines on this side were much thinner than any other of the ones they'd seen. And through the slats of green, Terya's peaceful face poked out. The vines held her there, perfectly straight and upright in her pod. Her eyes were closed, and her body seemed to show little sign of struggle, although her mouth was slightly open, though obscured. She looked almost peaceful in there.

They tentatively took a peek behind the vines, forcing them closer to those which still seemed to beat when, looking further down than they could before, Holst met something which made him grimace, and Semyr could barely hide his gags.

"That vine, right there, it's pierced her armour, and it looks like—"

"It's gone straight into her fucking heart!" Holst interrupted, his voice a growl as he shouted. He looked over at Semyr with a look of rage, and was met with the man's drained face, seemingly barely holding onto that snack bar.

Both men were afraid to open their mouths - albeit for differing reasons—but they tried to pull themselves together. Holst threw his backpack next to a nearby log, next to where Terya had laid hers. While he did, Semyr studied it. It seemed quite comfortable, with a thick layer of moss overtop. It appeared to be continually pressed down, and then grown back over, forming a thick blanket.

Once Holst had set his belongings down, Semyr stepped up and passed him the ball of light, which dissipated the moment it hit Holst's fingers, lighting up the wider forest for just a few moments before it escaped up through the canopy.

Semyr sat his belongings next to Holst's, and then grabbed the man's necklace to create a small fire which grew from his palm. Holst watched the red inside his necklace deplete, to which he then unsheathed his sword and at last, they were ready to free their friend.

The forest continued to scream in Terya's voice.

The childlike creature caught up to her sooner than she expected. It was barely screaming anymore, replaced with a haunting, hollow laugh that seemed to reverberate throughout the entire forest. Its face seemed to contort and twist as she stared into it, inflating like a balloon, with excess air escaping through its now empty eye sockets and lips. It had cut Terya off from the light she so desperately craved. She readied her small bow, but the thing just seemed to laugh harder. Although it wasn't the creature itself that seemed to make any noise, but the shadows which stalked the corners of her eyesight.

"You think you can do anything to stop me here? This is *my* realm! You're *mine*!"

She wanted nothing more than to fight back rather than resort to this useless conversation. She wished she had some way to harness the energy around her, something she could use to fight back. That wasn't something Semyr had gotten to yet in their studies though.

*Semyr.*

"No! You clouded me to something I've always known to be true! Something you could never understand!" She was unsure of which hollow eyehole she was supposed to look into as they conversed, so she resorted to staring at the dark mass that used to be the child's mouth.

"Oh, but I think I do, little girl. I'm inside your head after all. I know what makes you tick, and what makes you bleed," its voice rang throughout the trees, echoed back by the countless voices of young girls that haunted the forest with her.

"You may think I'm alone... But I'm not! They'll come back for me!" *Not my best line*, she thought, but it was always Holst that helped her with her cool battle quips.

*Holst.*

"But are you not all alone in this world? You abandoned the family who gave you everything you ever wanted, after all. You are left with nothing!"

It was then she noticed how tall and domineering the creature was. She was unsure if it was simply still expanding, or if its words were finally getting to her. Maybe she was better to stay here, with her new family. Family is something you're given into, after all, and all the child had wanted was to give her a family of her fellow lost girls. If she listened carefully, they welcomed and beckoned her to join them, into the mass of spirit they had become.

*No.* This wasn't what she wanted. She was sure of that. A fate of faceless amalgam was something worse than death. She wanted to be alive. She wanted to be free.

She wanted to be *Terya*.

With her newfound courage, she screamed; this time with her full voice.

"No! My family will always come back for me! Semyr, and Holst... everyone!" she aimed yet another arrow, this time towards the small body which was still attached to the inflated mass. She screamed, "You'll never take us all!" *That sounded much cooler in her head.* Regardless, the arrow soared through the air, to hit it directly where its heart should've been. It screamed in pain, head wobbling through the wind.

Terya took the opportunity to lunge at the massive *thing*. She bounded towards it, winding up for a massive kick in the chest once she got close enough, finally managing to use the small blade she attached to her sole ages ago, by Holst's recommendation. And just as her foot was about to connect, it swallowed her whole.

The men took turns slashing and blasting the vines surrounding Terya's body. Often, Semyr would step back to re-establish his flame, careful to not let it out of control. Holst, however, spared no time

in taking slashing pot-shots at anything which seemed to move within the amalgam. Every time one of them landed a good spot on a vine, Terya's voice would shriek out in pain. The forest seemed to be unafraid to use the girl's body as it saw fit. It made Semyr sick and Holst even angrier each time, renewing their determination in slashing and hacking and burning the forest which took their friend away from them.

The wind that surrounded her grazed her ears and eyes and mouth. It seemed to rush across every visible part of her body, skating across her eyeballs and tongue. She had gotten used to the darkness by now, but the wind was unbearable. She looked around, searching, looking for a way out. Even the eyeball would do, but there seemed to be no opening or exit from here. She wanted to scream, but the only wind that could have come out her mouth was that which already surrounded her. If she wanted out of this mess, she would have to dig herself out.

And that she did. She grabbed an arrow from the quiver on her back, placing her bow back with it, grabbed the arrow with two hands and dug it into the body of the beast. It yelled and recoiled, which meant she was on the right track. She pulled the arrow back out and pierced it once more, more pressurised air pouring out through the open wound. It recoiled once more. She continued to stab and pull out, stab and pull out until it gave out the loudest scream it had yet, a scream so monstrous Terya could hear the hundreds of souls trapped here with it flow through that one cacophony of a scream.

She threw the arrow to the ground, grabbed two sides of one of the wounds and started to pull it apart. *Freedom. Family.* That was all that was constantly replaying in her mind. It wasn't so hard to rip, but it certainly made her feel ill. She quickly made a big enough hole for herself and ran through it, back through to the light, and to her family.

The creature didn't seem to give chase anymore, but that didn't slow her pace.

"Huh. My fireballs seem to be finally doing something!" Semyr cried, his new smile the only crack of joy upon his blue and sweaty face. Holst's face lit up also, as he continued to hack away at the leaves in front of him, if only to give them a better view of the girl.

That was when they saw it. The vine that had pierced the girl's heart was beginning to wilt and retract, and soon all of the vines which encapsulated her seemed to do the same. As they wilted, Holst and Semyr looked at each other, before hacking and burning even harder than they had before, the knowledge that their efforts were no longer futile was enough to fuel them both. It didn't take them long to see the full fruits of their labour.

The first thing Terya did once she opened her eyes was grab the vine in her chest, and pull it out with reckless abandon. Her hands, drained and weak, slipped against the brown plant, but she eventually dug it out, panting and crying at the same time. Holst was frozen for a moment, before he grabbed her back and behind her knees out of the pod and onto the floor.

“Where am I? Semyr?” Terya asked through her fast and shallow breaths, “What happened?” Holst simply sat and smiled, as Semyr, huddled into his rucksack once more, searched for some medicine.

“The monster is gone, Terya,” Holst said, his wide smile impossible to hide. Usually, Holst would take his sword out to play with as he idled, but after that night he never wanted to see it again. Semyr dug out the medicinal paste, and some powdered medication, smearing the paste over her chest wound as she tried to prop herself up on her elbow, which then he gave her the powder to swallow. She thanked them both profusely.

“Nah, kid, don’t mention it. You really think we could leave you now?” he chuckled a little as he talked, although his concern for Terya’s wellbeing was clear on his face.

“You don’t understand how much that means to me, Holst,” she smiled back through her words.

“I think you had a little more to do with defeating this monster than you remember.” Semyr sat his bag to the side to finally relax. He looked Terya in the eye as she lay. He smiled. “so, Terya, thank *you*.”

Terya fumbled around on her elbows to try and reach a more comfortable angle, before Holst and Semyr took her by the arm each to hoist her up and into a group hug.

“Dunno what we’d do without you, kid,” Holst said, slightly winded from the squeezing.

“Boss is going to be pleased to hear how big a help you were,” Semyr said softly into the ears of the other two.

“You both saved me, I’m glad I could finally do the same,” Terya cheered. Hearing herself speak gave her a shiver of joy that she couldn’t place or understand.

The trio stayed in their hug for a few more moments, afraid of what might happen if they let go. By the time they had let go, sat and talked for a few hours, and shared many more embarrassing stories, the sun was beginning to rise, and it was time to head back and report to the boss.

The forest may have been left wilted, but each one of them took that life they stole and carried it with them, letting it enrich their lives through the rest of their days as a monster-hunting trio.

## Regulus Wolfe

### *Raspberries*

Raspberries are not berries; they are compounds sold in too small portions.  
There is always one that's tart, another too dense,  
Six more squished on one side.

Raspberries are not berries; they are fairy fruits.  
Moreish, small, hollow,  
too delicate to be anything but hand-picked.

Raspberries are not berries—they are Rosaceae, roses.  
Most popular in red, though they come in other hues.  
Raspberries do not come in blue.

Raspberries are not berries.  
But a rose by any other name would not taste as sweet.

*fae*

you forget, sometimes,  
and, sometimes, you remember.

the walls that crumble as the clay withers  
the bricks that sink in the swallowing earth  
the glass melting into pools of the sky  
the towers falling upwards to empty stars

sometimes, you remember

the stars that you watch form behind your eyelids  
the blood that cleanses your hands of the dirt  
the beating heart in the souls of the trees  
the mist that crushes your bones to dust in the wind

sometimes, you remember

the wind in your ears that tells you your secrets  
the hand you held as you fall into the lake  
the knowledge you bear in thin paper words  
the home that you lose as you thaw into clay

you remember, sometimes,  
and, sometimes, you forget.

## Meet the Committee!

### *Freya Juul Jensen (President)*

After completing my undergrad in English-History of Art, I'm now doing a PhD in Art History. Postgrad life is scary, but also exciting! Whilst I mostly write creatively in Danish to stay in touch with my mother tongue, I absolutely love being part of the editing process of other people's writing. Rephrasing something in prose to make it even stronger or finding just the right word for a poem is amazing!

My time with the Creative Writing Society has been a bit like an enemies-to-lovers story. I originally joined back in my first year at uni but took a break during my second to try out other things. I returned during lockdown in my third year, was Secretary in my fourth year, and now I'm President! It's been a wild ride, and it's been amazing to watch our members grow both as people and as writers over their time in AUCWS. We have some brilliant members with great ideas, which you've gotten a small taste of here. As the current member who's been here the longest, I feel a bit like a proud mum. With that said, I hope you've had a wonderful time with the fifth edition of our *Compendium*!

### *Blair Center (Vice-President)*

I'm currently in the fourth year of my undergraduate studies in English. I first discovered the pleasures of creative writing during my final year of secondary school; it was poetry which appealed to me then, and it is poetry which I write most often now. However, I didn't write again until my second year of university, when I joined this society. Recently, Freya referred to me as 'our poetry-guy'; I'm not quite sure how to feel about that—the rapidity with which I have become a senior member in the Creative Writing Society still feels unusual, considering I was one of the youngest members when I joined—but I suppose it *is* true as I've worked hard to successfully encourage the proliferation of poetry-writing amongst the membership. I also like to point members in the direction of publishing opportunities or, with my links to the English Literature Society, opportunities to perform work on-stage.

I'm engaged in the local writing community in Aberdeen and I grew up in Inverurie. I explore my strong sense of locality in my work through themes of memory, heritage, identity, place, and belonging, as well as through the language I employ as I occasionally make use of Doric. This is my first time on the committee; it is my third year as a member. Take it from me, as one whose skills were developed in this friendly society: joining AUCWS is a brilliant experience and provides excellent social and writerly opportunities.

*Tommy Berntsen (Secretary)*

I'm currently in my fourth year as a language and linguistics student. I remember writing, when I was very young, on the shared family pc and falling out of it as I grew up. Right up until a friend challenged me to do Nanowrimo in IB. Since then, it's never left again. I have a tendency to write stories in distinct settings, which has led to me being known as either "the cowboy guy" or "the Norse guy" (sometimes both). I am also an absolute madman who can never and will never stop building new worlds. I'm not addicted, I can stop whenever I want...

My time in the AUCWS actually started in a different society. However, I was viciously and mercilessly headhunted and have never looked back. This is my first year as committee and it has been a busy but also an incredibly rewarding one. The society is an incredible community and it's awe-inspiring to see how far so many of our members have come in such a short time. The *Compendium* and all its talented contributors are the perfect example of just that and we hope you enjoy!

*Morgan Royall (Treasurer)*

I'm a second year English with Creative Writing student who's had a passion for literature basically all their life. Despite this, I never considered myself all that active of a writer growing up, having little concrete ideas and even less patience to write them down. In fact, prior to joining the society, despite my degree path, I hadn't written anything properly in years. Joining the society has allowed me to not only gain motivation to develop my ideas with other writers, but also to gain the confidence to share my writing in a comfortable and encouraging space— Even the stuff I wrote half in a daze at 3am following a message in the Discord server.

This is my first year on committee, and while it's been a learning curve, it's been fun as well. I am so proud of how far the society has come and how the people in it have developed, and I look forward eagerly to what is to come. With that being said, I'm also glad to look upon the *Compendium* as a culmination of the massive amount of effort our members have put in this semester!



*Lillie Sanderson (Social Secretary)*

I'm a third year immunology student with a keen interest in creative writing. As cliché as it is to say, I've been writing stories since I could write. This is my second year as social secretary and it has been a busy one for us so far. I am beyond proud of our members and what we're accomplished even in the short time we've had this semester. I genuinely love this society and its members and couldn't imagine not having the meetings as part of my week. I always leave inspired and itching to write more.

I hope that the *Compendium* helps to display all of the wonderful talent in our society and I am so grateful to even play a small part in keeping the society running.

*Vin Wilson (Pre-Honours Representative)*

I am yet another English with Creative Writing student, who is currently taking a gap year (albeit accidentally... It's a long story,) and spends most of their time pondering the lives of the silly little fellows who live in their head. My fantasy novel project has taken up much of my writing this year, but I've still had time to catch up on my absurd and comedic poetry which has become a booklet staple since I joined the society last September.

This society has given me a family so far away from the one I left behind for university. I joined immediately after my first Freshers' Fayre, and it's been a staple of my life ever since. Just having a loving community to talk to on the cold, lonely nights has helped me immensely, nevermind the leaps-and-bounds my writing has taken over my time here. After everything this society has done for me, it only made sense to give back by becoming a committee member myself! It's been a massive honour helping out the rest of the committee, taking care of our online feedback forms, overseeing gift exchanges, and working on other things which our dear President and Vice-President delegate.

We are super excited to close out our fifth edition of the *Compendium* and hope you had a wonderful time! We'd be delighted to see you at any of our meetings (info way above, on page 6), and make sure to tune in for the next edition of the Creative Writing Society *Compendium*!

