

the Creative Writing Society

# Compendium



Spring 2023

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## **Editor's Welcome**

I am proud and privileged to present the Creative Writing Society's Spring 2023 Compendium. This is the sixth 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. This will be my last Compendium as Editor-in-Chief.

The Compendium is an ever-growing project, and it has been an honour to fulfil the role of Editor-in-Chief, especially during the period in which we became an award-winning publication and award-nominated publication with the Student Publication Association. Thank you, again, 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, again, 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. Our 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.

The most important rule here is to have fun! Whether it be sombre or light-hearted, short or long, every piece of writing has its place here, and a diverse, enthusiastic community of people is ready to listen and help each other grow. Members are never required to submit their work—you can just come along to listen.

The Creative Writing Society Compendium was originally created in 2020 by our former Vice-President, Alastair Fyfe. Since then, our "little" publication has only grown and is now award-winning.

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 the new academic year begins in September, 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

### *Hail and Steel*

*Content warning: Violence*

Roscige pulled the hood of his cape closer about his ears. Despite the month of harvest approaching, the air was bitterly cold. The young royal sighed and his breath briefly hung visible in the air. "Damn those savages," he mumbled.

The Daenir. Roscige had heard tell of them since he was a babe. Every summer his family would attend his uncle, King Aethelscige, in the royal Coastal Castles. And every summer, Aunt Cynewise delighted in frightening him with tales of the Daenir of the North.

She told him of the Silent White. "The northern islands were once hot and laden with trees, animals, and fertile soil. But the Daenir, they do not live in the biting cold that now rules there. They call it. They guide it. They draw it behind them, covering everything in their wake in the bitter, Silent White."

She told him of the Syrtore. "From the depths of caves that run with molten stone, they extract the petrified blood of volcanos unborn. The Syrtore, as they call it, bends to no heat or flame. It must be tamed and beaten into shape by master Daenir smiths in the heart of their frozen forges."

She told him of the Æser. "They worship heathen gods. Æser, they call them. Their gods make claims on the gifts provided to mortals by the Lady. Should you face them, pray you vanquish them or they you. For those alive, they eviscerate for the pleasure of their bloodthirsty false idols."

Roscige feared those tales as a child. As he grew, he came to appreciate them as well-told stories from a well-travelled woman. But he had always held them to be just that. Stories. Now, facing down a horde of savage warriors heralding biting cold winds from the north, his conviction lessened.

"My lord." Kyneberth's voice broke Roscige from his musings. "It is nearly time. You have eaten, yes? I commanded the quartermaster sharpen your blade, and your squire is making preparations to dress your armour. I have also instructed every archer to remain vigilant. I do not trust the savages to honour the rules of the duel to the letter."

Roscige chuckled, trying to jest at his friend's grim predictions. "Fear not, my ever vigilant, if somewhat paranoid, friend. I have every confidence that the northern savage will perish by my blade. Should the rest of his heathen ilk fail to honour the outcome of the duel, we shall strike them down to a man. I am sure the Lady wills it." He turned to face the ealdorman, willing his smile to be a confident one.

Kyneberth remained unconvinced. "I appreciate your conviction, my lord. However, the stories of these savages do nothing to embolden their chivalry. Especially without the Lady's guidance, would they even carry a moral compass to begin with? You keep your mind on the duel, I shall handle the rest."

The tightness in Roscige's shoulders loosened. He looked at his mentor, his dear friend, and smiled, sincerely this time. "Thank you, Kyneberth." He chuckled. "I know not how long Whalstershire would have lasted under my rule without your guidance. I can never offer enough gratitude to you, especially in the wake of my uncle's actions."

Kyneberth bowed his head curtly. "It is me who should offer gratitude. After your uncle bested me, he still gave me a chance to influence the future of my home as your ealdorman. It is a luxury few may even dare ask for. Now, you must ready, the hour is upon us."

Roscige agreed and followed his ealdorman back to the royal tent. They exchanged few words as the lord's squire dressed him in polished armour. Kyneberth inspected the edge of Roscige's sword, Gryphon Feather, determining it to be of acceptable sharpness. Finally, Kyneberth poured the nectar into the Lady's chalice for his lord. Roscige drank deep of the blessing.

The field was quiet as Roscige and his fyrd approached the massed Daenir. The northerners' formation was headed by a tall, blond man. Like the rest of his folk, his hair was long and tied in several braids, likewise his beard. Both were dotted with beads and metal rings. Black paint drew a thick line from one temple, across both eyes and to the other temple.

"Lo, we have come to demand you honour your word, northerner." Kyneberth's deep voice carried well in the still, bitterly cold air.

A Daenir woman walked forward to stand beside their champion. Her head was bald but covered in tattoos. "We will, as long as you honour yours," she answered with a barking accent.

Kyneberth turned to face his lord and sunk the gryphon-headed helmet over his head. "Focus on the fight, my lord."

"I shall, friend. Though I must confess to some trepidation. The Lady's blessing stung my tongue bitterly."

"Must be the heathen presence of these savages spoils her gifts. Win, and we shall rid these lands of their curse."

Roscige nodded and hefted his sword and shield, walking forward with a vigilance he did not feel.

The Daenir champion shrugged off his long-furred cloak, revealing a bare upper body mosaiced in tattoos and scars, new and old. He retrieved twin hand-axes from his belt and gave them both an experimental swing. Their heads were of a dark, matte metal. It ran through with cracks that revealed a faintly glowing red underlayer.

Roscige paused in his advance. There could be no doubt. The bitter cold they heralded. The axes made with molten metal. The skull-bearing standards and heathen tattoos. His aunt had fed him no tales of fancy. The Daenir were real. And he was to face down a champion of theirs.

Roscige's resolve near on shattered as the savage, with arms spread wide, sounded a thundering roar to the heavens. He was answered by his infernal cohorts. Their collected roar shook the ground beneath Roscige, or maybe it was his own knees knocking together. All as one, they ceased.

The Daenir champion began to approach Roscige, marching to the beat of his cohorts' weapons impacting the ground. The display made sweat run cold down the young lord's back, but he refused to be cowed by this barbarous heathen. Letting out his own war-cry, Roscige ran to meet his opponent, resolving to face his potential end head-on.

The Daenir flashed a predatory smile and matched Roscige's pace.

The champion brought both his axes down on Roscige, who managed a block with his shield. It clanged loudly and he felt the impact up to his shoulder, as well as a burning heat from the shield. Blindly, the young lord stabbed past his shield, hoping for a hit. No luck.

Before he could pull back his sword, the beard of one axe-head hooked the top of his shield. The Daenir wrenched Roscige's shield to the side and swung the opposite axe down in the same movement. The lordling brought his sword to bear and caught the axe-blow.

But now both sword and shield were hooked, and both men stood with arms outstretched.

The Daenir howled a mad laugh and slammed his head into Roscige's. The young lord stumbled back, disengaging to try and reset his position. Courtesy of the gryphon adornment upon Roscige's helmet, the champion had been left with a wicked gash, pouring crimson down his face into his beard. The lordling's vision swam, and he tasted copper.

Roscige circled, hoping to regain his faculties, and the Daenir matched him, keeping just out of reach. Any hope of recovery was dashed quickly, as the champion hurled one axe at the lordling and rushed in behind it. Roscige blocked with his shield, realizing his mistake too late. The massive northerner impacted the shield and bowled the both of them over.

The world flipped head over tail and back again. Hampered by his armour, Roscige scrambled to his feet as fast as possible; but the Daenir had recovered faster and was already upon him. Once more, the massive northerner brought both axes down from above. Roscige attempted another block, failing to realize his shield still lay on the ground. Instead of slashing the lordling's arm, the axes both hooked around it and yanked back towards the Daenir. Roscige's faceplate met the champion's knee with a crunch.

Blood washed broken teeth down his throat and Roscige was now blind. His helmet had crumpled in around the impact. He had to remove it; he knew that. With a cry of anger and pain, he wrenched the helmet from his head, the jagged, broken metal cutting his face along the way.

Behind the adrenaline fuelling him, dulling the pain, Roscige had to wonder about the man before him. He had not hesitated to meet him without armour. Twice now, he had impacted flesh on metal, and Roscige had come out inferior. What *were* these Daenir? Shaking his head, the lordling perished the thought from his mind. He had to win.

The duelling pair engaged again. And again. Every attempt Roscige made was halted by the champion. The reach of his sword should have given the lordling an advantage, but the Daenir moved like a man half his size. He whipped out of or around Roscige's attacks and fought back in, feinting the young lord successfully every time. With time, the northerner's cragged axes cut searing swathes out of Roscige's armour.

Moving came slower to the lordling with every passing moment. Much faster than should have, he thought. All the while, the Daenir seemed not to slow in the least. In fact, he seemed only faster the longer their duel passed. Or maybe that was the fog that Roscige felt in his mind. Or the pounding behind his eyes. Or the bitter taste in his mouth. He had never felt such battle fatigue.

Roscige could no longer lift his sword-arm. Nor could he pull in a breath. The world spun about him and the Daenir was a washed-out blur on a smeared horizon.

All at once, his gut dropped and he doubled over, spewing the remnants of his meal onto the ground. Never had this happened, he thought. Finally, his legs gave, and he once again met the contents of his stomach.

"I knew it!" Roscige could scarcely hear the voice of Kyneberth over the ringing in his ears. "The filthy savages poison their weapons. Archers!"

The ringing grew louder, drowning out the sound of the ensuing battle, while the remnants of Roscige's vision faded.

## *Requiem of the Night Watcher*

*Content warning: Violence, injury*

Watcher dropped through the ceiling window of the warehouse. With a thud he landed on one of the building's crossbeams. Silently he chided himself. Not bending your knees upon landing was an amateur's mistake. He resolved to add more flexibility exercises to his schedule—though he was well aware it likely would help little.

He pulled the black cape about himself and closed the mouthguard on his cowl. The Night Watcher's all-black suit had never failed to hide him in the dark rafters of a building.

As quietly as possible, the vigilante crept along the crossbeam until his target came into view. There, against the northernmost wall of the abandoned warehouse, stretched across a long table, sat a chemical production line. It was manned by half a dozen people and another dozen milled around them, playing cards, shooting the breeze or looking bored out of their skulls. Watcher did not know who they were affiliated with, but he was not going to let the operation go on any longer.

A new party drug, Shine, had run amok in the night life of north-eastern Dawn City in the previous months. Rumours claimed it to provide a euphoric high that lasted hours with no side effects and no chemical dependency. The perfect drug. However, these rumours failed to mention the extreme suggestibility that came along with the high. Users often found themselves liberated of material goods as well as any secrets they were supposed to keep. This, Watcher uncovered, happened at the hands of other Shine users who went back to those who would provide the drug in the first place. Pushers turning their clients into peddlers and thieves at the same time.

Watcher had spent a tireless month tracking the operation. Countless times he ran into dead ends of users unable to remember who they bought from or pushers vanishing into thin air. However, tonight he had struck gold. Not only had he located a seller in the back alley of a night club. He had managed to track the man back to the warehouse. To the main operation.

Or at least Watcher thought it would be the main operation. He was struck with how small it seemed. Six people to cook the drug, maybe another six acting as watch and the final six being pushers on break. He shrugged mentally, maybe the city would finally give an old man a break.

He sized up the situation. The six cooks did not look like fighters. Likely, they were simply connections with enough knowledge to not blow themselves up and sufficiently few scruples. The pushers could probably fight off a jealous boyfriend or a grumpy bouncer, but in their number, they should prove little trouble. The goons, however, could prove an issue. They actually bothered to look about and kept one hand on their chosen weapon at all times. Clearly, this was not their first job.

Between them, Watcher could spot six fully automatic, suppressed assault rifles, all strapped to the hardened goons. Scattered about the makeshift box-tables were eight side arms and more knives than people. He knew his moment of surprise would be short and with the amount of firepower in the room he would have to be fast.

Quickly, he checked his suit before engagement. His wrist-mounted launchers were loaded with a shock-bola each. He had three smoke-bombs left and his stun-knuckles were still fully charged. Watcher closed his eyes and mentally mapped out the location of all targets as well as the layout of the area.

His plan would be to drop all smoke-bombs to cover the area of engagement, before dropping down himself on the goon beneath his perch. In the confusion, his shock-bolas would be able to subdue another two goons. He would have to handle the last three in melee before the smoke cleared. After the goons, the pushers and cooks should be easy work, with or without cover.

Watcher stretched his arms and legs. They had gone cold in the time it took to plan his assault. He hated it. He used to be able to watch for hours and engage without issue. Now, he could barely sit for ten minutes before his limbs started to complain.

As ever, the old man spared one last lucid thought for his late Kris before dropping both the smoke bombs and himself off the perch.

The air rushed past his ears, deafening the confused yelling beneath him. Watcher dove into the sea of smoke and landed squarely on his target, who crumpled with a grunt. Swiftly, he passed out under the knee planted on his neck. The remaining goons lit up under the cowl's thermal vision.

With an infinitely practiced motion, Watcher aimed at two separate people with his arms. The shock-bolas flew true and, in a garbled mess of screams, incapacitated the targets.

Watcher moved to strike at the next target but stumbled. The crick in his back acted up and shot pain down his legs. Must have been agitated in the landing, he thought. Every step now shot pain down to his ankles, but he fought to keep standing.

Still covered by the smoke, the next goon was easily taken down with a swift punch to the liver. He tensed up before falling to the ground, muscles briefly locking as Watcher's knuckles discharged five milliamps into them.

Swinging his head to locate the next target, Watcher was met with a vicious rifle-stock to the face. Once more the vigilante stumbled. His ears rang and the sensitive ocular display flickered between several settings. Stepping back, he shook his head, both to clear it as well as the display.

The smoke was clearing faster than it should. Must've opened the doors, the vigilante thought. He was still missing two goons.

Utilizing the last of his smoke cover, Watcher grabbed three knives off the nearby box. One, he stashed in his belt behind his back, the remaining he held up akimbo.

The goon who had struck him was stupid enough to remain within melee range. "Who—" he started, but before another word left his mouth, Watcher hurled a knife at him and closed the distance under its cover.

The vigilante connected with a hard punch to the goon's chest, discharging another stunning strike. This time, before the man fell to the ground, Watcher caught and held him standing by the collar. The unconscious man jerked forward as a salvo of rifle fire rained down on the pair. The bullets ripped through the now surely dead man, only denting Watcher's suit.

Watcher stepped to rush the final rifleman, still under cover. However, an impact from the side knocked the vigilante off his feet. He tumbled to roll through on his shoulder. Except, as he impacted the ground a pop resounded through his body and his shoulder exploded into sharp pain.

The aging hero skidded to an awkward stop several feet from his cover. The acrobatic manoeuvre was once second nature to him. Now, the same skill that had saved him from countless

dangerous falls had dislocated his shoulder. He attempted to scramble to his feet, but another sharp pain in his hip halted his attempt.

The smoke had completely cleared, and Watcher now saw his situation clearly.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” It was the goon who had mercilessly killed his fellow who spoke first. “It’s the god damned Night Watcher. My pops used to shit his pants talking about you. Now look at you. What’s wrong, broken your hip, old man?”

Watcher winced. He was more bothered by the accuracy of the criminal’s taunting than anything else.

Tuning out the prattling goon, the vigilante looked beyond him. He was flanked by six people of a similar hardened criminal’s countenance.

The cooks, Watcher realized. They had never been simple connections. No, they were likely of a similar ranking to the armed ones. A detail he had missed in his haste to be over with the night. One that would now cost him dearly.

The group approached. They did not even bother to hold up any weapons. They were as aware of his situation as the old man himself.

The biggest of the group reached down first. Watcher grabbed the knife from behind his back and swung for the back of the man’s knees. Except, with no support from his other arm, the strike had no power. The giant man easily caught the attack. He laughed as he hauled the old man off the ground before hammering him down with a meaty fist to the face.

Watcher tasted blood.

The group descended upon him like vultures. The next minutes were a haze. The aging vigilante lost count of the number of times he was struck. The number of bones he broke.

He was passing in and out of consciousness as the beating halted.

They scattered. They ran left. Right. Past. Back.

One smashed into a shelving unit.

Another slid across the chemical table on his face.

Watcher’s lidded gaze drifted up. He looked out of a ceiling window and saw the moon. As a goon crashed up through the window, he passed out.

---

Richard awoke to the steady beeping of a heart-rate monitor. Every fibre of his being was sore.

He looked around, neck unmoving. He recognized his design, a medical room in Sentinel Tower.

Straining to turn his stiff neck, he looked towards the sound of turning pages.

On a chair, next to his bed, sat Ailani. She was out of her combat gear, dressed in an oversized Starlight hoodie, blanket spread over her legs as she read a thick, yellowing book.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” His voice was little more than a raspy growl.

Ailani jumped. “Richard! Thank Ku, we thought we had lost you. Yes, I pulled you out of that mess.” Her elated expression quickly changed to one of indignation. “What the hell were you thinking?!”

Richard sighed and looked back up.

“No, don’t you just dismiss me.” She stood from her chair, blanket and book falling onto the ground. “Not this time. Inessa, you, and I founded the Sentinels! Why won’t you listen to us?”

“Because I can’t.”

The irate demigod fell silent.

“Because I can’t take it. It tears me apart sitting in the tower doing nothing... It tears me apart sitting and watching you and Inessa. My oldest friends and closest colleagues look barely older than forty and live happily married. All the while Kris died of a curable disease, and I waste away to a husk. Old, frail, and useless. It’s not fair.”

“So, you’re blaming us for being happy?” Ailani’s voice was choked.

“Ailani I—”

Richard was cut off by the entrance of Inessa. “No, dear. Richard doesn’t blame us.”

“Starlight. I have told you to stay out of my thoughts.”

“Firstly. Drop the moniker, Richard. Secondly. We’ve known each other for five decades. I did not have to read your mind.” Her expressions softened as she put a hand on both her wife’s shoulder and his. “Please don’t pull away from us, Richard.”

He froze.

Inessa took a seat in the, now unoccupied, chair, grasping Richard’s hand tightly.

“I won’t lie. I cannot imagine what going through this is like. But throwing yourself head-long into situations like you’re still thirty cannot be the answer. We don’t want to lose you like that. We love you as family, Richard. We always will. Please, rest for now and let us talk more about this later. Don’t push us away.”

She spoke the last before rising and hugging her oldest friend close.

Ailani followed suit before picking her blanket and book off the floor.

Richard remained quiet, looking down at nothing in particular.

With a soft hiss, the door to the medical room closed and silence followed.

The old man turned from the door. In the lonely quiet, he choked on feelings pushed down as tears ran through the furrows of his face.



## *Fade to Black/Unforgiven*

*Content warning: suicidal ideation, mental abuse*

*I have lost the will to live.  
Simply nothing more to give.  
There is nothing more for me.  
Need the end to set me free.*

Look at you.

You were born as who you are.

“There are no markers. No signs.”

Exactly. There is nothing wrong with you. It’s just who you are. A failure.

You have no right to feel that way. You are not worth anyone’s trouble.

The deck has always been stacked in your favour, yet you still manage to fuck it up.

You’re only good at chasing empty dreams into heartache and feeling sorry for yourself.

*New blood joins this Earth  
And quickly he's subdued  
Through constant pained disgrace  
The young boy learns their rules*

And afterwards, you wish only to never feel again. To become cold and emotionless.

You find no worth yourself so you desperately chase attention and love and intimacy.

You think it will fix you.

You don’t relate to anyone around you. That doesn’t make you fucking special.

There’s nowhere you belong, and you know it. You feel it every day.

*Things not what they used to be  
Missing one inside of me  
Deathly loss, this can't be real  
I cannot stand this hell I feel*

You’re not just unlovable, you’re undeserving of love because you’ve fucked up every chance you had.

You hear their compliments. But your heart has been broken and reset so many times.

Impervious to the soft words of compliments yet shattering under the weakest blows.

“You’re one of the good ones.”

You know they mean well, and that you should appreciate it.

But it is just a searing reminder of what you are. Where you belong.

So be a man, suck it up and keep walking. No one wants to see you cry.

*Emptiness is filling me  
To the point of agony  
Growing darkness, taking dawn  
I was me, but now he's gone*

and the universe was silent

and the universe said you weren't good enough and the universe said you are nothing by yourself  
and the universe said you are weak and the universe said you take up space and the universe said  
you should be gone and the universe said you cannot fight the darkness within you and the  
universe said you will never find the light you seek and the universe said you are alone and the  
universe said you are separate from everything else and the universe said you are what the universe  
would never want and the universe said that the universe does not even hate you

It doesn't care. It just moves on. To begin anew.

You are not imperfect. You are just unimportant.

*What I've felt, what I've known  
Never shined through in what I've shown  
Never be, never see  
Won't see what might have been*

## Emma Bristow

### *The Seasons*

The year begins, for her, in Autumn,  
As Kore descends into the underworld,  
Back to her home, her husband, her thorned crown and throne,  
To her son and her daughter, who live down below.  
The underworld blooms, dark flowers and leaves,  
As the world above starts to drain and wilt,  
Crackling in an angry emptiness and loss.

Winter passes, the year turning on,  
And as always, it is her favourite time of year,  
Where she wishes she could spend always.

The year begins, for her, in Spring,  
Spring, as Persephone rises to the surface,  
to the earth, to the plants, to the bright sun of day.  
Back to her home, her mother, her childhood.  
The weather lightens, dancing in the last cold showers of rain,  
The grass greens, and the flowers blooms, bright,  
Leaving behind the deepness and cold of winter.

Summer passes, the year turning on,  
And as always, it is her favourite time of year,  
Where she wishes she could spend always.

The year begins, for her, in Autumn.

## *A Night in London*

*Content warning: War, claustrophobia, ableism*

It was the evening, and so when Mother set off for work- helping with the war effort overnight, although she hadn't told Bernice the exact role she had because she knew Bernice would then worry about it—Grandmother was left in charge.

Well, Mother said that Grandmother was in charge while she was gone, but once she was out of earshot, Grandmother had given Bernice a smile, and said that, really, they were in charge of looking after each other.

Besides, Bernice knew that she had stayed in London despite all her friends heading out to the countryside, in various places that they sent the occasional letter back to her from, so she could look after her Grandmother while her mother was busy.

She made sure all the blackouts were in place and cleaned the dishes while the parts of the evening radio her grandmother liked played, and once it was done and turned off, she got them both ready for the night, her grandmother telling her stories about her Father when he was young as she did.

Although the most fascinating one out of tonight's tales—one about a bird that had been injured and which her Father had tried to nurse back to health—was interrupted midway by Bernice not needing to come into the privy with her grandmother, even if she did need to help her walk there.

Although they didn't expect the Sirens to begin their calls for a little bit longer, they clambered under the shelter regardless, the Morrison Table Shelter that Bernice had had to put together with help from Simon from along the street.

Simon was old enough to be a soldier, but he didn't speak, so he stayed home in London. Grandmother said she was happy that Bernice had at least one friend left in London that wasn't herself, even if Simon couldn't come around when Mother was around, because she didn't like him very much.

She pulled their blankets in with them, ones that had been made before the war, for they certainly couldn't have gotten this much fabric during them.

They were all knitted, made by her grandmother, and forming a pile the pair could bundle under.

"It's burrowed under, like badgers, or foxes, or rabbits," her grandmother said.

"How can I be burrowed like something I haven't seen?"

"I *know* you've seen rabbits before, Bernice. Do you want to hear about badgers though, Bernice? I remember your father used to be fascinated by them when he was young. In fact—"

The stories always ran back around to her Father nowadays, but she didn't mind much. She ran her fingers over the ripples of the wool while she listened, wondering if she'd ever wear them out doing this, because she knew there would be no replacing them once they did.

Grandmother's hands meant she hadn't been able to knit anything for almost four years now, since before the war. The last things which she had made were a pair of plain rectangle scarves, matching between her son and her granddaughter. She had meant to make a third, for her daughter in law also, but she had to give up before she could.

Knitted like those, too, were Dolly and Katty, who were placed firmly in her arms, and who Bernice dared not even imagine wearing out like the blankets might.

The sirens wailed on into life, and Bernice let her hands shoot up, covering her ears, the screaming noise piercing through her eardrums like ice picks.

There were several reasons why they hid under here, under this table, pretending to try and sleep in a bundle of blankets and family, and Bernice's response to these sounds was certainly one of them. Her grandmother's health was another—not wanting to have to walk her over to the nearby station and down all those steps, and then up again in the morning.

Although Bernice had, on her grandmother's urging, tried to join Simon and his family down there one night, early on, and she was a little ashamed to admit she could do little but cry at how loud and just overwhelming the station had been that night.

It was better for her to stay here with Grandmother.

Like always, she got used enough to the noise after a few minutes to not need to keep her hands clamped over to keep it away, although it certainly was still unpleasant. It was the suddenness that it always appeared with that was the worst part to her.

She focused on her breath. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Everything will be okay.

Another breath, and she looked up at her grandmother again.

She was here, and as safe as she could be, under the Shelter, with her beloved Grandmother, and her well-loved Dolly and Katty.

They waited, quiet and silent, and foreboding, until the inevitable sound of bombs across London surrounded them, the noises echoing across the city seeming to converge upon them, chaotic and overwhelming.

She didn't bother putting her hands back up to her ears. There was no blotting this out.

Her grandmother started to speak again, as if her voice was louder than the bombs. "I wish you had gone out to the countryside."

She had suggested as much before, but never said it outright.

"I don't."

"You would have been safe there, at least." She brushed her granddaughter's hair back with stiff and trembling hands. "You get upset more than you should here. I know it's too much for you."

"I don't." Bernice said back, despite knowing it was true. She did burst into tears too much, or do that thing that no one really understood when she did it, when it was all too much and she was silent, not responding to anyone around, just rocking herself slightly.

They had been few and far between, which was still too much for her mother to be happy with, but they'd been more frequent since the bombs started, and since they received the telegraph that her father had died.

Besides, if she'd gone out to the countryside, she wouldn't have Grandmother or Mother or Simon around, and she probably wouldn't have been with her other friends anyway, and she didn't want to have to start to know who everyone is from scratch.

And the war and her father would still be an issue, even if she left.

Her grandmother sighed. "Oh, Bernice."

"Sorry, grandmother."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, child. None of this was caused by you."

She looked up, trying to see her grandmother's smile in the darkness of the night.

A bomb hit nearby.

Next door—to the left, and their house shook.

It was fine, it was safe, and it wasn't them.

"Oh, thank heavens," her grandmother said in relief, right as a creaking noise came from above them. "Bernice—"

The house fell around them, dust and splinters of wood and glass puffing in through the wire grids of the shelter.

Bernice screamed.

Their shelter creaked like the house, but unlike their house, it held.

The back of her head hurt, like how her legs did when she'd fallen down the stairs at school when she was eight, but worse.

Grandmother grabbed Bernice, pulling her in tight to herself.

"We'll be okay, Bernice," Grandmother said, although she seemed to be saying that to herself and the house and not just to Bernice. "They'll find us in the morning, they'll get us out."

"Yes, grandmother."

She loosened her grip on Dolly and Katty—who she knew she was too old to have, but couldn't bear to give up fully yet—and her father, who she wished so much was here now for her, had said before he went that she might as well be allowed to carry them as if she were still young til the war was over.

Instead, she moved one of her arms forward, to wrap back around her grandmother.

“They’ll find us.” Her grandmother repeated.

Under the rubble, it was suffocating, but somehow, the sound above was muffled slightly, and the bombs felt further away.

Perhaps that was just her.

Everything felt further away.

“Bernice?” her grandmother asked, panic in her voice.

She didn’t respond, and instead found herself falling asleep in her frantic grandmother’s arms.

## Nina Bucklewski

### *Philtatos*

“Muse and Lover since the flood  
digs her fingers into figs  
in the shadows of cerulean trees  
where every fool falls in love.”

Philtatos

I whisper to you sweet,  
reading in your bed,  
praying to the fates and sun:

May no arrow strike you  
in the battle with no armour.

I must be the most foolish of them all.

You stood drenched in rain  
with every shade of gold  
falling from your eyes,  
and you took my hand  
and dug fingers into my skin, soft.  
I thought I'd fall for you right then,  
with rain dripping from your hair  
like happiness freely given.

May you stay with me  
in the house by the cliff,  
somewhere beyond the sea.

Don't you wish we were there?

We grow from our shoes  
with every tear to the sea,  
roots planted in our hands  
telling me how ancient lovers loved  
and how they dig into figs  
with all the cuts and bruises, softly.  
I would have fallen for you then,  
an old tale on my lips,  
everything given so freely.



May you one day see  
how irrevocably in love I've been  
even since before the flood.

On that island I cannot be as foolish  
as it seemed.

*The girl living in my fingertips*

She's sitting on the windowsill  
watching patiently as the world spins by,  
what she can't see does not exist,  
that chaos and uncertainty  
just another reason to stay a little longer;  
catching dust in her hands,  
folding paper boats and letting them drift  
on blossoms and ever-changing skies.  
She has long hair,  
fiery embers in the dusk, and silk during dawn,  
her eyes of the brightest green,  
like the sun caught  
and found in them a piece of mother nature.  
Her fingers are stained with words  
and words and words,  
endless yarns of regrets and new lessons.  
She plays music with the fabric of her dress,  
symphonies and ruffles  
carried through the wind to oceans, away,  
like they're her own imagination;  
a tender ripple of her soul gone missing  
and brought back home  
after climbing the sky and sailing mountains,  
set ablaze with possibility.

## *Oh Aberdeen*

With your endless sunsets casting shadows long,  
tree figures dancing across the grass,  
cobble streets and glass knowledge with a view,  
we swim through your park at night, mere stars  
scattered across the sky like prose,  
and the lovers we unburied from lecture halls;  
each Thursday another race through streets  
up to Dracula's home by the sea, broken stone  
to carry souls at the bottom of my backpack.

She'll come to sit cross-legged on my carpet,  
they'll hold my hand on the ice, stolen rum bravery  
and I'll taste March snow on my tongue  
after flushing salt tears down the shower drain  
to ward off evil spirits around yellow crocuses  
and daffodil days, savoured nights in 151,  
where the Don meets the sea in loud laughter  
never to be caught in its home, wakes me  
one last time with sea glass charms  
before I forget what your stories taste like.

## Ashley Carter

### *Pneumonia, Winter 2022*

These December days carry an illness—cold and wet and suspended from all activity. Blackened leaves pile into corners, sidelined by natural distribution, congealed by nature's greyed phlegma. Well, as without, so within, as ancient minds knew, or claimed to, when they first observed man and his surroundings, and split each into their respective parts.

Light strikes this northern region like a shortened breath or a paled finger—it behaves strangely, altering perceived shape, perceived rigidity, perceived permeability, and all our replicas run like paint in the wind and rain. Across from me, some gentlemen share coffee, eyes arched over components set on black velvet. They concur in weighty sentences.

The indigo rain is indiscriminate, and some things take solace in such quiet consistency. Work too long in an abattoir, and you will eventually come to see even your forearms as pieces of salted, bloodied meat. And what of those exalted roman temples, that carve the sun like butter? Maybe it is not our place to ask.

## Blair Center

### *Dirt Poem*

I

The smell of dirt reminds me of childhood.  
Easter holidays, we wore down the sod.  
We slipped the soil through our small hourglass hands,  
the cracks running with the smooth, falling strands,  
and the dust ended up rubbed upon skin  
like brief marks of ash upon faces, foreheads.  
We had our rituals and oaths to play,  
we, chanting procession of boys, bikes, balls,  
salt of the earth at one time, maybe, then.

These stories are those ballads will not hold. Value.  
They are no ink. They flow within their dust.  
The shadow—the earth’s long washed-off—lingers;  
Soil on pages from my tongues and fingers.

II

I remember my grandfather stooped down,  
scooped up thick soil and its stones, palm near mired,  
clumps and chunks and wet and stuck like balled clay  
and he lifted the tubers from their sleep.

I find the moment huddled in water.  
The memory’s wheel takes it, shaping it;  
I fire my time in the kiln of language.  
I make a pot for the experience.  
I put the ceramic to my lips. Speak.

III

The garden tap makes a plastic drum—  
the bucket thumps. Throw the cool water in.  
Drive a furrow through the world like a wound.  
Drop sticks, stones, gravel, leaves, topsoil, turf, mud.  
Stir sun-drenched heather. Watch whirling water break.  
A bucket, a blank cataracted eye.

These memories that ballads will not hold  
still grasp for expression, to be told.  
I slipped. I rolled in the dirt. In the muck.

That's me—that's Earth, the old conglomerate.

## Willow Daymond

### *A Transformative Journey*

*Content warning: Body horror*

There looked like there could be many rooms filled with hundreds of fantastic creatures. A tower stretched up in the centre as if it was trying to stroke the clouds. I'm guessing that's the main tank, probably. I wonder if that's where they do the feeding from. I really want to see the feeding of the fish, especially the predatory ones. It's the middle of the day but the building stands in almost darkness. It hardly looks alive, and there are no cars parked in the bay. Well, cheaper off-season tickets for me. The door is a ridged hardwood that has been stained with blue dye, the same colour as their logo. I push inside. The foyer is dimly lit, and a single lady stands behind the desk. She looks solemn, almost opaque. Her face is stiff and it's as if she doesn't see me at all. She's a lone shark, swimming against the tide waiting for a morsel like me to swim onto her path. I buy my ticket and push my weight against the doors, stepping into the first room of my trip.

The floor is painted in blues and greens, flowing in rivers down the corridor, mimicking the fish in the tanks around me. The room is lined floor to ceiling with fish, from guppies to angelfish. I feel like a tiny sea slug compared to them. It's fascinating, the great white shark swims parallel to me, racing me to the next room. The pools seem infinite, an oasis of calm. The world becomes quiet here. The fish float past me, merging with each other and myself, as they swim in pocket sized circles, bringing me into their fold of aquatic life. The aircon makes the aquarium cold; it makes me shiver. Mysterious creatures fish. They survive even in the deep caverns of the oceans, and you never really know what fish are thinking, not like dogs or cats. The predatory fish should be in the next room which excites me, I came all this way to see them feed.

There was a creak from behind me and a low rumble. As I turned, an uneasiness came over me. It enveloped my head and then made its way through me until it escaped in the floor. It's not painful but it tingles. I feel numb. Everything around me, lights, background music seems to get louder and brighter. I go to move my hands over my ears, but I can't. It's as if my arms aren't long enough anymore. I scream. I cry for help, but nothing is happening, I can't hear myself. Have I gone deaf? Have I passed out and not realised? My adrenaline kicks in, but I can't walk. I try to inch my way forwards and I collapse in on myself and crash to the floor. It feels like I'm shrinking. Gasping again, I force air through me in an attempt to scream but nothing escapes me. No air is coming in, and I can't hear myself now. I'm suffocating. Falling, going, gone.

There's a muffled sound directly behind me and it feels like I'm being picked up. I feel like air being squeezed out of a balloon, then dropped, weightless. Falling in a dream, and you can't wake up until you hit the bottom. Crashing through layers of dreams until I can take a breath again, then it hits me in the chest I can breathe again. I take a few deep breaths. I need to ease the pain that's built in my chest. That's when it hit me- the awful realisation; I'm not on the ground, I'm floating. I can't feel my legs. I'm not standing. There's... I don't even know. It's not like air, I can feel something around me. I can't place what it is but I recognise it. I think I must be breathing, as there's air entering and exiting my lungs, but it doesn't feel the same as it did ten minutes ago. I'm struggling to place what's different about it though. The cold has wrapped itself around me,

squeezing the warmth out of me. The coldness around me can almost be seen; it's translucent. Almost water-like. *Water*. How did I not realise this before? I'm underwater. I must be dead. This must be hell; a new circle that's been added, the underwater. I feel too conscious to be dead though. I can think and imagine things in my head; a green apple, a red truck. Or am I trapped inside my own head? I try to shove myself forward again, and I can feel something moving on my sides. Short, sharp movements are coming from me. Movements that arms are not capable of.

It's a realisation that creeps in slowly the way the dawn does. I can see clearly again. The shapes line up against each other to create a puzzle for my brain to hopefully understand. I can see where I am now and it's terrifying. There are dozens of little fish whizzing around me. A coral plant reaching up from below me, trying to grab me. A solid sheet of glass stands ahead of me, an impenetrable wall. I should be on the other side of it though, I was on the other side of it. I force myself forwards to glide up to the glass. An unnatural movement for me. There's a shape coming up into view. It's out of focus and blurry, but the shape is recognisable. The shadow is tall and colourful, red and yellow hues are seeping through the glass to me. It's the outline of a person. It must be, there's nothing else that makes this shape. Thank God, someone that can help. If I could just get a message to her, an impossibility but maybe?

I realise it quite slowly, walks up my back like a shiver. She's in just as much danger as I am. There's no way to get a message to her, I can't send it in a bottle or telepathically speak to her, nothing. This lady has entered as I did, bored and too curious to leave this aquarium alone. So, she makes the same mistake as I did and enters to make her own trip to see the fish. I watch in despair as she walks on to the next room, and I let myself sink to the bottom of the tank.



## *A Not So Cosy Winter Night*

*Content warning: Death*

On a cold winter night when the buildings are blanketed in snow an eeriness sweeps over the college campus. Most snowy nights are the same, the campus feels like it is hidden away from the rest of the world. Only to be unlocked again at midday the next day when the campus is bustling with life again, full of students headed to lectures. At night the place feels sinister. Campuses have the perfect mixture of old and abandoned places that can be full of decay. Sometimes even a graveyard tucked away. Abandoned buildings long forgotten by professors are left haphazardly between lecture halls and offices. Hence at night, especially on a night such as this when the cold has swept in and a layer of snow covers everything, you feel like something sinister is just waiting to happen just around the corner.

The college could be haunted- that could account for the eeriness. On a winter night the veil between the living world and the dead could become thinner. Those in limbo could then pass through to our side for the night. A winter night creates the perfect atmosphere for them to do this in. The ghosts can use the snowstorm nights to mask their identity. Snow absorbs sound, eliminating the background noise of life. Ghosts can go from building to building unnoticed, giving them the perfect opportunity to wander from their hideaways and venture out into the campus to explore the pieces of life that they miss.

There are few reasons why a student may leave the sanctity of their dorm to step onto campus at night but there are some. To haul their books into the library for a midnight cram session, hunched down over a desk at the window. Occasionally glancing out and seeing flashes of movement between the lampposts in the quad. Or to meet friends on the other side of campus for an evening out. When a student walks through the campus on a night such as this they stay alert. Watching from the corner of your eye for any anomalies. Something that dashes past you then vanishes, something that falls that shouldn't have, or a sweeping feeling of dread. The students who brave these nights are on edge, anyone or anything could jump around the corner, and you don't quite know what their intentions might be.

The college buildings can be intimidating in the daytime but at night they become unearthly. Rising above the students sleeping in darkness, casting a stench of fear.

On a cold winter night such as this the last thing that you want to see is your classmate striding towards you saying, "I've found a body".

### *First Meeting*

I can pinpoint the exact  
Moment  
I fell for you.  
A commonplace day.  
My string of fate weaved  
quite a lot for me to be us.

Some say that time stands  
Still,  
Some say there are fireworks.  
For me though; it was as if  
a light flicked on inside.  
Illuminating me.

A singular moment of  
You.  
Do you think? And tell me honestly  
That it's possible I fell for you,  
at that moment, in every universe.  
They lined up, at that precise  
point,  
to let every me, find every you.

### *Corvus*

Sleek, black with the hook of a claw.  
A murder  
waiting to pounce.  
The bead of an eye and a quick wit stare,  
a creature of superstition.  
Are they friend or foe?  
The beating of wings, and the low  
caw of a hymn.

## Ennis Freeman

### *A Trick of the Dark, To Grant You the Light*

*Content warning: Homophobia, religion*

Nightmares have become a second home to me, now, as I revisit them night after night. Each evening as I lay in my bed, I stare at the ceiling, wondering what terrors will plague me when sleep overtakes me. They grip me in their claws, and I wake in the middle of the night with a scream on my lips, yet even now I do not fear what the night would bring. Perhaps there is some solace in dreams, as dark and cruel as they may be, for they reflect the parts of my blackened soul that I might not accept when daylight is cast unceremoniously upon me.

Even as monsters, more of mind than being, take my hand in theirs, tearing my heart out with wicked sharp teeth, I feel safe. As much as they torture me and hurt me, they never once betray the deepest parts of my soul, the pieces of me that are mine and mine alone.

Tonight, the candle burns low as I sit on top of the mess of sheets, sifting through dozens of yellowed papers that house sketch after sketch on them. Messy graphite has stained my fingertips this evening, as I'd slaved over a small drawing of the heart that beats inside me, the heart who has a face and a life and laughter and kindness. I drew the face of my heart like a monk worshipping a flame, each stroke of graphite and charcoal the ritual of a love that is as undeniable as it is true. Despite what I may preach in my mind, the love is denied, as deeply as it possibly can be. The drawings are nothing more than an unkind fantasy, one that comes from the lifeblood of my nightmares, and not the truth of the waking world.

I have denied myself a thousand times over, to the point in which it is second nature. It is far easier for me to lie than to speak truths.

Aunt Margorie had always said that truth was the closest thing to touching God and the Divine. To lie was to deny Him, and to tell the truth was to accept Him into my heart. And, like any good girl, I'd agreed without question. As time had crept on, and the sands of the hourglass kept falling, it had become harder and harder to speak naked, unquestioned truths.

The only times they are revealed to light are through the sketches that are as damning as they are holy.

I gather them all into a pile and lay them back into the drawer of my nightstand, gently placing the false bottom atop. They will remain in darkness, where they will be safe from the burning eyes of those who would destroy them. At least for tonight, I will deny once more.

---

When my eyes open, I stand on the balcony of my parents' old home in London. I can hear the sounds of chattering from within. Dozens of voices lilt from beyond the closed door, and while I long to hear what they say, my attention is primarily drawn to the man who stands beside me.

Endlessly handsome, with a sharp jaw and a beautiful, ethereal look about him, he is the portrait of a man of class and wealth. His dark hair curls gently, and when he turns to meet my eyes, his burning, scarlet ones are filled with nothing but pity.

The only thing about him that fills me with fear are the crimson ram's horns that rise from his head, dripping with blood.

"My child," he says, gently, as if speaking to a dove. "How I have missed you." His hand reaches over to take mine, long, pointed nails only brushing over my palms before our fingers entwine.

I say nothing, as I always do, but what was spoken aloud does not matter. The thoughts that have roiled in my mind, the passions that have settled in my heart, speak for themselves.

"Why do you not fear our meetings?"

Because there is nothing to fear from a man whose only power is knowing me as well as I know myself. All the strength he has comes from what I am terrified to speak, but here, I know there are no true consequences to my darkness and sins.

"A truthful answer, perhaps. Yet if there is no consequence, why are you greeted with my face instead of the one which you truly desire?"

I cannot desire it. To desire it is to bring shame upon my family, upon the memory of my mother and the name of my father. The ghosts of all that came before me haunt the very manor I live in, and they see all. I will not desire what they might try to steal.

"'Cannot' is far different than 'will not.' You do not refuse your own passion for yourself, but instead for the object to which it is directed. You fear that which will destroy what you are afraid to lose."

I do not.

"And thus begins the lies. But, my child, you forget." He grows close, his breath hot as fire against my cheeks as he speaks. "I am the Lord of Lies, the Master of Untruth. To lie to me is to deny me, and no one denies me!" His words are harsh and cruel, snapping against my throat like rabid dogs, desperate to clench around the voice that is afraid to sound. "You live and lie and live and lie. You do not deserve love, if you do not will to speak it true."

"Now, my lord, it is you who lies."

Then his hand plunges into my chest, searing pain ripping through me, and when it is pulled from between my ribs, my still-beating heart lays in his hand, bloodied and cruel, blackened with the state of my words.

Without another word, nor even a thought, save for the inferno that blazes in his eyes in Hellish fury, he crushes my heart into dust, and my vision goes black.

---

Music waltzes around me as I wake, a gasp flying from my lips. My hands clutch and grasp aimlessly against the sheets, waiting for a phantom pain that will not arrive. There is no dark hole in my chest, and my heart still beats within it, pounding a rapid pace punctuated by heavy breaths.

I gather myself quickly, for the years of practice have made waking from horrors a simple enough matter. From the light, or more accurately, the lack of it, from behind the curtains, and the gentle ticking of my clock, its still night, perhaps not even past midnight. And there still remains that melody played out on the grand piano in the drawing room, the sounds drifting softly through the halls to reach my ears.

Selfishly, I imagine for a moment that it is meant for me, a song played by much-loved hands to be adored by me and me alone. But reality returns me to my wits, and I slip from the covers, pulling on a dressing gown before lighting a new candle to guide me on my journey to the source of the music.

The halls are as dark as expected, painted in the shadows of night, and a persistent sense of claustrophobia begins to root itself within me. There are too many eyes on me in these empty halls, too many ancestors watching me through their ghostly forms. They bare me with them, tearing my skin from my bones to see what I have kept so closely clutched to my chest, haunting me as I betray everything they lived for. I can only imagine my mother among them, watching me from beyond her grave in London with a vile hatred in her eyes. How I must seem to her, gnarled and malformed past the girl she had tried to raise.

But I walk, anyway, through the seas of ghosts and wraiths, past the claws of those who would rip me apart, the only courage I can muster drawn from the sound of the piano alone. Comfort comes from the wandering melody, as I am awash in the warmth of the music, staving away the cold winter winds that whip outside the walls of my home.

It is a fight, a battle against those who would see me deny again and again, to reach for the brass doorknob and grab it, and there is a war in the turning of it.

Yet the moment the door peels open with a soft groan, it is as if the effort vanishes from my heart, beckoning me forward with the promise of light and happiness. The screams of betrayal from the dead are behind me, now, as the door clicks shut, and the music drowns it all out with sounds of life.

Pale hands dance along the ivory, playing the keys with reverence, an endless devotion to the sounds it brings. They do not notice my entry, they do not fumble on the notes as they continue on, the music ebbing and flowing like the tide.

I could exist here for eternity, in this moment of liminality, in which I am surrounded by that which I love beyond words, able to watch without notice, without shame, opening my heart to the kindness of truth and honesty. I can hear the words of monsters in my ears, I can hear their whispered welcomes, and yet I cannot bring myself to care that I have aligned myself with sin when the light that this music brings feels so holy. It brings warmth to a frigid soul, enveloping me with nothing but the passion which I have denied myself for so long.

The song comes to a close, and the final note hangs between us, a thread growing taut.

Slowly, the artist who has brought breath to my heart turns, warm brown eyes meeting mine with a soft smile. For a moment, there is nothing, just the silent acceptance of my presence. And then I am drawn forward by a mind that is not my own, finding a seat on the lounge where I can appreciate the light before me even more.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I say softly, that cruel fondness entering my voice without permission. "It was beautiful."

"You interrupted nothing," is the reply, gentle and kind in its words. "Was it nightmares that brought you here, or something else?"

The soft sigh I breathe only strengthens the silence before I speak. "A nightmare, as it always has been, and likely always will be. It is a matter of my life, that I am afflicted by them. But don't let it worry you. I do not suffer from them. Not anymore."

But my answer does not soothe. "I would see you sleep in peace, not followed by cruel tricks of the mind." I do not fear tricks of the mind. They are harsh and mocking, to be certain, but they are not as cruel as tricks of the heart. All a mind can do is wound, but a heart knows precisely where a blow must land to harm.

I reach out to take a hand that has fled the ivory keys, skin soft and smooth beneath my fingertips. Those brown eyes, endless in their kindness, do not stray from my own gaze. "Kate," I only say, "do not worry yourself over my dreams. They are as inconsequential as a fly. What matters is how I live here, in the waking world."

Her skin is warm against mine as she takes in my words, her thumb absentmindedly rubbing against the back of my hand. "I'll always worry about you," she says. "I want... I wish you were able to have peace. There, here, wherever you'd wish it. It isn't fair that sleep brings you demons and cruelty, that this pain is nothing but a fly buzzing in your ear to you. If I could, I would banish them all away without a second thought."

From the depths of my heart comes the urge to tuck the wayward strands of her dark hair behind her ear, the gentle waves mocking me in their beauty, as if they know how I long to feel them between my fingers. And there is that cruel earnestness to her eyes, one that tells me with absolute certainty that what she says is what she truly wants.

For a flash of a moment, I only feel envy.

"If I had a single wish, it would not be to banish the nightmares," I say suddenly. "I would wish to be as free with truth as you are. To be able to speak your mind honestly, without fear, is something that I crave as truly as a flower craves sunlight."

She offers a quiet laugh in return, and her hand lets mine slip away. "Truth is a subjective thing, Ada. Honesty is one side, certainly, but truth, in its purest form, is as elusive as anything." Her words are accompanied by a smile, her soft lips drawing my attention for the briefest of moments before sanity takes me in its clutches once again. "I think... I hide from it as much as anything. Just because I say pieces of honesty does not mean I am an honest woman."

“Yet far more honest than me.” The sentiment comes unbidden, as if my faculties have fled me in this moment of vulnerability. It tears me open, no eyes to pull apart my soul, save for hers that are as kind as the spring rains.

Those eyes watch me incessantly in this brief moment in time, gauging my words. “What if you changed it? What if you told me one completely honest thing, right now?”

My mind is flooded with the words that I cannot say, with the memories of drawings drawn of her with a hand too ashamed to admit that the touch of paper was nothing compared to that of skin. All the things that I could say, baring the truth without regard for my own soul, cry out to be spoken, but I fear them more than anything else. If I give them leave, they will reveal the pieces of me that would damn everything I’ve lived for.

If I let myself, I will tell her that I love her.

Instead, I pull all those thoughts and desires away and settle them into a pocket of my mind reserved for such sinful things. I let myself forget them, and I find some other shred of honesty.

“Sometimes, it feels as though the dead are watching me,” I manage. “They follow me, and they wait for me to follow them into eternal rest. My mother’s memory haunts me, and I cannot escape the weight of what she’s always wanted me to be.”

And yet, in my weakness, I have only managed a half-truth.

Kate says nothing, only regards me with eyes that seem as though they see the world as art. Then: “Damn them.”

“What?”

“Damn the ghosts and the dead. This life is too short, with so many untasted fruits of incredible sweetness, to fear what they might say. If we live to prove our worth to those who have gone, we will be searching for an acceptance that will never exist. Be here, Ada, in this world, in this life, and forget what they all have to say. What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” I say, my voice as quiet as a mouse. I’m not even certain that I said it aloud, or if my mind had supplied it without voicing it to the world. Yet as we remain in this moment of silence, I can see a sort of understanding dawn in her eyes.

It terrifies me.

“What about you?” I ask. “Tell me something honest.”

She leans back slightly, drifting a finger absentmindedly across the keys of the piano as she thinks. I am struck with the art in my mind, the way that Gentileschi painted Judith or Kauffman painted Ariadne. Her visage is that of the greatest music, personified in a violent storm of truth that has turned upon me. She craves my destruction with her words, tempts me with her lips and ringing laugh. I am endlessly tormented by the cruelty of my love.

Finally, she shifts forward, moving as softly as the wind. When she speaks, her voice is low. “My truth? I hoped you would hear me playing. I hoped you would come find me. And if you had not, I

would have played into dawn, and I would have been happy to do it.” My breath is iron in my chest. “I wish that your nights may be restful and calm, without the torments you have been subjected to, but beyond that, I wish that, should your nights continue with these dreams, that I could be there to comfort you, to drive them away myself.”

My nightmares have followed me since I was a girl no older than twelve. After a particularly cruel dream, I had awoken to learn my mother had died, the illness that had followed her like a shadow all her life finally catching up to her. But in my youthful ignorance, I believed that it had been my fault she had died. That my dreams had somehow manifested into the real world and taken her breath from her throat. I had been terrified to close my eyes, for fear that my nightmares would take my father from me, next. Fear had gripped me in sharp talons, and every time I awoke from a lapse in my vigil, I’d sworn that I would never sleep again. I would not again lose someone I loved to the demons in my mind.

The fear I’d felt then is nothing compared to what lies in my heart at this moment.

A breath away sits the object of my affections, the woman who has drawn my love since we were young girls, just turned eleven. And I had not known then what we would grow into, and perhaps I do not even yet know. There is a bridge between us, now, carefully constructed through trust and friendship, but now it is threatened by the hammer that feels like a lead weight in my hands. Desire sits nestled in my chest, craving nothing more than to feel her lips against mine, yet through desperation alone, I keep it contained.

I will not lose her to the sins that I have committed in my mind. They are mine, and mine alone to bear.

What do you want?

I want her.

Something within me snaps, a thread pulled too tight, and I shift forward, pressing a soft, brief kiss to her lips.

Fire explodes within me, ecstasy overflowing into my heart as I feel the soft curve of her mouth, that which I’ve only ever dreamed of. Warmth melts the ice in my heart, the surge of it all an overwhelming sensation of honesty that has fought endlessly to be released.

A moment later, I pull away, the bliss of acting upon a lifetime of love quickly overtaken by a sudden fear. In her eyes is some terrible, unknowable emotion, and I await the sting of rejection, the knowledge that the eyes of all those who have carried the same name as I will watch as I damn the family to an endless torrent of mockery and shame. I have failed the very person I swore to be, I have failed my mother’s memory, my father’s legacy.

Kate breathes a soft gasp. “Ada.” She says my name like a prayer.

Then she’s surging towards me, taking my face in both of her hands, and where the first kiss was tentative, as full of fear as it was desire, this is the culmination of everything we have ever wanted. The heat of my want is endless as the love that pours through my heart in this moment, in this



ethereal, transcendent moment. This is the thing that poets have spoken about since the dawn of time, this inexplicable sense of belonging that fills every piece of me.

It is an endless pull towards her, the strings of fate that weaved us together eternally, and everything monstrous that roils and writhes in my mind is dwarfed entirely by the single, simple thought that rises within me.

She wants me, too.

After what feels like too short a time for how much I have waited in languorous desire for this moment, we part, my hands reaching up to take hers as I shift away from her grasp. A part of me has ignited, a fire that burns brightly with the sense of defiance that has surfaced from a hidden place. There is something special in the feeling that hovers between us, the knowledge that our actions are full of sin and darkness, and that these very actions are what have finally made us whole. Never have I loved someone like I do her.

“I have a second truth,” she whispers. “My second truth is that, for as long as I can remember, I have loved you, Adelaide. I have loved you beyond measure, beyond reason, beyond right and wrong. And I love you, Ada, I love you, in this moment, and for infinite moments to follow.”

I can hear the howl of cold winter winds outside our walls. I can hear how they would freeze any poor soul that would try to brave it. They would be enshrined eternally in ice. Yet, as she speaks, I am certain that the warmth that blossoms in my heart, this swell of my heart that is love, true and undenied, would be enough for me to step outside and not feel the nip nor bite of frost.

“My second truth,” I return, bringing her left hand to my lips and pressing a kiss there, “is that those words are all I have ever wanted to hear in my life. That they are music played by the most beautiful of hands. And I have dreamed that, in whatever world that I might hear that blessed music, that I would be able to return it in kind. I love you, Kate. My heart, in whatever form it may be, is yours, and it always has been.”

There is a faint whisper of movement as she moves from where she sits on the piano bench, to kneel in front of me as I sit on the lounge. We are eye-to-eye, her warm, rich brown meeting my icy blue, and she reaches to cup my face in her hand.

Yet, despite everything that I have fought so hard to now hold, there is fear that still sits within me. “The ghosts will see us,” I say, terrified to turn around and see the cruel gaze of my mother as she screams for my betrayal. I have failed my family.

“And who will they tell? They’re dead.” Her thumb brushes against my lips, as if she desires to memorize the very feel of it.

“Perhaps someone can speak to them. We may even be betrayed by Death himself.”

She leans forward slightly, placing a soft kiss to my forehead. There is a specific honesty to the gesture, a determined acceptance of the fears that I hold. Despite the eyes that may be upon us, that scheme to betray us to those who will see us separated, this feeling hovers between us, more precious than roses or diamonds.

“Perhaps,” she finally murmurs, “But Death cannot have us now. Not when we have only just begun to live.”

## Isabelle Gdaniec

*tub*

*Content warning: Light gore*

in the dirty white-tiled bathroom  
the tub overflows with rage  
its water runs too hot  
trying to burn away your skin  
the ceramic coating  
eroding underneath your body  
the rust dissolving  
seeping in your wounds  
sulfuric acid sizzling  
from the pores beneath  
your skin burnt, melted away  
disappearing  
down the drain  
the blood of your tears  
down  
the  
drain

the gentlest words wash over you:  
you are still something

to be loved

## Sasha Gdaniec

### *snow castle*

thin red string  
in my eyes coloured pink  
from me, to you  
though i don't know if it reaches  
so ephemeral, so light  
the connection between us  
but i hang on with all i can  
and i can tell so are you  
dancing like a storm  
all feelings erupt  
i want you  
i need you  
i've missed you  
you  
are so important  
so can we really try to make this  
snow castle last forever?

*liver identity*

*Content warning: Abuse*

like a toy,  
a squishy plush,  
or a fruit on a tree.  
to you,  
i am an object with colour  
picked, squeezed  
you name my shape,  
you label my personhood,  
and you paint my soul  
under your shrink wrap.  
your store tag.  
your canvas.  
your love.  
i am suffocating  
in the fire of my liver,  
the one place untouched.

*fear, mostly*

grounded, white and pleasant  
the colour of that emotion soothes  
sturdy and trustworthy  
put in yourself  
put in others  
put in the future  
put in hope  
incandescent, it brightens up the room  
but as is true  
the brightest point of a shadow is in its middle  
and that same  
grounded, white and pleasant  
becomes overwhelming, blinding and foreboding  
surrounded by a shadow  
sturdy and hated  
put in yourself  
put in others  
put in the future  
put in powerlessness

incandescent, it burns through me

## Yuki Gdaniec

*sanity*

*Content warning: Parental abuse*

grasping at sanity  
grasping at relation  
grasping at  
the emotion i refuse to say  
that you feel for me  
i attempt to be your child  
the way a fish attempts breathing  
and when you reach back out  
to me  
i become nothing  
my mind feels acidic  
my body feels corrosive  
and my heart feels oxidising

exploding in white noise

i no longer feel my feet

## John Harper

### *The Geese Are Too Far*

The geese are too far to be heard, but they are seen  
and the changes they propose are gentle.

As I face the sun, the chasm closes  
between tranquil dusk and musical dawn.

Forgiving our harsh prints, feathery snow dissolves  
to unveil our glistening summer canvas.

Daffodils weave golden kisses around grass relearning growth,  
so, when I see you again, let us reminisce

about that time you flew over  
and I couldn't hear you speak;

the rich, sweet soil lifted me in its fragrance.  
I took a deep, conscious breath — then, another.

I did hear you.



## Freya Juul Jensen

### *II. Song for Erinna*

**E**rinna, your brown curls lay on the sheet next to me. I trace their pattern with my fingertips, scared to stir you in this dark night. This is all I will ever have, for come morning, you will press a kiss to my brow and leave without a word.

Erinna, perhaps one day I will love you in ways not secret. Perhaps I will reach for your hand in a place not confined to these walls, and you will not let go, but hold it and press it to your lips.

Erinna, lesser loves have known greater rewards. I could take any man as my husband, but his eyes would never be yours, his voice never as sweet as your whispers in these shadows.

But Erinna, we may never leave this bed together, for you will be gone before light touches the ground. I will stay under my covers, knowing my love was never meant for our time.

## Daniel Kearns

### *The Crawler*

*Content warning: Human and animal deaths, violence*

Blinking red lights and a thick spray of smoke filled the air of the room as Peters came to. His vision was blurry and unclear, his entire body aching. Sharp pains ran through his arms and his legs, so much so that they almost felt numb when he moved. He took sharp breaths as he pulled himself up onto his feet. He coughed and spat onto the ground, staggering as he shook his head.

His mind was racing, memories swirling together and blurring. He couldn't remember what happened, but the blaring of the alarms in his ears told him that something was going down. Something bad.

Once his vision had cleared enough, Peters looked around. "Hello? Hello?! Anyone!" he yelled out, hearing his own voice echo through the corridors. After getting nothing, Peters dragged himself over to an orange button mounted on the wall below a speaker. "Syster, status update. What happened?"

A brief jingle played through the speaker as the automated AI assistant, Syster, came back to life. "Mobile facility collided with an unregistered body of land approximately 40 minutes ago." The voice continued as Peters stepped away from the button. "Significant structural damage to the southern and western sectors. Loss of life and essential resources also reported. Remaining life signs are congregating in the eastern sector."

Peters sighed and ran a hand over his face, lightly punching the wall beside him. He'd hoped they could have completed their mission without casualties. Life got in the way of plans sometimes, and sometimes the results were disastrous. "Fuck. Anything else, Syster?"

Silence fell after he asked the question, Peters turning to the wall and waiting for Syster to reply. He shook his head and began grabbing some fallen objects from the floor.

"An unidentified life form has been detected."

He stopped and laid down a small pile as the news got to him. "... Syster, can you repeat?"

"An unidentified life form has been detected."

"What kind of life form?"

"Unclear. Life form is presumably carnivorous. Current hypothesis is that a native organism has wandered through an opening in the exterior hull."

Peters took in a breath and pushed himself toward a fallen cabinet, opening it up and pulling out several items, mostly weapons and ammunition. "Syster, location of unidentified life form?"

"Unidentified life form is currently moving toward the eastern sector."

He strapped a pair of guns over his shoulders, and pocketed as much ammo as he was able to carry. Satisfied with the armoury he had on his person, he stepped toward the nearest corridor. "Syster, maintain open communication and keep checkpoints active. Keep me updated."

"Affirmative, Commander."

Peters walked down the corridor, Syster's voice growing more distant as he did. This wasn't the kind of day he had expected to have at all, and the idea was terrifying him deep down. He'd watched plenty of movies like this. Lone survivor fights off the monsters lurking in the dark after they've picked off the crew one by one. The flickering lights weren't helping his feelings either. He remained determined, however, to try and salvage accomplishment of some kind from this mess.

He took a turn and entered an intersection leading toward the different sectors. There were sounds of something moving around in the distance.

"Syster?" he asked quietly. "Current distance between my position and location of unidentified life form?"

"Unidentified life form is moving toward the medical bay of the eastern sector. It is close."

'Shit...!' Peters thought to himself as he took a hold of one of the guns strapped to himself. Loading it up with some of the ammo he had snagged, he took a right turn and headed into the eastern sector. He steeled himself for what he could find himself facing off against. They were travelling by sea last time, he remembered, so could the sectors have flooded? Was it a shark? Orca? Humboldt squid? No, it couldn't have been any of those. Syster was programmed to recognise all Earth's creatures. If it was anything like that, she'd have said so. What kind of creature could it have been? Had they encountered some sort of cryptid? A previously undiscovered species? On any other day, he'd have been ecstatic at the idea. Not so much when his mobile base had been heavily damaged, and some unseen thing was skulking around, possibly eating his crewmates.

As Peters continued, he heard a human voice. Somebody calling out, pleading for help. Survivors. A wave of relief washed through Peters, but his defences shot back up when he realised that they weren't safe if something else was lurking nearby.

"Hello?!" Peters called out, stopping himself as he waited for a response.

"H-Hello? Someone there?" a new voice called out from around the corner. A man, probably mid-to-late 40s. They sounded hurt.

"This is Commander Peters, what's your name?"

"Cole... m-my name is Cole."

Peters listened out for the unidentified creature but couldn't hear anything more beyond the sounds of sparking and a slight creaking. "Okay, Cole. Are you injured? Is anyone else with you?"

“Uh...” Cole hesitated in his answer. “I-I’m fine, just a bit scratched up, b-but my daughter, she—” He broke off midway through, sounding like he was sniffing. “This... this thing came out of nowhere, and it—”

“Cole, listen to me.” Peters spoke as sternly as he could. “It’s going to be okay. I’m gonna come around and get you to safety. Okay?”

Cole went silent for a moment. “... Okay. Okay.”

Nodding to himself, Peters turned a corner and lowered his weapon. He’d walked into a grisly scene. A room just down the hall from the medical bay, fallen debris blocking a second exit. Cole was sitting in a corner, clutching a trio of nasty scratches on his left side. Nearby was what remained of Cole’s daughter. A girl, no older than early 20s, almost torn in half with deep gouges in her back. A mess of gore spilled out from her sides, and her head was attached to her neck by mere threads. Another couple of bodies were nearby, similarly mutilated, but presumably of no relation to Cole.

“Dear God...” Peters spoke to himself as he observed the carnage. Off the corner of his vision, he could see Cole pulling himself onto his feet, leaning on a fallen cabinet for support.

Cole met Peters’ gaze with misty eyes. “It was a monster... I-it ran right through, killed those people. M-my daughter, she wanted to help, and then it—” He pointed toward the mess that was once his daughter. “It-it did that. It killed her.”

“I’m sorry.” Peters looked around, raising his weapon upward again. “I truly am. Right now, what matters is you’re alive.” He pointed a finger to Cole, then pointed to the medical bay. “Let’s patch you up, and we’ll meet with other survivors. We’re gonna get out of this, okay?”

Cole struggled to tear himself away from staring at his daughter, before looking Peters in the eyes and nodding. Peters tapped his shoulder and gave a small smile. “Perfect. Come on, let’s—”

“Commander Peters.” Syster’s voice echoed in the room. “Unidentified life form is approaching your location rapidly. Extreme caution is advised.”

“Wai-wait wait, it’s coming back?! It’s coming back! It’s coming!!” Cole breaths were growing rapid, his voice shaking.

Peters grabbed onto Cole and forcefully shoved him back, raising his weapon and scanning the room. “No. I’m ending this thing right here. Stay behind me.”

Seconds began to feel like eternity as he stood guard, weapon drawn, ready for whatever horrifying creature was approaching. Eyeing the side of his gun, Peters slid his thumb over a toggle to change the firing mode. From the little he knew, creature was capable of massive damage, so it would be best for him to keep his distance and kill it as soon as possible.

From around the corner, sounds were drawing nearer. An echoing, hissing animal call followed closely by a human scream and the sounds of footsteps rapidly running toward them. Another survivor, with the monster tailing them. Peters felt sweat dripping from his forehead as the screams were cut short, a loud ‘thud’ followed by the crunching of bone.

Shortly after, the beast was now making itself known. Walking on all fours, at first it almost seemed like a Komodo dragon. Though, looking at it now, Peters would much rather have had the Komodo. Its footsteps created echoing stomps, rippling muscles hidden beneath layers of feathers, dull but colourful, adorning its back from the base of its head to its tail. Its closed mouth oozed with blood and small chunks of meat, falling to the floor as it approached. The beast reared its head to meet Peters and Cole's combined gazes. A forked tongue slipped from its mouth and licked at the blood on its corners, before its tail raised and fanned out in a display like a peacock, eye-like patterns on the end of the feathers.

The two men kept their eyes on the monster as it ventured into the room with them, not breaking its visual contact with them. Behind him, Peters could hear Cole whimpering and struggling to hold back his fear.

"Easy, Cole... easy," Peters whispered as the monster tilted its head toward them, admiring them with the curiosity of a child. If not for the brutality around them, Peters could have been convinced that this thing wasn't a threat.

It kept pacing itself slowly toward them, climbing over the corpses of its previous victims. Eyeing up Cole specifically, the monster growled, its teeth flaring from the sides of its mouth. Cole whimpered more and more, his fear getting the better of him. A quick glance towards the medical bay, and he was off.

In a blur, the monster opened its mouth, revealing rows of sharp teeth and bits of human stuck in its gums, and sprinted toward Cole, clamping itself onto his leg and forcing him backward.

Cole screamed, and it chilled Peters down to the bone. He'd never heard a man so afraid in his life. Clutching his weapon tightly, he stepped around monster as it pulled Cole backwards, sinking its teeth deeper into his leg before pulling back and tearing out a chunk of flesh. The screams grew louder. Cole looked back, watching as his leg gushed blood and the monster climbed onto his back, pinning him under its weight. It leaned down, close toward the back of his head, and extended its tongue to lick his cheek before it resumed its attack.

Peters watched, taking aim as the monster raised its forelimbs and jammed its claws into Cole's sides. Its claws sank in further, almost like the monster was trying to shove its hands inside of Cole to tear him apart.

Adrenaline was pumping through him as Peters cocked his gun and fired a shot into the monster's back. Blood splattered from the impact as it turned and roared at him, flaring its tail feathers in an effort to intimidate him. Peters staggered back as the monster tore itself away from Cole, who cried out in agony as he bled out of his sides.

The monster eyed up Peters and kept a fierce gaze on him. He knew that if he broke contact, even for a second, that it wouldn't hesitate to kill him. There didn't seem to be anything behind its eyes, nothing familiar anyway. It was almost as if the monster had crawled from hell itself. He took another shot, hurting the monster again but to little avail. It simply roared out again before it turned to its left. It spotted Cole rolling onto his back, crying out as he looked to face the beast. He tried to speak but couldn't get the words out, only able to turn to Peters with a look of pure terror.

Roaring once more, the monster lunged forward and jumped onto Cole, grabbing him by the throat and shaking him around as much as it could. He screamed for the final time, his cries quickly replaced by the sounds of gurgling as it laid the killing blow. Peters shot into its back again to grab its attention as it jerked its head upward. The monster turned to Peters, holding the decapitated head of Cole in its mouth. Staring at its next target, the monster opened its mouth wider and swallowed its prize whole, its neck bulging slightly to accommodate the head.

Peters felt sick watching it feed, keeping his weapon pointed straight at it. The monster parted ways with Cole's corpse, still bleeding out, turning its attention toward Peters. He felt almost paralysed with fear, unable to move or pull the trigger again. His mind raced, wondering what he should do. He almost debated trying to run, seeing if maybe he could outrun it. 'No,' he thought to himself. His inner voice was right. It had to be killed, and right now only he was able to.

"Come on!" he yelled as the monster lunged for him, propelling itself onto its hind legs for a boosted jump. Peters moved to the side and fired into the side of its underbelly, landing some good hits. The monster hissed out and staggered just a little. It charged again, knocking Peters down before running up and grabbing his shoulder in its jaws, biting down hard. Peters cried out as it bit harder, its teeth sinking in deeper.

He struggled to switch over the hand that held his gun, feeling his arm growing numb as the monster tore into his shoulder. Screaming out in pain and anger, Peters forced the gun against the side of the monster's face and pulled the trigger, blasting a hole through its head and killing it. The grip on his shoulder loosened and he managed to push the monster aside, letting it bleed out onto the floor. He gritted his teeth and hesitantly put his weapon aside to place his hand over his shoulder, wincing.

He took quick breaths, looking at all the bodies surrounding him. "S-Syster... update."

"Unidentified life form signal terminated. Remaining survivors are now evacuating the base through the eastern sector," the voice echoed, bringing a great relief to Peters. "Would you like me to divert power to the medical bay?"

He nodded, walking himself down the corridor and into the medical bay. "Y-Yeah... divert non-essential power to medical facilities."

The lights within the medical bay flickered to life as the whirring of machinery filled the air. Peters smiled as he plopped himself down on a chair, removing his hand from his shoulder and letting a mechanical arm begin work to patch up his shoulder injury. His breathing slowed. He had eliminated the threat and lived to tell the tale.

Peters let himself sink into a relaxed state, smiling and laughing to himself as the mechanical arm did its job. He closed his eyes, the noises of the machinery and the blurriness of his own euphoria tuning out the voice of Syster calling out.

"Unidentified life forms located and converging on the eastern sector."

## Ronan Lynch

### *A Coward's Gamble: Prologue*

*Content warning: Attempted suicide*

**April, 1861**

He's all on his own, on a worn-out, ragged, wooden chair. Booze on his breath. Blood on his hands and sleeves. There's a Bible in his left hand, a pistol in his right. His beard is damp, crusted too with dried tears.

A glass, which had once held an inefficient portion of bottled tequila, lies shattered into a hundred pieces around him on the planks of the floor, the shards interwoven with the dried alcohol and blood which now stains the otherwise barren wood.

The saloon on the edge of town is empty now. Every seat vacant except his. Though he can still hear the commotion from beyond the swinging double doors. The rustling of the pine trees in the strong night wind. The progress of the river sneaking by behind the great timber building. The groans from the townsfolk outside as they surround the now cold body drained of colour. The sounds seem distant to him, though all of it he can still hear despite his best efforts.

His mind is clear of thoughts. His eyes are empty.

A gunshot from outside brings him back from the beyond, though he doesn't have the energy to react with much more than a blink. The sound is deafening. Too deep and distinctive to be a pistol. A rifle.

No more gunshots follow.

He looks down, the sound reminding him of his own gun resting loosely in his hand. He looks up again, not able to bring himself to stare at his hand for longer than he needs to, deep red stains and all.

Slowly, he lifts the pistol from his lap, sliding his index finger through the trigger guard of the six-shooter single-action revolver. He bares his teeth as the cold of the barrel comes to rest on the side of his head. His eyes are dry. There are no more tears left to cry.

With the revolver against his head, he glances once more at the Bible. Its pages spread open gently as he shifts his leg. His eyes glance over one of the passages.

'Psalm 34:18, The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.'

He almost smiles at this, shaking his head at the ceiling for a moment, but every time he moves, he risks another fracture to his wounded and fragile soul.

"Ain't nothin' left for me here, Lord," he says through gritted teeth, barely recognising his own gravelly voice. The Bible folds closed in his hands and with great strain he lifts his head to peer

beyond the gaps of the swinging doors of the saloon. A half-moon stares back at him, faint white light against a starless sky.

“Forgive me,” he finally stammers, his mouth spread wide as he bares his teeth once more, forcing air out through his clenched mouth and open dry lips, saliva breaking free and dripping from his teeth. His eyes are screwed tight now, he knows the final moment has come.

With an immense effort, he squeezes his finger and the trigger swings backwards, causing a sharp metallic click within the chamber of the gun.

He is back on his parents’ farm. It’s evening on the miniature ranch he has not seen in seventeen years and the golden rays of the low sun bake the dry grass and sands beyond the hill. Beneath the brilliant beams of light, he can make out the mountains in the far distance, great jagged peaks standing together on the horizon beneath a clear blue sky.

There are animals around him. Cows and pigs. Chickens. Those were his favourite animals to tend when he was a boy. He can hear Mother singing as she always did, her soft voice drifting on the breeze from somewhere inside the cabin. Her favourite song.

*Take me to a place where the trees are so green  
that they drown out the colour of your eyes,  
take me to a place where I can  
be free as the birds, which sing in the skies.*

“George?” A voice which shatters tranquillity. He recognises it immediately. He tears himself away from Mother’s words and turns.

His brother is behind him and eventually the two stand face to face, the tree line springing up behind the man’s ragged dark hat. His face is filthy. His hands are too but not with earth.

*Take me to a place where I can be alone,  
where no one can see just what I have done,  
take me to a place where I can  
tell the world how much I’ve given for love.*

“Don’t... don’t come any closer,” George quietly says to the ragged man, annoyed at himself for being so gentle with his brother. Against the lush green forest and the well-kept land around the cabin, his ragged brother is the only thing in sight that poisons the otherwise pristine image of the farm.

“George, it didn’t have to end up like this,” his brother tries again but every time he opens his mouth, he reveals his filthy teeth. Every word that comes out of his mouth is repulsive.

“To hell with it. I was too much of a coward to twist it any other way,” George replies.



*Take me there and show me  
just what the world was meaning for me,  
oh, take me to a place where I can  
finally be at peace.*

The ragged man shakes his head, his long damp hair scattering dirt around his boots.

“Pullin’ a trigger don’t make you brave,” he says with his filthy teeth. “The real struggle comes after.”

“What happens after?” George asks, failing to ignore the clouds darkening overhead. The trees shiver as a gust of wind blows through the small farm.

The ragged brother glances up as a stream of leaves soars above. A sudden rumbling of distant thunder pounds on the skies above as the rains begin.

“What happens after?” George repeats, his voice rising above the strength of turning nature.

“Guess you gon’ have to find out yourself,” his brother says, tipping his hat and turning, slumping amidst the rustling green of the forest as the rain plucks up the courage to grow louder and more forceful.

George is left alone.

He’s back in the shadows of the saloon, the barrel of the pistol still pressed against his head. Rain now drums on the roof of the large building, drowning out the hum of voices which still haunt the other side of the swinging doors.

The gun feels heavier in his hand than it ever has as he slowly lowers it and turns it to one side. He flicks out the cylinder and gives a soft snort at what he finds.

It’s empty.

His life had ended, and yet here he was. He glances down at the Bible, watching as he allows it to slip from his grasp and clatter to the floor.

Letting out a long sigh, he slots the weapon back into its holster, glass cracking under his boots as he climbs with great effort to his feet.

His road had not ended yet, though he had arrived at a fork.

He reaches across the table in front of him for the bottle of tequila. He figures that whether he decides to take a different route with the time he has been given, or find a bullet for his gun, the first thing he’ll need either way is something to dull the pain.

## Chapter 1: Drifters

### 8 months earlier

One stuffy summer's morn, before fife and drum began to play, before hearts were broken, bodies mangled and before homeland was stained, two brothers rode alone, tracking their way across the ever-expansive western frontier.

A weightless sunset stained the horizon blood red as evening drew its curtains across the distant valley.

Their horses stood upon a hill of parched grass, mountains lining the distance, some capped with snow, others dry as the lowlands beneath them. A forest clustered indignantly at the far end of the valley, a small town sprawling out into the open grasslands before it. George estimated it to be less than a day's ride.

"We could make it if we rode into the night," he called to his brother.

"No. We camp here," Tommy replied without hesitation.

George nodded, swinging his leg to dismount.

"Woah there, girl," he said, soothingly patting the brown American Quarter horse as she whinnied in strained relief.

"Get the tinderbox, George," Tommy called, smoothly dismounting and groaning as he stretched his arms out wide, gazing out across the golden valley beneath them.

George reached into his saddle bag and retrieved the small wooden container. Then, he took the leads of both the horses and led them gently beneath a small juniper tree which stood peacefully shivering in the mountain breeze. He loosened the leads and tied them around the tree's trunk, before turning again to his saddle bag to feed them.

"What would we do without you two," he said softly as he watched them tuck in gratefully to the small bundle hay and chaff. His horse, Paris, was a loyal young mare whose spirit had carried him out of many a tight spot. Tommy's horse, Icarus, was larger. A proud black stallion whose tight muscles granted him immense strength.

"George!" Tommy's voice came firmly despite the wind now picking up, causing the golden grass to shiver and wave.

George left the horses to their food and approached where Tommy had dumped his bag beside a small rock, where it appeared a patch of grass had already been burnt.

"We ain't the first ones to come through here."

"Osage perhaps?" George asked, dropping to one knee to inspect the charred earth. Tommy watched him.

"Damn savages."

George scowled, though he knew his brother could not see it.

“What now?” He asked, turning to face Tommy who again was gazing out at the vast plains beneath them. He groaned, his head lolling downwards, chin to chest.

“We’ll have to keep watch,” he said after a long pause. “We’ll take turns. You can go first. Get a fire going too. I’m gonna take a look around.”

With that, he removed his weathered old hat and turned, hand resting on the pistol at his belt as he left the site behind, heading for a large cluster of rust-coloured rocks.

George sighed, watching the back of his brother’s jacket before turning his attention to the sky now tinged pink as the sun continued its descent.

Darkness fell.

He opened the small box in his hand and before long, the piece of flint and steel had struck and a small flame crackled among the tinder. He combined the small flames with branches he’d pulled from the juniper and the fire caught and spread easily in the dry summer air.

As the soft crackling began, he returned once again to the horses and collected the limp corpse of a black-tailed jackrabbit Tommy had shot earlier that day.

By the time Tommy returned, the shadows of night had crept throughout their campsite and the jackrabbit meat was roasting over the fire.

“No more evidence of any savages. No more signs of anything. Ain’t any signs of life at all besides that town down there across the plains,” he said as he planted himself upon a rock opposite George, the fire softly spitting sparks between them. George nodded.

“Good.”

“That thing ready yet?” Tommy nodded his head towards the roasted meat. George rose to his feet and picked up one of the sharp sticks he’d stuck into the pieces of jackrabbit, pulling out the end he’d lodged deep into the ground to angle the meat over the fire. He stepped around the campfire and handed it to his brother before collecting one for himself.

Then he sat back down, the soft long grass comforting after another day in the saddle. The brothers began to eat.

Tommy pulled a face after his first bite, beginning a series of exaggerated chewing actions before appearing to swallow with great difficulty.

“Can’t expect much livin’ on the road I s’pose,” he said, eyeing up the chunk of roasted meat with distaste. George shrugged.

“It ain’t that bad,” he said with his mouth full. Tommy chuckled softly, trickling slow laughter.

Their campfire was now the only light standing against the night. The flames crackled on before them. The leaves of the juniper rustled in the soft wind which whistled ever so slightly every now and then. George lay back and listened. This peace was more than welcome.

The faint call of an owl was interrupted as Tommy spoke loudly and broke the quiet.

“Here,” he said, pulling his gun from his holster and tossing it over to George. “If there’s savages around, you gon’ need it.”

George shook his head. “Thanks, but you don’t have to do that.”

“The hell I don’t!” Tommy retorted, his voice rising suddenly. “It’s my life you’re gamblin’ with right here, it ain’t just yours.”

George said nothing. He tossed the pistol back to Tommy, shaking his head ever so slightly. Tommy’s hand flew up to catch the gun. He stared at his younger brother. George, failing to meet his eyes, did not concede.

There was a long silence before Tommy broke off, glancing into the darkness away from their camp, a grim smile spreading across his weathered face. Eventually he nodded his chin towards George’s own pistol, the revolver nestled tightly in the man’s holster.

“This whole do-gooder charade of yours ain’t built for a world like this. It don’t matter if your chamber is always empty, one of these days you gon’ catch a bullet.”

## *A Wanderer*

A man, alone, aimlessly wandering  
where the horizon meets the sun,  
as the golden eye sets in the distance.  
He passes me in a wood and tips his hat.  
“Going somewhere?” I ask,  
“Not all who wander are lost,” he replies  
and I am left alone.

He moulds into the forest,  
wandering in his soldier greens.  
What would have shifted, I wonder,  
if a single bullet had gone astray.

What would have been  
if that piercing unnatural disaster  
had torn fabric and skin,  
closing off the doors to the world we now know.

So graceful he was  
a sureness in his aimless roaming.  
Who am I among these pines  
when wise men like this can wander?

Somehow he knows  
to avoid every rabbit hole  
and every wrong turn,  
though he has never been this way before.

Those simple words with so much weight,  
and off he sets  
fading into the woodland.  
And - I haven't seen him since.  
“Going somewhere?” I asked,  
“Not all who wander are lost,” he replied  
And I was left alone.

## *Weather the Storm*

*Content warning: References to drowning, parental abuse*

### **October, 793 CE**

The sea is a powerful thing. That was what Mother had always said. There is nothing more dangerous.

As the mid-Autumn sky was shrouded out by dense fog, the rolling white mist became far more than a soft blanket of island air. I was by the water's edge when it began. The same place I had run when my brother had died. That is what had happened. It had been a year now since my mother's failed birth and I was wiser to what had really occurred. She told me he had been needed by God, and maybe this was true, but she had only said that because I was young. He had died during the birth and there was nothing more to it than that.

The sky darkened above me as I played in the mud, drawing castles with a stick and chasing rabbits who ventured too close. As the waves began to grow and writhe among the ocean's surface, spitting and frothing with foam, the sound of impossibly vast drums beating among the heavens echoed across the sky as the downpour began.

I grinned as the rain started to drench me. The world was falling apart and there I was, laughing as the elements beat their chests, battering the island with their might. The rain swiftly grew fierce, washing away the mud that had been plastered to my face and front. I spread out my arms, pretending it was me in control of the storm as the waves grew ravenous before me.

The drums clattered once more and this time the clouds were illuminated in a dramatic flash as a spear of light pierced through the sky's thick coverage and embedded itself only for a split second on the island, a little way along the coast from me.

I howled, jumping up and down as the rain relentlessly battered my face, the waters pulsing violently ahead of me.

The next thing I heard was a scream.

A woman's voice. I turned to see my mother tearing towards me through the battering wind, her tunic and hair flailing around behind her in all directions. I ran to meet her and she seized me in her arms, dragging me back towards the house when another scream broke through the chaos.

Mother and I turned, the scream sounding again as a woman ran recklessly towards the water, stumbling on the uneven ground but climbing to her feet and carrying on.

"I'm coming! Don't worry! I'm coming, just keep your head up!" she screamed as she tore off her tunic and leapt into the sea. Mother and I stood frozen to the spot and then Father appeared beside us.

"In God's name," he gasped as the thunder shattered across the island and the sky was once again momentarily ignited by the power of the lightning.

Another man ran past us but Father seized him, stopping him in his tracks.

"If you go in there, you will die!" he shouted above the pelting cacophony of rain.

"My wife and son!" the man screamed back. Father shook his head, squinting his eyes as rainwater poured down his bearded face.

"The water has gone wild, man. They are already dead. If you try to save them you will be too."

The man groaned in desperation and shook Father's arms away, setting off towards the water in a lopsided sprint. He disappeared beneath the throbbing murky depths and Father swore, perhaps thinking I wouldn't hear his words over the rain.

"Robert, we have to do something!" screamed Mother as the dark waters consumed the man into their depths.

"If you want to be a hero, I'm not paying for your funeral," Father retorted, water spraying off his face, appearing as though he was spitting the words. Amidst the wild turmoil, I felt anger wash over me, though I wasn't sure of its source. Perhaps the storm had given me strength. Seething anger. Not just at the way Father spoke and acted towards Mother, but also at myself for not standing up for her before. I pulled my hand free from her grip and stepped towards Father, fists clenched.

"Don't speak to her like that," I said, with as much conviction as I could muster. I held my breath and waited for a response. Father paused. Shocked. I took another step forward.

"Aonghus, don't," Mother said and I could hear the fear in her voice.

"I'm sick of the way you treat her," I shouted at Father, over the roar of the sea. There was no going back now. I had already spoken. "I know you hurt her. It wasn't her fault that my brother died! It wasn't—" My outburst was cut off as the back of Father's hand struck my face. Mother screamed, pulling me away from him, my hands clutching my cheek.

Father didn't pursue me. He stood there, motionless, staring at the ground.

"You brute!" Mother cried as she steered me away from him, now simply a man left alone amongst the raging storm. We went back to the roundhouse and warmed ourselves by the fire. Mother comforted me. She told me everything would be alright and foolishly, I believed her.

The following morning, when the storm had finally cleared, three bodies washed up on the banks of the shore.

## *Echoes of the Past*

*Content warning: Blood*

It was the singing, not the morning light, that drew Aaila from her fur bedroll, for the day had not yet broken.

The soft voice sounded first in her dreams, then louder once she had awoken. The words were distant. She thought it strange that she could hear the singing above the howling of the wind and the constant cascade of snow.

Though the voice was clearly audible, the words were muffled. She could only make out the pitch of the singing, so gentle that it was almost a whisper. She glanced across the tent at Freydis, still fast asleep, clinging to the inside of her furs, an imprint of pale left behind on her face by the cold night air of the Winter storm. Aaila wondered if she too could hear the voice in her dreams.

Pulling on her gloves, she worked her way carefully to the flap of the tent.

The wind snarled at Aaila's auburn hair the moment she stepped out of the measly tent that clung to the veneer of snow upon the ground with visceral desperation.

The voice was somewhat clearer now, though the singing did not rise in volume. It was dark, even amongst the bright white of the snow. Falling flakes collected densely in her thick braided hair, softly scorching her face and neck as they fell. She pulled up her hood, shivering; she could not say if it was the singing or the cold that caused her to do so.

With a wave of her hand a small flame sparked to life on the surface of her palm. A candle of her own making. She held it upwards, her light a needle in the haystack of darkness.

It was then that the singing stopped.

Aaila's boots sank into the snow as she turned, her flaming hand whirling around her, searching. She listened carefully. The thick snow continued to fall. The relentless wind continued to scream. The words that had drifted above the chaos of the night were lost in the storm.

Then she saw it. At first, she thought it was a light, though it did not stand out against the mist and drifting snow. A brief shape among the darkness.

She should have returned to the tent. Should have woken Freydis and the others. This she knew even as she took her first step forwards.

The shape appeared again, a glimpse of dark grey with a subtle radiance of blue seemingly concealed somewhere within the outline.

Aaila followed it.

The storm rose in ferocity.

Her curiosity fought the omens, fought the feather of fear running its soft branches against her spine.

Then the singing returned. This time it was louder. This time she could make out the words.



*Oh heartless flame that's flaring bright  
As we sleep, our souls you reap,  
Cripple us with all your might  
Flame your anger is unique.*

*Oh heartless flame my steel you tear  
All do crumble from your power,  
Flame you are my burning flare  
From your anger all do cower.*

A tearing scream sharply pierced the dense atmosphere of the storm, shattering the shadows as it hurtled towards her, the shape in the snow advancing with terrible haste.

Aaila cried out in sudden terror, bracing her arms in front of her body and crouching as the shape reached and entered her stomach. The screaming continued as the shape emerged instantly from her back and Aaila turned, flaming hand outstretched. The ring of her sword as she drew it from its sheath did little to counter the sound of the screams and the storm as she readied herself for the figure to return.

*Heartless flame!*

The voice was a whisper and a howl at the same time, the words sounding as though they had been spoken straight into Aaila's ear. A searing spasm of pain shot through her skull as the grey shape emerged once more from the darkness.

*Reap! Reap!*

The voice continued and again Aaila's head seemed to let out its own scream as the pain took hold. A desperate stream of realisation struck her amongst the chaos. With a wave of her hand, she snuffed out the fire that had been burning on her palm.

The bombardment of pain in her head ceased. As did the screams.

When she opened her eyes there was a woman crouching before her, arms covering her head and face. Grey and translucent, a faint blue glow which spread to the snow around her, emanated from her huddled form. She quivered as Aaila stepped forward.

With a wave of her hand, Aaila again produced light, a small white orb of luminescence. Not fire.

Aaila tried to speak but her voice rasped with weakness. Gently, she coughed and tried again.

"Hello?"

The translucent woman didn't respond. She stayed there, just quivering softly, hands clasping at her dark hair.

Aaila continued forwards, crouching as she drew close.

“I... I’m sorry. It’s ok.”

The figure's head snapped up, her face contorting in a sudden snarl. In a brief flash Aaila could have sworn the woman's face changed, skin growing lighter, hair growing brighter, into a reflection of her own. Just for a moment. And then it was gone.

The woman’s own face returned, skin twisted and rough, cracked like the bark of a tree, teeth black and eyes white. Her dark hair was thin and drifted around her head as though she was suspended underwater.

Aaila gasped as quietly as she could manage, moving her orb of light away from the woman, but still her faint blue glow kept her ragged appearance in full view.

“Who are you?” Aaila heard herself say. Her shock seemed to disconnect her from the meeting, her curiosity the only thing keeping her courage balanced on the knife’s edge.

The translucent woman did not respond to her question. Though she did speak, her black teeth returning once again to view.

*A spark, a spark. Cursed flame, bastard flame.  
Never again must it light.  
Never again must it crackle in the deep,  
In the deep, as we sleep,  
Cometh flame, souls you reap.*

She spoke quickly, her anger rising with every word.

“What happened?” Aaila asked curiously, but the translucent woman began again, repeating her words over and over, the speed of her speech somehow increasing every time.

“Who are you?” Aaila asked again, her frustration granting her new reserves of courage as she raised her voice. She needed answers.

*Heartless flame, heartless spark.  
Children cower, people bark.  
Set me free, set me free,  
My poor daughter I must see.*

Aaila listened carefully now, her instincts keeping her on edge, telling her to run. Again her craving for answers entered the fray of her mind. She chose her next question carefully.

“Who did this to you?”

The woman’s violent rambling ceased instantly and her expression became blank as she turned her head, white eyes staring directly at Aaila’s for the first time.

She said nothing.

A single dark tear formed in the inner corner of her eye and began to trickle silently down her face. It was too thick however to be a tear.

Aaila watched in silent horror as the trail of blood ran from the woman's eye the full length of her face, before dripping from her chin and disappearing when it landed in the snow. Then the translucent woman spoke again. This time to Aaila.

*I'll show you.*

## Eilidh McDonald

*Where do we belong?// Anywhere but here*

*Content warning: Religion*

1.

Weak sunlight filters in through the stained yellow blinds.  
You turn your head to see me in the gloom.  
The sun catches the faint cherry tint of your hair with its frayed ends,  
and I wonder, for a moment, if your watery blue eyes will see  
right through me.

Shadows of the trees beyond the windows—those great, grey branches—  
fall upon your face, gentle as snow,  
and I wonder why you look back.  
I wonder what you were expecting to see.

The projector reflects off my glasses, shining back the images  
of a history long lost, of places that hold no room for us,  
and I feel guilty for that, like it's my fault.  
Like fault can be found with us.

So, when you look to me, is mine is the face you are searching for?  
Or instead, do you see the wild, salt-swept hair of Venus as she emerges  
glittering and new from her seabed,  
impassive but admirable.

Or, worse still, do I betray myself as nothing more than a golden virgin,  
Mary in all her distant beauty,  
with panes of glass set in my eyes so you may gaze at  
the rotting skull at my core—

am I what you were expecting to see?

2.

I think of the same question while we sit in the yellow room,  
wreathed with cheap fairy lights,  
basking in someone else's holy glow.

That humming you hear isn't the heavenly host,  
it's just the gentle strum of an acoustic guitar,  
faint yet insistent in the background.

If Jesus was there in that room,  
He must have missed us.  
The man at the front,  
not quite a priest but who preaches nonetheless,  
asks the real questions.

*What does home mean?*

If you have an answer, you don't share it, but you do listen to the chatter and hum around us,  
your head bending forward as your hair forms a curtain,  
obscuring your face from me.  
For balance, I over-share.

Home is wherever I'm not.  
I say it with a smile, but you don't read the cue to laugh now.  
You just nod. No malice. No judgement.  
I'm not optimistic enough to think you could be curious.

*Where do we belong?*

This I cannot answer, the words get stuck in my throat like the bones of a fish.  
Delicate truths, made for a gentler touch than my own.

You don't push for an answer, but you do offer me an escape route,  
nodding to the neon green sign behind our heads,  
hanging like salvation.

## Ally McWilliams

### *Cold Are the Stars*

*Content warning: Bugs, death, grief*

*Lelarith, Tuomikko 21XX*

Golden rays reflected off the waterfall of an island that shouldn't exist. Rainbow hues played in the mists, in a lake formed in tragedy.

Kwanghee watched the bustle of life; the trio travelled between an island floating in the sky and the settlement on solid ground, unaware of the island's core. He watched the lake, the wind styling Leo's hair, Tyler staring in awe, silent. Kwanghee watched the universe's largest grave while Leo drove past.

"That's Kvätt, right?" Tyler asked, looking towards the island as moss rippled and moved, almost following their speeder.

"She's the core, yes." Kwanghee turned away, opting to watch the road, Leo's hands on the steering wheel, the white furry leaves of the flowers in his lap, anywhere that wasn't Kvätt, and subsequently, where Mikkel fell. He turned his ring over in his hand; it was a simple gold band, something that was meant to last, all while not interfering with his work. It held his happiest memories and the cruellest goodbye as it outlasted his fiancé.

The time to mourn that loss was fast approaching as they made their way to a quiet coast. Purple moss led to fine dirt, which fed crystal waters. Sunset and regrets reflected in the waves. They stopped in front of the lake, where Kwanghee had stood years ago, frozen in front of a gaping crater. It was there where he had narrowly escaped death.

If only Mikkel was so lucky.

Yet magic with all its beauty was cruel, and the soul so volatile. It certainly didn't help that Sikis knew exactly how to manipulate the cracks and expose the magma within. Now Kwanghee was left with the ashes of his and Mikkel's promises, ashes that Tyler held protectively in her arm.

Tyler climbed out of the speeder, her dark hair and left sleeve dancing with the gentle breeze. She looked older than she should, her youth robbed from her by cruel hands. It was hard to believe that she was barely in her mid-twenties.

Kwanghee watched as she set the box of ashes down in her seat, took multiple deep breaths, walked towards the lake and reached for the magic surrounding her. He followed and placed a hand on her shoulder, and ice twirled and formed a rowboat. It was a simple thing, lacking in any of Tyler's preferred design elements: no ice motifs, sharp edges nor exaggerated shapes.

Leo caught up with them on the beach, taking Tyler's hand as she finished casting. Her hand trembled, and she kept her eyes off the boat. Kwanghee noticed how Leo's eyes were empty, as

though his soul was resting elsewhere, and yet, he didn't tremble. He forced a smile, and held his head high. His was a heart that didn't have the privilege to break.

It was all Kwanghee's fault.

"Ty, keep Leo out of trouble for me," Kwanghee said, settling into the boat and the familiar chill, cold already seeping deep into his blood and bones. He set the flowers on the space beside him, and they perked up with the chill. He pulled on a pair of gloves, as if they could do much when he was this surrounded by ice, but it was a comfort.

"Of course, Mr Boss Man sir," Tyler gave a mock salute, right hand over her heart and a left hand never fully forming just above her brow, ice shimmering in the dying light. For a moment, she looked so much like she did as a teenager.

The magic died with the end of the salute. Kwanghee wasn't even sure Tyler knew she was casting.

"No longer your boss," Kwanghee replied with a sad smile as he picked up the oars, thick gloves protecting him from the chill.

Leo let go of Tyler's hand and helped to push the boat away, without a word. He hadn't spoken much lately, hadn't quite been himself. Not that Kwanghee could really blame him.

"Thanks," Kwanghee said with a soft voice.

"No worries," Leo's voice was wrong: too quiet, too calm. His voice was the loudest after the mask was lifted from their eyes, and now, it was painfully quiet.

The journey to the centre of the lake took minutes. Darkness grew steadily as Kwanghee rowed. Tears already welled up as the image of Mikkel tumbling down into the crater replayed over and over again. He blinked them away and wiped away the few that escaped.

He removed his glove and ran his fingers through the water, the icy cold burning them.

Small ripples rose to greet the boat as he stopped in the middle. Exposed roots above him hummed and turned towards him, reaching out but too short to touch.

"Hey Kvätt. Sorry it took me so long to visit," he said, reaching out one arm to touch the roots. They were damp and firm in his hands, and tightened around him where they could reach. Ice droplets ran down his arm, and shivers followed.

"Can you hear me?" he asked. The roots provided no answer, but the earth just above him rumbled, making small, unnatural movements as the dirt turned over itself without a visible cause.

"Sikis was right then. You're alive." The roots recoiled at the mention of Sikis. Kwanghee could only miss their touch, and apologise for everything to do with her.

Kwanghee tensed as the chill settled into every vein. It didn't help that he had always been sensitive to the cold.

“How?” he asked. The earth above him shook and small creatures fell into the boat and lake, their bodies scrambling in the ripples they left. Kwanghee shuddered as he brushed them off him, more frantically than need be.

“Please don't do that again,” he grimaced, as his entire body crawled with bugs that no longer stood there.

The earth rumbled and the roots turned towards the flowers.

“They're for Mikkel.” He picked up the flowers, with their five white petals splayed out down the purple stem in a spiral, and spidery antenna spread out without rhyme or reason. He felt along the fur of the petals; Mikkel had been fascinated by them. A whole universe full of everything that was so new, and a flower that felt like the willows back home.

He set the flowers on the water, where they floated among the littered creatures. Some scrambled on, holding onto a life raft.

“Watch over him for me,” Kwanghee said, looking into the water, the bottom of the lake barely visible in the low light. He could still see the blood-soaked ice and how Mikkel's body went limp.

Once again, the earth rumbled.

“In return, I'll stop Sikis. She won't hurt anyone else.” He looked up as the roots reached out, and held his hand out for them to wrap around and squeeze, as the pain in his heart did the same. Finally they retreated back into the earth and Kwanghee made his return to land.

Leo and Tyler sat on the shore, wrapped in a blanket, waiting for Kwanghee as he sailed back. Tyler rested her head against Leo's shoulder, the blanket slipping off her, and she made no attempt to fix it. A pair of lit candles sat in front of them, and a freshly dug hole beside the candles.

The boat shattered into thousands of fine diamonds as soon as Kwanghee climbed out. The cold imprinted on him as he shivered. Tyler rose and half-ran to his side.

“Are you ok?” she asked. Her gaze was sharp and far too seeing. Kwanghee nodded, ruffled Tyler's hair and joined Leo by the candles. Leo simply leaned into him and held out the blanket, which Kwanghee rushed to grab. Tyler sat on the other side, sandwiching Kwanghee. She felt cold to the touch.

“How was she?” Leo asked, looking at the island. The bustle had died down, and the sun was deeply low, beginning to dip down below the horizon. Its dying lights bathed Leo's skin in a golden warmth.

“Alive.” Somehow, confirming that she was dead would have been an easier truth to swallow. Sure, she was alive and maybe, just maybe, there was a chance of saving her, but it wasn't good news. What would happen when she died? How long did she even have? Would the stars ever be able to smile down on her again? Death would have been a mercy, rather than to be doomed to live life as a pulsar star.



Leo stared in disbelief and looked over to the island, to the waterfall, the moss-covered rocks and the settlement on the other side of the lake. If Sikis was correct, they all had an expiration date.

“So Sikis wasn't lying? Does that mean—”

“Let's hope not.” Kwanghee interrupted. Any ending to that question would have been a knife to his heart.

“So, she really didn't try to kill me?” Tyler asked, her voice a shadow of herself. She sounded so much like the scared girl who clung to him and Leo all those years ago.

“I hope so,” Kwanghee replied. Kvätt probably wasn't Sikis' first victim in her search for the tears; however, she was never particularly bloodthirsty, and he could only hope that she was honest. Even if all that meant was peace of mind for Tyler.

The rocks almost seemed to form eyes on the side of the island, the moss covering them becoming eyelids. Leo looked to the box of ashes, a small white thing with Mikkel's name engraved along the front.

They hadn't acknowledged it, a spell of silence seemingly following it which no one wanted to be the first to break.

Kwanghee brushed his fingers along the engraving and took a deep breath. It was time. The moon had finished waning and it was time for it to go. Mikkel's story had long since finished and the ending was set in stone.

“You sure you're up for this?” Leo asked, placing a gentle hand on Kwanghee's arm, though he could barely feel the warmth.

“I've delayed long enough.”

“That doesn't mean you're ready,” Leo said, his voice firm, almost akin to how things were just before everything went wrong.

“I don't think I'll ever be ready, but I promised him that I would bury him. He was rather put off by the idea of me keeping his ashes...” Kwanghee's voice trailed off. “He would have kept mine, had I asked him to.”

He wanted to talk about Mikkel, about the stories living inside him, wanted to keep Mikkel alive. Yet the words got lost in his throat, tied up and scared.

The sky had turned into a brilliant pink, and golden clouds were painted across with a large brush.

Kwanghee picked up the box. The weight of it felt like the weight of the world and yet, it was almost nothing. A person larger than life reduced to ashes. Stories and memories would be all he could be.

One day, Kwanghee would tell those stories.

He set the box into the earth as the sun fell below the horizon: the final plunge into darkness. The candles provided a soft light, fighting against the night all by themselves. They flickered but never dimmed.

The words got lost, trapped in a labyrinth. Kwanghee stayed silent.

He cried as earth hid the box from the universe. Alien constellations watched him with their cold eyes as the candles flickered with the wind. Tyler leaned against him, ice against his skin. They sat in silence in front of the unmarked grave, the world made anew and yet all the same: grief so familiar, a home he had built for himself and yet so foreign, a language he didn't quite speak.

"You're cold," Leo said as he joined the others. Tyler pulled away, and apologies spilled out of her lips.

"It's a cold night," Kwanghee replied, watching the stars, drawing images in the freckles.

It was a new moon.

"We should get you inside," Leo said, already helping Kwanghee up, warm hands reaching out. It was odd to feel another person's warmth, for someone to notice he was cold. The fire under his skin was temporarily put out, and he didn't know if he wanted it back. He could get used to the warmth of another.

The three of them scrambled into the speeder. The roof moved into place, and Leo drove, away from Mikkell, away from Kvätt, away from the doomed settlement. The candle kept burning.

And as always, the sun would rise again.

## Melbourne Murray

### *A Very Important Meeting*

*Content warning: Spiders*

“Order! Order!” the head house spider barked, slamming one of her legs down on the drywall, with little effect. The spiders, being almost blind, couldn’t notice her either. Gradually, however, the chatter died down enough for the spiders to notice.

“I hereby call this Cluster to order; we have important matters to discuss. But first, attendance.” She waved her leg to a fellow house spider, who read off a list of names:

“Jumping spiders?”

“Present!” the representative of the jumping spider delegation shouted, launching herself into the air excitedly before crashing down on the podium and bouncing her way back to her delegation. The others remained unmoving, their eyes gleaming in the darkness of the inner walls of the Richnid house.

“Spitting spiders?”

“Here!”

“Good, glad to see that you’ve gotten control of your venom at last. Orb weaver spiders?”

A chorus of “present!”s echo from the wall, further above the meeting.

“Cellar spiders?”

“Ici.”

“Great, everyone is present. Has anyone seen the American tourist?”

“Ooh! Ooh! I saw the brown recluse in a corner of the attic this morning!” a jumping spider shouted.

“Except it was actually just a spitting spider,” another jumping spider said. The first spider turned to him, then turned away, not saying anything in front of the Cluster, her face betraying nothing. Not that it makes much of a difference; the Cluster was not in the habit of making facial expressions.

“Excellent, everyone is present,” the head house spider said, “Now, down to business.” The spiders all stared as a third house spider was brought up to the front.

“We will start with the orb weavers. Are your web-making skills still sufficient?” One orb weaver dropped down on a thread of silk closer to the meeting, though still keeping high above the rest of the Cluster.

“I’m honoured to say that our webs continue to ensnare the four-legs every time they walk through the door,” the representative said, adding, “When will they learn that this is our house?” A

small chorus of laughter echoed around the Cluster; obviously the four-legs only thought they were in charge of the house.

“Excellent, great to hear,” the house spider said. “Cellar spiders?”

“Oui?” A cellar spider called out from his web, looking more like skeins of dust than any of the more robust spiders that crowded around the committee.

“Any misfortunes being spotted or recognized?”

“Non, zer are no four-legs wis knowledge of us being zer.” Cellar spiders, being bilingual, were sometimes a little hard to understand, so the house spiders were relieved at just the one sentence. Truth be told, they were only at the Cluster because they lived in the area; otherwise, they’d be forgotten every time.

“Does the house spider delegation wish to speak on their scare missions?”

“I encountered a four-legs who saw me on the wall. As soon as he saw me, I sprinted into a corner in the wall. He has no idea where I’ve gone!” the head house spider said. The jumping spider representative, clearly very excited to share her news, leaped up right next to the house spiders again.

“The jumping spiders have been investigating the house next door!” she announced, “And we have discovered that their four-legs keep lights on all night and leave old food around for insects!” This announcement was met with a chorus of outrage all across the silken floor of the Cluster. Legs, already bristly, bristled even more. Fangs and eyes alike gleamed in what little light existed in the walls. The silk was alive with complaints and squeals of outrage, until finally the house spider representative raised her front four legs in a gesture of command, and slowly the Cluster quieted down.

“It has always been understood that we have a lot of insects here to catch,” the house spider began, “But practicality here is what is necessary. Starting tomorrow, orb weavers will construct webs across into the neighbour’s house. We will take advantage of this food supply, even if we have to fight the other spiders to do so. All in favour?” Several bristly legs quickly shot up in the air. “Remember, you can only vote twice.” Several bristly legs proceeded to fall back to the ground.

“Excellent,” the house spider said. “Spitting spiders, do you have anything to add?”

Their representative stepped forward, saying, “The spitting spiders would like to request that we stop being confused with the American tourist.”

“Request acknowledged. Would you like to lead the search for the brown recluse?”

“Ehh,” the spitting spider said, “I think I’d rather just let someone else do it. It’s too much work for us poor spitting spiders.”

“We’ll do it! We’ll lead the search!” one of the jumping spiders shouted. She raced out through a crack in the walls, very eager to begin searching for what was probably another spitting spider. The house spider just sighed, then turned to the spitting spider’s creepy face.

“With that matter resolved, is everyone clear on what to do?” No one said anything. “Excellent. This meeting is adjourned.”

## *A Tourism Problem*

“Hi-um, hello! We’re starting the meeting now!” a squirrel monkey called from high above the branches. The animals gathered in the foliage paid no attention to him, instead preferring to chat amongst themselves. Nobody really wanted to be here anyway. The squirrel monkey, looking a little dejected, slumped on the branch. The howler and capuchin monkeys ran over to comfort him, and the howler monkey looked up and did his thing.

“ROOOOOOOOOOOOAR!” Everyone’s head snapped up and a hush fell over the crowd as they looked up from the sun-dappled rainforest floor.

“Great,” the spider monkey said, rubbing his ears, “We need to get to important matters—tourism!”

“Ugh, but why do we have to worry about tourists? They haven’t been here for at least three seasons.”

“They’re coming back,” a capuchin monkey said, “And we need to know what to do with them, so everyone will come up with ideas.” The other animals shrunk back at the thought of speaking to the crowd, all except for the monkeys, who were unbearably social, and probably the ants, though it was hard to see them from high up in the trees. For several long minutes everything was entirely silent, even the crickets. Then two scarlet macaws flew forward in the branches, showing off their bright red plumage.

“We think that this problem is irrelevant and we should just let tourism climb back up,” one of them said. “Besides, it’s too much effort to actively curb tourism. We’re just too beautiful, we’d only attract more of them!” This was met, predictably, with outrage, and it wasn’t until the howler monkey shouted again that everyone quieted down.

“Yes, thank you for your... wonderful opinion,” the capuchin monkey said through bared fangs, “I’m sure it would be a lovely idea... with the tourists.” The macaws, not wanting to get their faces ripped off, took the hint and flew away. The squirrel monkey shifted on his branch.

“With that out of the way, let’s hear some actual ideas. Army ants?” A swathe of black poppy seeds with legs swarmed up the tree, some noticeably bigger than the others.

“The army ants agree with bullet, fire, and leafcutter ants, sir!” the queen of the army ants shouted. “This is how to deal with the rise in tourists, sir!” She beckoned to the bullet ant queen, who seemed to dwarf even the large army ant queen. The monkeys took a step back, not wanting to even touch the ants.

“STING THEM ALL!” the bullet ant queen shouted.

“BITE THEM ALL!” the leafcutter ants screamed.

“STING AND BITE THEM ALL!” the hordes of fire ants yelled. The animals gathered below began whooping and cheering, obviously this was the most popular idea.

“Thank you for your time, sir!” the queen army ant said, taking her leave back down the tree. The other animals made a wide path, steering clear of all the ants.

“Yes, excellent,” the squirrel monkey said. “Um, very intense. Who wishes to offer their idea next?” Yet more silence stretched across the meeting. The spider monkey shifted uncomfortably.

“Is there a jaguar representative present?” the howler monkey asked. The silence became whispers and rumours, word of this elite and equally elusive shadow of the rainforest.

“Do jaguars even exist?” the fire ant queen asked.

“Oh, they do,” a caiman said. “They absolutely do.” Their eyes were as wide as a caiman’s could get, and the acrid scent of fear began drifting off their scales. The other animals gave them a side eye but said nothing else as the caiman continued, “They’re probably watching this meeting right now, completely unseen, waiting for the right moment to attack!”

“Yes, okay great. Do you have a suggestion for dealing with tourism, caiman?”

“Hide and pray!” he bellowed, “Hide and pray that they don’t find you!” They disappeared under the water, leaving only ripples across the surface. A shiver passed over the crowd.

“Uh- sounds... depressing,” the squirrel monkey commented. “How about the cicadas, any cicada representatives?”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!” the cicadas screeched in the background. The squirrel monkey burrowed his face in his hands. Nothing could save this meeting now. Doing his best to ignore the screaming cicadas, the squirrel monkey turned to the rest of the group.

“Does anyone else wish to suggest an idea? Any sloths?” He turned to a green lump on a nearby tree. No. The sloth was sleeping, as per usual. “Great. This disaster— I mean meeting— is over.”

“Actually, I’ve got a—” a red-eyed tree frog started to say.

“I said this meeting is over,” the squirrel monkey replied, baring his teeth again. The frog disappeared back into the undergrowth, grumbling about what might very well have been a solution, but the squirrel monkey was already done with life and was heading back to his troop for a much needed nap.

## *North vs. South*

“Greetings, everyone,” the blue whale said, her massive voice reverberating through the water and into the air. “Thank you for coming to our arranged meeting.”

“I don’t have all day,” a wolverine snapped, standing on the small rocky island nearby that was accommodating the land animals. “Why are we even here?”

“We have some questions between you and the... Antarcticans? Is that a word? Anyway, we want you guys to settle this simple debate: Where is the hardest to live?” The wolverine snorted with laughter.

“Obviously the Arctic; I bet I’m stronger than anyone here. You don’t get predators like me in the Antarctic,” he said.

“Oh, are you the strongest?” a polar bear asked, sauntering up to the wolverine. She absolutely dwarfed the wolverine, but he hardly even flinched. “Three breaths.” The wolverine reared up on his hind legs, almost making it to the polar bear’s elbows.

“Bring it!”

“Enough!” the blue whale interrupted, “We’re not here for a battle.”

“We’re not?!” the polar bear exclaimed, looking shocked. “But you said it was a fight!”

“A debate,” an orca clarified, sticking her huge head out of the water. Next to the blue whale, she looked closer to the wolverine in size, but everyone still staggered backward at the mere sight of her, even the polar bear. An Adelie penguin from Antarctica and a ringed seal from the Arctic both fled awkwardly to the other side of the island, only to stop when they saw that the entire pod of orcas had surrounded the small, rocky outcrop. A lone leopard seal rolled her eyes at her northern cousin.

The polar bear turned her head back to the whales in the water. “There’s a third one under the water, isn’t there? What is he?”

A third whale stuck his head out of the water, though to the other animals it may have well been his entire body.

“Well, that’s almost everyone accounted for,” the blue whale said, “unless a Greenland shark wishes to show up. Let’s start the debate!”

“Well,” the leopard seal began, “I think the Antarctic is clearly harder to survive in because it doesn’t breed wusses like this ringed seal over here.” The ringed seal shrunk backward in fear.

“I-it’s not my fault! I’m literally surrounded by every predator that’s ever hunted me!”

“Yeah, why don’t we see how you like it when I hunt you?” the wolverine asked, stepping closer to the leopard seal. Even though the seal was much shorter than the polar bear, she still made the wolverine look small.

“Try it, Fuzzy.”



“I’m not in the habit of just trying, Speckles.” The two drew closer to a fight, until a reindeer stepped in, nearly skewering them both with his antlers.

“The sky is falling!” he said. “We’re all gonna die!” He stared down at the ground, swinging his antlers up and down as he bobbed his head, still standing between the wolverine and the leopard seal. The leopard seal looked utterly confused.

“Yeah, he does that sometimes,” the ringed seal said. “You get used to it after a—” they cut off with a small yelp as the leopard seal glared at them, clearly fed up with them.

“Is there a northerner that isn’t off-the-rails crazy?” she asked.

“In our experience, no,” the blue whale said. “You haven’t even met the Greenland shark.”

The leopard seal just looked back at the reindeer, who was now trotting in circles, screaming, “Look, I’m flying!”

“Even worse than that?” she asked. The right whale popped up again.

“I hope not, there’s not many more brain cells I can afford to lose.”

“Judging by the size of your head, you could really stand to lose a few more,” the polar bear commented.

“Is the conclusion that the Antarctic is superior, but the Arctic is full of psychos?” the blue whale asked.

“The conclusion should be that the Arctic is harder to live in, because I’m here!” the wolverine shouted.

“I do think that I agree,” the ringed seal said tentatively. “Not because he’s here, but if you saw the things I had to survive...”

“It’s probably nothing compared to what I have to deal with,” the Adelie penguin replied. “I still think that the Antarctic is harder.”

“Do you have to deal with these demons knocking you off of the ice?” the ringed seal asked, nodding at the orcas. “Or those polar bears dragging you up onto the ice from underwater?”

“Oh— we don’t usually stay on the ice, we stay on the shore, but we still have to swim to catch our food, and that’s when they—” the Adelie penguin nodded to the orca and leopard seal, continuing, “they attack.” Their eyes were wide as they spoke of clearly haunting experiences.

“Maybe we should have just let the predators take this meeting,” the ringed seal said, laughing a little nervously.

“Yeah, surely we didn’t need to do it in person? Without putting our lives at risk? If only there was some way.”

“Eh, there probably isn’t, but do you still wanna get out of here before the wolverine, polar bear, orca, or leopard seal decide they’re hungry?” With a single nod from the Adelie penguin, both

animals took their leave, slipping into the water and disappearing, to no notice of anyone else. They both breathed a sigh of relief to escape that hellhole of an island. Luckily for them, the orcas were too busy rolling their eyes at the wolverine, who was too busy shouting at the head orca for a comment about them actually being the top predator.

“Come up onto land and say it to my face, you coward!” he shouted at the orca.

“Well, I think we can all agree that the Arctic has some of the more... brave animals,” the blue whale commented.

“More like stupid,” the leopard seal corrected.

“Don’t lump me in with him!” the polar bear said. “Unless you want to have a fight you definitely will lose.”

“You know what?” the leopard seal said. “This isn’t worth my energy. I’m going back home and hunting. I’m starving!” She bounced over the rocks and slid gracefully into the ocean.

“Well, I guess the debate will have to be settled another day,” the blue whale sighed.

“Well, the Arcticans outlasted the Antarcticans, so that has to count for something!” the polar bear argued.

“All it proved is that you’re crazy,” the orca said, turning his huge body around and summoning his pod. “To be settled another time!” Then he, too, disappeared into the sea. The meeting was over.

Long after everyone had left the island, a Greenland shark finally showed up, her eyes milky white, moving as slowly as one could possibly move.

“Hey, where’d everyone go?”

## *An Interruption*

“Hello, everyone, and thank you for coming to this E.O.A. meeting,” an alligator said.

“I thought this was supposed to be a meeting of predators,” a bull shark said. “So why is the manatee here?”

“The manatee’s with me,” the alligator replied, slamming their tail against the ground in adamant protest. “So unless you want to argue with me...” The manatee, for his part, breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn’t wanted to come, but his friend had insisted.

“It’s fine, I’ll- I’ll just sit to the side and eat some grass,” he said, swimming a little ways away. The alligator growled at the shark, blaming her for their best friend leaving. The shark just stood there, not showing any fear, though it was hard to tell without facial expressions.

“So, what are we discussing?” a barracuda asked. The alligator turned their attention to her.

“Well, first things first, summer is coming up and—”

“Has writing been a struggle? Gramamari will help!” a Nile monitor lizard shouted, diving into the water to interrupt the meeting. The bull shark was quick to snatch it up. The alligator just gave the shark a nod of appreciation, and the bull shark swam a little ways away to enjoy .

“Anyway, so as I said, summer is coming up and that means we need a plan in place to avoid the tourists.”

“The tall grasses in the Everglades are growing in, right?” a snapping turtle asked. “Why don’t we try that?”

“And what about the ocean animals?” a barracuda retorted, showing off her long teeth even though it was irrelevant to the snapping turtle. “This isn’t just the Everglades Association!”

“Well, you could always just go deeper into the ocean,” the bull shark said. “That’s what I’d do.”

“That would be a great idea!” the barracuda said sarcastically. “Because every fish can easily withstand deep sea pressures.”

“Don’t be a coward, fight! In Bait: Salmon Legends!” a lionfish said. The other E.O.A. members groaned, but there was nothing they could do against a venomous torpedo of spines. Even the bull shark was hesitant to eat it. “You won’t regret playing a game like Bait: Salmon Legends. It’s so much fun that you’ll be playing it until the coral dies! Get it for yourself and a member of your school for—” The lionfish was cut off by a massive grouper fish making an appearance, swallowing it whole. The E.O.A. excitedly watched it disappear. If the animals could have, they would have broken into applause.

“So, where were we?” the alligator asked, desperate to get back on track.

“What am I going to do in regards to avoiding tourists?” the barracuda reminded them.

“Oh, right.”

“Have you tried biting them?” the snapping turtle asked. “That’s what I usually do.”

“That’s... actually not a bad idea,” she replied, smiling creepily. “Biting it is!”

“Great, now that that’s out of the way, we’re onto our next order of business: Florida Men,” the alligator said.

“Well, they only really affect you and the bull sharks, don’t they?” the grouper asked.

“Yes, but I was hoping we could all put our heads together and share some ideas,” the bull shark said. “That’s why I suggested this discussion for today’s meeting.”

“I just don’t want to be thrown through a drive-thru window again,” the alligator sighed.

“Looking to share your ideas more effectively?” a catfish said in an overly cheery tone. “It’s Gillshare! With Gillshare, you can—”

“Nope!” the alligator shouted, trying to drown out his voice. They swished their powerful tail once and sent the catfish flying out of the water.

“How many more of these idiots are there?!” the snapping turtle shouted in exasperation.

“I’m getting tired of all of them,” the grouper agreed. “Maybe Florida Men can wait. What do we do with all of these invasive guys?”

“They’re getting really annoying,” the barracuda said. “And there’s too many for even the groupers to eat.”

“Is that a challenge?” the grouper asked.

“Please do your best,” the bull shark said, “Let’s meet up next week and share our ideas for this.” The animals each went their own ways, trying to shake their annoyance off. The alligator swam away with the manatee. Nearby, a Burmese python slithered through the water.

“This story is brought to you by Otterble!”

*The True King of Sting*

*In Memory of Justin Schmidt, who inspired me to become an entomologist*

INT. Debate stage - Evening

A HONEYBEE steps up to the stage in front of a camera, brushing the last bits of pollen out of her fur. Behind her are the three candidates for King of Sting- winner gets bragging rights for the week. The audience is empty, all too busy serving their proper queens to care.

HONEYBEE

And we're back! Welcome to the fiftieth weekly Royal Hymenoptera Debate! A reminder for our new larvae watching this that this is a regular debate to decide...who is the true King of Sting? Here we have our final three candidates, the bullet ant, the warrior wasp, and the giant bornean carpenter bee. Voting commences now, you can change your vote until the end of this debate. Remember that there are no rules here, but I will be asking the questions.

\*She points to the three insects behind her: poor, weak CARPENTER BEE, looking very intimidated next to the big shots, BULLET ANT and WARRIOR WASP.\*

BULLET ANT

Before we begin, I just want to make sure that we all know that I am still the true king of sting here. I think we all just want to see the wasps and bees lose again.

HONEYBEE

(sarcastically)

Thank you, bullet ant. Carpenter bee, you have the lowest-rated sting pain here, described by critics as “electrifying, sharp, and piercing” and “next time hire an electrician”. What do you have to say to those critics? How would you compar-

CARPENTER BEE

(interrupting)

Nothing can be accomplished without working together as a hive. That’s why bees have every right to be up here and compete for the King of Sting; why we are globally feared. There is nothing that compares to the might of the bees when we get down to our work ethic and our-

\*The Carpenter Bee's voice is cut out as the Honeybee starts flitting her wings loudly.\*

HONEYBEE

Thank you, carpenter bee, your time is up.

(Honeybee turns to Warrior wasp)

Warrior wasp, you recently starred in a controversy in which you said that, and I quote, “wasps are the superior Hymenoptera and everyone else should be killed”. Ants and bees notably contribute significantly to our respective ecosystems, maybe more so than wasps. Do you think your comment is ignorant?

WARRIOR WASP

I'll tell you what I'll say. *Bullet ant* said on stage that *she* was the most powerful and doesn't compare to anyone here! Why aren't you mad at *her*!

BULLET ANT

Because I speak facts and you dodge questions.

WARRIOR WASP

(snidely)

I understand. Can't dodge questions if you're someone who can't fly.

BULLET ANT

Listen here you little shit- I don't *need* to fly! Or did you forget who has the most powerful stinger?

WARRIOR WASP

*For now*, you bastard. It's only a matter of time before people come to their senses and *I* become the King of Sting.

CARPENTER BEE

Guys, we have to work together, otherwise nothing will get done! I propose a new method of ranking the stings where we measure the *potency* of venom as opposed to the pain.

HONEYBEE

And, Carpenter Bee, you do realise it would give Harvester Ants the title?

CARPENTER BEE

(hesitantly)

I- well then... I guess that would be fair.

WARRIOR WASP

(snickering)

Did you not think about that before you spoke?

CARPENTER BEE

I don't have to answer that! The details just need to be fleshed out a little more-

\*Carpenter Bee is cut off by Warrior Wasp, who raises her wings in anger, her feet drumming on the ground and jaws clacking in a very loud threat. Carpenter Bee shrinks a little bit in her exoskeleton.\*

WARRIOR WASP

(irritated)

And if they're not fleshed out, then they're irrelevant! Bring your half-assed ideas somewhere else. Can we get back to the *real* debate?

BULLET ANT

There was never a debate. I'm still the most painfully rated sting.

HONEYBEE

The reason we have this debate is because that's still under scrutiny. Bullet ant, critics have consistently rated both you and the warrior wasp at a 4, with the warrior wasp being



described as 'torture- you are chained in the flow of an active volcano'. How do you intend to clarify that it is you who is consistently more painful?

BULLET ANT

(nonchalantly)

I have the best reputation. Men know to run when they see me. I am called the bullet ant because that's what it feels like to get stung. I am a tool of manhood. How long can you endure my pain, my rapid stings? I have consistently won these debates thanks to my infamy.

HONEYBEE

(sceptically)

And how much of that could you attribute to the rest of the highly-rated insects living in relative shadow?

BULLET ANT

If my shadow is so big, then it's clear I have the most painful sting.

WARRIOR WASP

(angrily flaring wings)

LIES! How many humans out there even know I exist?

BULLET ANT

Is that because you can't sting strong enough? Need your little hive to back you up? Bullet ants need no one to protect them in the rainforest; we became what we are because of it. You hardly

venture far from your nest, and you need your precious bright colours to protect you.

\*Warrior Wasp rises from her podium, stinger flashing. Bullet Ant opens her jaws wide, accepting the challenge. Carpenter Bee quietly flies away, back to her hive, while Honeybee turns to the camera, as if the scene behind her wasn't happening.\*

#### HONEYBEE

I'm afraid the candidates have run out of time. The results of the Fiftieth Royal Hymenoptera debate will be announced soon. Who will be the next King of Sting? Stay tuned to find out!

## Athena Oliver

### *Bliadhna na Losgaidh*

*Content warning: Parental death, implied/referenced child abuse, blood, violence towards animals*

It's a bright, frosty April morning, the day the MacLeòids' house burns down. Francis is in the fields, jaw clenched against the chill, numb fingers digging in the frozen ground for anything vaguely resembling a potato. When he looks up to wipe the sweat from his brow, he sees a plume of smoke rising over the hills. He tosses one last blackened lump into his basket and heads back to the house.

His little sister, Georgina, is sitting by the blackhouse, leaning against the low stone wall and picking at the brown grass. Martha must have gotten tired of trying to entertain her. Georgina isn't a bad crofter for her age, but she still tires quickly. She jumps up when she sees him, and stands on her tiptoes to examine the contents of the basket. "A bheil iad math?"

"English," Francis reminds her. "And no. They're all blighted. Get the door, this is heavy." At the puzzled expression on her face, he sighs. "*An doras*, Georgina. The door." Usually, he'd put up more of a fight, but he's too exhausted today to deal with her stubborn insistence that she doesn't understand English. She is, after all, only six. She'll grow out of it.

Georgina makes a face at him, but shoves past him to push the door open. He ducks through the doorway, sets the potatoes on the table, and begins picking through them for anything salvageable. There's two and a half, maybe three, that aren't completely rotted through, and one strangely shaped black oval that he suspects is actually a clump of dirt. No-one in their right mind would trade for these, let alone buy them. He throws them back into the basket in disgust.

It's at that moment that the door slams open and Martha bursts into the kitchen. She's panting, face flushed and hair damp like she's run a mile. Her skirts are hoisted up around her thighs, and Francis sees a good deal more of his sister's legs than he ever wished to. "Did you see the fire?" she asks, once she's gotten her breath back, and without waiting for an answer, says: "It's the MacLeòids. I've come from the valley."

"What, are they having a bonfire?" he asks absently.

He can't imagine that kind of luxury. They aren't burning wood, surely; it's far too precious a resource to waste on a little warmth. Peat burns best, of course, but all the turf he and Martha dig has to go straight to repairing the roof. Not that they've had time to dig much, lately. With just the three of them on the croft, they're working to the bone just to keep themselves fed. Georgina and Martha are still growing, they need two meals a day, but with this new blight, he may have to cut back to one. His stomach clenches at the thought.

Maybe they should start growing turnips. They're harder, less likely to rot all the way through. The MacLeòids grow turnips. He could ask them for the seeds. At the very least, he should ask if they've been affected by the blight. "Did you ask about their crops?"

Martha punches him in the arm. "Francis!"

“Ow!” He rubs it and scowls at her. “I was being serious. I need to know if it’s just our potatoes.”

She glares right back. Francis doesn’t cower under it, but it’s a near thing. Martha has a glare that could rival their mother’s. “No, I didn’t ask about their *potatoes*, Francis, because their *house* was being *burned to the ground*!”

His throat tightens. “They burned—”

The MacLeòids. Mrs MacLeòid.

After their mother passed, Mrs MacLeòid half-raised Georgina. She took the girls to church, took their education upon herself, taught them alongside her own children. She’s the reason Georgina still speaks Gaelic, even now. *A girl needs a mother*, their father had said. And she was one. To Georgina, to Martha. Francis isn’t sure they would have survived without her.

And now she might be—

“They’re alive,” Martha says, before he can spiral further. “Soldiers forced them out before they started the fire.”

Francis doesn’t know if the emotion that washes over him is relief, but it certainly helps him breathe a little easier. “The MacLeòids always said they’d die before they let anyone force them off their land.” They’re tougher than anyone he’s ever known. They’re one of the few families in the village who clung to their Gaelic, their faith, even when the Lowlanders came and set up their schools. Zealots, his father called them. He can just picture Brighde MacLeòid getting up in the face of an English soldier, telling him, in no uncertain terms, that she would sooner die than abandon her home.

If even the MacLeòids couldn’t hold out against the soldiers, what hope do they have?

Martha shrugs. “I suppose the duke disagreed.” She takes a brush, dunks it in the bucket of water on the table, and begins scrubbing at the potatoes.

“Don’t bother,” Francis says. “Blight got at all of them.”

“Pit air iteig,” she spits. Georgina eagerly repeats the curse. Neither of them bother to chastise her. Martha flings the brush down and rounds on Francis. “What the hell are we meant to do, then?”

“Don’t take that tone with me,” he mutters. “It’s hardly *my* fault.”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes. “You know, sometimes you sound exactly like athair.”

“*Father*,” he corrects. “And is that such a bad thing?”

“It is when you say *father* like that,” she says, affecting a truly awful English accent. “I don’t want Georgina to grow up ashamed of who she is just because you are!”

He bristles. “*I’m* trying to keep her alive—”

“Mamaidh wouldn’t want us to lose our own language just because a handful of Lowlanders think they can tell us what to do.”

“And Father wanted us to speak a language with a future.”

Martha opens her mouth to retort, then glances out the window and freezes. “Gun tigeadh Dia san eadraiginn,” she murmurs. “Get the—”

She’s cut off by the sharp rap of knuckles on the front door.

Francis all but runs to answer. He opens it to find a soldier standing there. He’s dressed in full military uniform, red wool and white sash and polished brass buttons. His neatly combed hair is the same deep, earthy brown as Martha’s, but his skin is pale, clean-shaven and clear of freckles or sunburn. He smells faintly of smoke.

The bottom drops out of Francis’ stomach. For lack of anything else to do, he bows, and hopes the officer doesn’t see his hands shaking. “What can we do for you, officer?”

The officer regards him disdainfully, and Francis can tell he’s eyeing the dirt under his fingernails. He hurriedly hides them behind his back.

“I am here by decree of His Grace, the Duke of Sutherland.”

Francis expected little else, but those words still cause his heart to beat faster. “And what does His Grace ask of us, sir?”

The officer peers past him, through the doorway. “Might I speak to the man of the house?”

“You’re speaking to him. Sir.”

The officer raises his eyebrows. His voice, when he speaks, is coloured with disbelief. “How old are you, son?”

Francis holds back the childish urge to cross his arms. He knows he’s not exactly tall, but he had hoped he might appear old enough to at least escape being called *son* by an English officer. “Four and ten years, sir. My sister and I manage the fields on our own.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the officer says tonelessly. He couldn’t be less genuine if he tried. Francis wants to tell him to take his pity and shove it, but if this false sympathy is what will stop their house from being burned to ashes, he’ll grit his teeth and bear it. “How long?”

“Our mother when our young sister was born, and our father near two years now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he repeats, like it’s the only remotely consoling phrase he knows. “It must be difficult.”

“We get by.” Belatedly, he tacks on, “Sir.”

The officer barely seems to notice the slip. He's gazing at the house with a detached, clinical interest, eyes flitting over the wooden beams and thatched roof like he's imagining sparks catching the turf, flames licking at the stone walls. "Well," he says, "His Grace would like to extend an offer of help to your family."

Bile is rising in his throat, but Francis manages to choke out, "That's very... generous of him, sir."

"Indeed," the officer says. "His Grace believes that the land you currently occupy would be put to better use in other pursuits. Sheep farming, for example."

"Sheep farming," Francis says dumbly.

"Yes, sheep farming." His words are dripping with condescension, as if speaking to a child. "As soon as you move elsewhere, we can begin. We have new farmers set up and ready to go. There will be no further work required on your part."

*Move elsewhere. New farmers. No further work.*

"I can give you some time to consider, if you'd like," the officer says. He must have memorised a list, Francis thinks, of how best to convince the crofters to give up their land. He wonders what offer he made to the MacLeòids.

"Thank you," Francis manages, and shuts the door in his face.

He sinks back against it, breathing heavily. He wants to shout, to cry, to scream at the officer, at the duke, at every single person trying to force them off their land to farm *sheep*. But he's young, not stupid, and he knows a move like that would be more likely to get him killed than anything else. He needs to do something else. Something different. He can fix this. He *can*. He just needs time to think, to plan. He needs...

A small, pathetic voice in the back of his head whispers *athair*. He quashes it.

He stands up straight, blinks hard several times, and marches back into the kitchen. Martha is, of course, waiting for him, Georgina clinging to her side.

"Well?" Martha demands. "Are they burning our house down?" Her voice trembles, but there's determination in her eyes, stubbornness in the set of her jaw. Francis has always been proud of his sister's ferocity, but now... it scares him, more than he likes to admit.

"They want us to move." He pulls out a chair, scraping it unpleasantly on the stone floor, and sits. "They want to replace us with sheep farms."

His own horror is mirrored in her face. "Sheep farms?"

He laughs. It sounds foreign to his ears, dark and jagged. "Yes. Apparently they already have the farmers prepared. All we need to do is leave."

"We won't," she says. "We *can't*."

“Well, obviously we *can*. You saw what they did to the MacLeòids.”

“We’re not them! We can fight this, we can—”

“Martha!” he snaps. Her face pales, and he suddenly realises what she meant when she said he sounded like their father. His voice might be higher, but the cadence is exactly the same. *Martha, stop speaking to your sister in that ridiculous language. Don’t you dare fuss like that in church, Georgina. Pull yourself together, Francis, before I give you something real to cry about.*

He sighs. “Look. I don’t want to leave any more than you do, but we’ve got to be reasonable. We can’t beat them.”

“But—”

“*We can’t beat them,*” he repeats forcefully. “We try, and Georgina’ll be the one who pays for it. You want to see her dead, too?”

Martha recoils, and Francis immediately wishes he hadn’t spoken. They’ve argued about Georgina before, of course they have, but he’s never thrown her in Martha’s face like that.

Georgina tugs at her skirts, eyes wide with concern. “Dè rud a th’ ann? Martha, a bheil thu gu snog?”

Martha strokes a hand over her hair. “Tha gu math,” she reassures her. “Na gabh dragh mu dheidhinn.” She shoots Francis a look like she expects him to chastise them, furious and upset and bitterly disappointed. It’s the same look their mother gave their father, when he came back from the new English school in the village. When Francis made the mistake of showing off his Gaelic in front of his father.

Francis’ cheek aches with the memory. He feels sick.

He kneels down before Georgina and squeezes her shoulder. “Martha’s right. It’s nothing you need to worry about, but we need to talk about grown-up things, okay? Go play in the barn.” It isn’t really a barn, not any longer. It used to house cattle, back when they could afford to keep them, but now it’s just an empty room, walled off from the rest of their house. They use it for storage, sometimes, when they have enough food to bother keeping stockpiles.

It’s been empty for months.

Georgina obediently turns to leave, but not before muttering a petulant, “Chan eil thu inbheach,” under her breath. Francis is tempted to call out, *I am so an adult!* after her, but that would just prove her point.

Martha turns to him, arms folded and eyebrows raised. “Well? What’s your brilliant plan?”

He swallows hard. He *knows* he’s the one in charge, knows he’s the one who should be fixing this for Martha and Georgina, knows he’s being stupid, selfish, childish. He just... wishes, sometimes, that he didn’t have to.

“We leave,” he says eventually, because it’s the only thing he *can* say. Martha opens her mouth, eyes flashing dangerously, but he speaks over her. “We *have* to leave, Martha. They’ll kill us if we stay, you know they will.”

Her lip curls, disgust and anger warring on her face. “You’re not even going to *try* and fight?”

“I don’t have a death wish,” he snaps. “I can talk to them, see if they’ll pay us in return for leaving willingly. We can move south, to one of the big cities, or—”

Martha makes a revolted noise in the back of her throat. “You want Georgina to grow up there, working in a factory until she dies? You want to make a deal with the people who just burned down our friends’ house? Oh, *fantastic* idea, Francis, well done.”

He knows he deserves it, but the sarcasm hits him like a slap to the face. He grits his teeth. “I’m not *saying* it’s the best option, but it’s the only one we’ve got. If we stay here, they’ll burn our house too, and then we won’t have the money to move elsewhere.”

“So this is us giving up, is that it?” She scoffs. “We’re going to roll over and let them take our *house*?”

“You’re not *listening* to me. You think you can win against a hundred soldiers? Against the *duke*?”

“That’s not what I—”

“Because you might think you’re tough, Martha, but the Duke of Sutherland isn’t going to listen to some stupid little girl.”

As soon as the words are out, Francis wishes he could take them back. Martha’s eyes harden to steel and her hands ball into fists. “Fine,” she spits. “*Fine*. You’re right. I’m just a stupid little girl who can’t do anything.”

He reaches for her arm. She jerks out of his reach. “Martha, I didn’t mean—”

“I’m going out back.” She marches away.

Francis buries his face in his hands and groans.

Martha isn’t stupid. He *knows* Martha’s not stupid. She’s smart, so much smarter than him. Tè nam buadh, their mother called her. Her clever one. Why should that change now?

His father’s voice echoes in his head. *Intelligence is no substitute for common sense*. Martha may be smart, but she’s also idealistic. She grew up with the MacLeòids, and they put the foolish idea in her head that anyone, no matter how small or insignificant, can get what they want if they just try hard enough.



He wants to believe she could be right. He doesn't *want* to leave their home, their livelihood, the last remnant of their parents. But that isn't how the world works. People like them don't have a hope of standing up to people like the duke. And Francis has long since learned not to hope.

He allows himself ten... twenty... okay, *thirty* seconds of weakness. Then he hauls himself to his feet and starts on dinner.

The potatoes are cold by the time Martha returns. Georgina is half-asleep, clinging to Martha's back, her arms looped around her neck. She murmurs something unintelligible as Martha deposits her in his arms. God, she's still so *young*, still looks as fragile and breakable as the day she was born. It's easy to forget, sometimes. Right now, he can't fathom why.

Neither of them apologises, but Martha thanks him for cooking, and Francis thanks her for fetching Georgina. And that is better than nothing.

Maybe, he thinks, things will be okay. Maybe the soldier will forget their little farm, among so many others to raid and burn. Maybe he'll take pity on them, leave the poor orphans to fend for themselves. *Please, God, just maybe.*

The next morning, he wakes to an eviction notice pinned to the door. They have until the end of the week. Six days.

He leaves Martha and Georgina to rake through the fields and heads down into the valley. He sees a few familiar faces, greets them and grumbles sympathetically about the duke and his soldiers, but people he's known his whole life have just... disappeared.

Most houses are simply deserted, but one—the MacLeòids'—is a hollow blackened shell. A lone figure stands in front of it.

Francis makes his way over. "I'm sorry about your house," he says tentatively.

Mrs MacLeòid sighs, but offers him a sad smile. "It was bound to happen sooner or later. At least we got out in time."

"Still."

She nods. Her eyes are dry, but red. It's disturbing, almost unreal, to know that Mrs MacLeòid had cried. It doesn't seem like the sort of thing that should be allowed in a fair world. Of course, fairness hardly matters now.

Francis contemplates leaving then and there, but instead he blurts out, "They want us out, too."

Mrs MacLeòid's eyes flare with anger, then soften. "Oh, Francis..."

"Yeah," he mumbles. He wants to hate the concern in her voice, the cloying pity, but Mrs MacLeòid has been there for him and Martha since their mother died. She's the one who fed Georgina before she could eat solids, who looked after the girls when he was busy in the fields, who organised their father's funeral.

“Yeah,” he repeats, for lack of anything better to say. “I don’t know where we’ll go. Martha’s furious.”

She sniffs. “I should think so.” She gives him a sideways look when he doesn’t respond. “Aren’t you?”

He scuffs the toes of his shoes along the ground. They’re going to be filthy with ash and charcoal. “I don’t know. I suppose so.” He winces. “I mean, I am. But...” He shakes his head. “What’s the point in fighting? They’re still going to win.”

Mrs MacLeòid sighs. “Och, a bhalaich. You’re just like your athair sometimes.”

It doesn’t sound like a compliment.

She pats him on the shoulder and says, “Brighde’s ‘round the back. You’ll be wanting food for the journey.”

“Mrs MacLeòid, I couldn’t—”

*“Francis.”*

There’s no winning an argument with Mrs MacLeòid. He nods meekly and ducks around the side of what used to be their house.

Brighde, Mrs MacLeòid’s eldest daughter, is sitting cross-legged on a pile of burnt wood that might once have been a bench, a small group of their fellow crofters, mostly women and girls, gathered in a semicircle in front of her, quietly conversing. Some of them he recognises from the neighbouring village. When she sees him, she waves him over. “Francis! Did Ma send you? Come on, sit, sit!”

His face heats. Brighde is two years his senior, taller than him, and very pretty. Her hair is blonde like his, but unlike his, it suits her, framing her face in wisps and braided over her shoulder. She has the same rosy, freckled complexion that all the crofters share, and a birthmark, pink as dawn, over the left side of her face.

Brighde beams at him. There are dark bags under her eyes, but her smile is as bright as ever. He sits opposite her, between the two Tomaidhs. They’re both family to her — her uncle and her little brother. Her brother isn’t actually named Tomaidh, but he bears such a striking resemblance to his uncle that the nickname stuck. Tomaidh Beag, everyone calls him. Wee Tomaidh.

Francis opens his mouth to say something — he has no idea what — but she’s already turning to the rest of the group. She claps her hands for silence. “Alright, listen up!” The chatter dies down at once. He straightens his back, ready to hear what she’s about to say.

Then she starts to speak in rapid-fire Gaelic.

He understands Gaelic in a pinch, when Georgina and Martha speak it, but that’s largely because he knows them so well; he’s willing to bet he’d understand them even if they spoke French. But he

hasn't spoken Gaelic with anyone else since his mother died. Mrs MacLeòid had taught his sisters, but he couldn't bring himself to learn. Not with his father standing over him every time he took Martha and Georgina to the MacLeòids', muttering about their outdated ways, pretending he didn't understand a word anyone spoke to him that wasn't in English.

He's completely lost when it comes to Brighde's slurred, vowel-swallowing accent. He catches a handful of words — croft, sheep, land, and some colourful curses that his mother would have boxed his ears for using — but he can't for the life of him figure out what point she's making. Something about the duke, and their farms, and... marbles?

Wait. *Marbhach*, not marbhal. Killing.

Brighde finishes up with one final insult to the duke, and the group cheers. They begin to disperse, their discussion starting up again as they leave.

When he and Brighde are the only ones left, Francis clears his throat. "So... what was that about, exactly?"

Brighde gives him an amused, slightly exasperated look. "Luidse," she says. He's pretty sure she's insulting him. "Them soldiers have already moved their farms into the village over the hill. They're counting on sheep being cheaper than crofters, but they need a lot of 'em. If we get rid of them before they get rid of us—"

He blinks. "You're killing sheep?" It makes sense. Without the sheep, the duke won't have a reason to clear the villages. But... "Isn't that dangerous? If you run into the soldiers—"

"We'll be there in the middle of the night. No-one's gonna see us." She rolls her eyes. "Deirdre Ruadh from over the hill stays near where they're penned. She says the only people who visit are the farmers who feed them, and never after dark."

"But—" Francis' head is spinning. "If you get rid of them like that, the duke won't know why. They'll just bring more sheep in."

She shrugs. "They can't keep restocking forever. Besides, Ma's getting the educated folks to write to the Duke and them Lowland farmers. Let them know we're not going down without a fight." She offers him her hand. "You in for a fight, MacArtair?"

He opens his mouth, then closes it again. He finds that, in the face of Brighde's fire, her insistence, her surety, he can't come up with a single decent argument. In the end, all he can manage is: "They want us out by next week."

Brighde's smile is razor-sharp. "Then we'd better be quick about it."

He shakes her hand.

As he walks away, she calls after him, "Hey, MacArtair!" He turns, and she tosses him a small brown bag. He frowns and opens it. Turnip seeds. He looks back at her. "Be there," she says seriously. "You and Martha both. We need everyone we can get."

When he gets home, Martha is waiting for him, arms folded and a question on the tip of her tongue. He pushes past her and joins Georgina in the fields. The frost broke overnight and the ground is softer today, but all that does is make it easier to tell how many potatoes are rotted through.

Six days. Less than a week to decide. They could leave, get jobs in some southern factory where they'll grow hunched and gnarled, smoke clogging their lungs. Maybe they'll go to the coast. There's work on boats, he's heard, only he hasn't the first clue of how to fish. They could even sail west, travel to those faraway places he's only ever heard tales of.

Or they can stay, and they can fight.

Francis is not a fighter. But he doesn't much like the idea of running, either.

Five days. He plants half the turnip seeds Brighde gave him. He keeps the remainder tucked in the inside pocket of his shirt, just in case.

Four days. Martha asks why he's letting a bunch of soldiers drive them off their land. He tells her to shut up. She calls him a coward.

Three days. Martha isn't talking to him. He goes down to the valley again. Tomaidh Beag MacLeòid charges him a penny for a pound of carrots. He tries to press a shilling into his hand, but Tomaidh won't take it. Francis grudgingly accepts. He can't afford to turn down charity.

Two days. It's Sunday. He takes the girls to church. He doesn't pray much, not anymore. He was raised Catholic when he was young, until one day his parents stopped taking him to mass in the village, started praying in English and going to services at the plain church in the next town over. It's all muddled together now, different languages and different clergymen and different families, and he's not sure what to believe.

But God is still God. Today, he prays.

One day.

He finds Martha outside, sitting with her back against the wall, eyes closed. He sits across from her. "Hi."

She doesn't open her eyes. "What do you want?"

"Do you still want to stay?"

She finally looks at him, glaring suspiciously. "Of course I do. Why?"

"Brighde has a plan."

They drop off Georgina with Mrs MacLeòid and her youngest at sundown and go to meet Brighde outside the church. From what he can tell in the dim light, almost everyone from both villages is there.

They move as one, a silent militia of men, women and children armed to the teeth with pitchforks and shovels, towards the remains of the neighbouring village.

Francis has never killed anything before. His parents kept cows when he was young, but after his mother died, they were too much work and far too expensive to keep. He's used to vegetables. Vegetables don't squeal when you cut them. Neither, he learns, do sheep, if you creep up on them quietly enough.

They bleed, though.

It's too dark to see the colour, but he can feel the warm wetness of it running over his fingers, down his wrist, dampening his shirt. His hands are trembling.

"Hey," Brighde whispers, nudging him in the ribs. "You alright?"

He looks up. Her hair is loose and tangled around her shoulders, her grin wild, her pink birthmark crimson in the dark. There's blood on her skirts, a bread knife in her hand. Her eyes are shining.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I'm good."

She claps him on the shoulder, and disappears into the night.

He gets his next sheep in an artery, and the spray of blood as it goes down sends a violent thrill through him.

Beside him, Martha is digging up chunks of earth, making the ground so uneven Francis isn't sure the grass will ever grow back. Brighde's sister Seonag chases three sheep towards a break in the fence, where their brother Iain is waiting to herd them away. He loops a rope around their necks and disappears into the darkness.

It's a foolish rebellion. They could be caught at any moment. But in the dark, with Martha at his side and Brighde leading them, the cold biting at his skin and his people around him, it's *exhilarating*.

*We're going to win*, he realises with a rush. *We're going to beat them*.

"Alright!" Brighde whispers, after Francis has gutted his fifth sheep. "That's enough for tonight. We've sent them a message they won't forget in a hurry!"

It feels like it lasted no more than a heartbeat. They trail back out of the old village, laughing and chatting excitedly amongst themselves. It's so dark they're tripping over themselves, stumbling and falling against one another.

“I got at least six!”

“I reckon I dug up half that farm.”

“Did you see me knock over that fence post?”

Francis, grinning, turns to Martha, but her eyebrows are pinched with anxiety. He nudges her. “What’s the matter? Didn’t you have fun?” When she doesn’t respond, he asks, “Didn’t kill enough sheep?”

“No, I did,” she says quietly. “I mean, that’s not the problem. Just... have you seen Tomaidh?”

He blinks. “What, Brighde’s brother? Tomaidh Beag? Not tonight. Why?”

She worries at her bottom lip with her teeth. “It’s probably nothing. He just mentioned—”

“I told you they’d be here!” says a very familiar voice.

Tomaidh Beag MacLeòid is standing, fists on hips, at the mouth of the valley, a dozen soldiers alongside him.

The realisation crashes down on Francis like ice water.

Those carrots.

The *price*.

Of course he wouldn’t take the money. He didn’t need it. They paid him off.

Francis has never punched a twelve-year-old before, but, before tonight, he also hadn’t killed a sheep.

Tomaidh Beag looks terrified, but defiant. Francis is close enough to hear one of the soldiers—the officer who came to his house—tell Tomaidh, “You did the right thing, son.”

Beside him, Brighde snarls, “I’m going to *murder* him.”

Francis glances down at Martha. She looks almost as frightened than Tomaidh.

“Did you know?” he breathes.

She shakes her head. Her face has gone stark white in the dark. “He said... But I never thought he’d actually...” She looks horrified.

The soldiers don’t stop them when they try to return to their homes.

What’s left of them, anyway.

"I'm going to miss you, you know," Brighde says. She's trying to be brave, for his sake, for Martha and Georgina, for the rest of her siblings. She doesn't have a choice.

Before the soldiers came to break up their little group, they took Mrs MacLeòid into custody. They found the letters she was sending to the Lowland farmers. She told them it was all her idea, that her children were scared and following her instructions. It had been too dark to make out the faces of the rest of them, and they couldn't arrest two entire villages. They were graciously pardoned by the Duke of Sutherland, on the condition that they left without any further disruption.

At least, that's what Francis has gathered. Brighde refuses to talk about it. She still blames herself.

She's going to blame herself for a long time.

"Yeah," Francis manages. His throat is tight. "I'll miss you too."

"Ah, well." She clears her throat and attempts her usual grin. It falls flat. "I'll just be down the coast. It's you who's leaving."

"I'll write."

She snorts. "Don't waste your money."

He steps back, a lump growing in his throat. "Martha!" he yells, and she jogs over to him, Georgina in tow.

"I was saying goodbye to Tomaidh," she says, daring him to object. She's been like this for the past few days. *He didn't mean to, he said he was sorry, he didn't know what he was doing.*

Francis still hates the little weasel. But there's no point making a fuss now.

"Okay," he says. "Ready to go?"

"Not really."

He smiles and grips her hand. "I know. We've got to, though."

"I *know*." She swallows. "Let's just... let's just go quickly." She hoists Georgina onto her hip and marches down to the port, where their boat is waiting.

Francis offers his hand to Brighde. "I guess this is goodbye."

"Luidse," she says, and hugs him. Despite the chill in the air, he feels warm all over.

When they break apart, Francis swears he sees a glint of tears in her eyes. He doesn't mention it.

"I'll wave from the boat," he tells her, and walks away.

Canada won't be too bad, he thinks. Cold, maybe, and lonely. But...

He tucks a hand inside his shirt and takes out the turnip seeds.

They can manage. They always have.



# Morgan Royall

## *Eros and Psyche: Octet*

### I

They worship me, I know, even if from afar,  
And it may not be gracious, but my mind can't help but fixate  
On my dissatisfaction. Oh, how shallow their adoration is  
Without connection, for their love for me runs only skin-deep.

### II

My Mother envies you, my Dear,  
And I see why, as I look through your open window.  
The curves of your face and figure, a perfect picture in bed frame,  
I welcome the accidental prick of my arrow.

### III

The oracle says my loneliness is for the best, that I'll love a monster,  
Yet is a monster a fate much worse than isolation?  
The west wind brought me to you, my Love,  
A spirit I never see, but can't help but fall for.

### IV

My Mother wanted me to curse you, my Dear,  
The beauty greater than hers, cursed to love a beast.  
And though I am not ugly, I fear if you see me,  
You would see me as monstrous all the same.

### V

My sisters say I shouldn't trust a ghost,  
And Love, you've been so kind, but paranoia runs deep.  
Your face is beautiful in the lamplight, the arrow only amplifying  
My undying affection, and my heartbreak as you flee.

## VI

My Mother is angry at you, my Dear,  
And I was too, when I saw you look upon me.  
But now, as I watch you complete tasks she made for you to fail,  
My only wish is that I was there with you.

## VII

Seeds sorted by colour, gatherings of golden wool,  
Water from a cursed river, a box to give beauty.  
My curiosity is my flaw once more, my Love, I'm afraid,  
I open it, and my heart knows it's fatal.

## VIII

I'll take you to Olympus, my Dear, revive you,  
And with ambrosia, I'll make your newfound breath undying.  
You'll be of Soul, and our child will be Joy,  
And as always, I am of Love, only this time it is mine.

## *Brownie Points*

The locker was cool against his back and he slumped against it, eyes half-lidded and music blaring through a single earbud. The distinct sound of heeled boots clicked towards him. Eyed opening, he straightened himself.

“Somebody’s cutting it close,” he said, smirking at the blonde standing in front of him. She swung open her locker, examining herself with a level of disdain at her reflection in the mirror within it

“Bus was running late, that bitch,” Kit said, grinning a crooked smile at her before going back to checking her lipstick. She popped her lips, “Anyways, I’ve got bigger problems.”

Jack looked over at her questioningly. Kit reached into her bag, pulling out a sheaf of paper. “Those problems being my essay. Please make this like, somewhat legible.”

He snorted, pulling out a jotter in return. “Only if you help me sound like I know how the fuck enzymes work.” He flicked through the essay she had given him. “Hey, Kit, what the fuck is that supposed to say?”

“It says ‘fuck you.’” She squinted over the part he was indicating. “I think that’s a T?” A chewed pencil slid past lipstick-coated lips. She snapped her fingers. “Oh yeah! I think it was ‘Theoretically’” Jack hummed and the two fell into a silence, each focused on the other’s work.

“So, Valentine’s day is coming up”

Jack looked over his glasses “So? Not like we ever do anything for it.”

A thoughtful chew to her pencil followed. “Well yeah, but there’s apparently a couple’s discount at that cafe near the park. A holiday special.”

“The one with the really good brownies?”

“The very same.”

“Well...” He pondered, setting a finger on his chin in mock thought. “How do I say no to such a romantic proposal?”

She flicked the side of his head. It hurt. Kit wore acrylics. “Don’t mock me! So, does four work for you?”

“Yeah, no, sorry, I got practice. Half-five or bust.”

The bell punctuated his words. “Fucking rugby.” Kit pouted. “I’ll pick you up from there. Cheer you on and everything.”

“Oh fuck no.” Kit walked off, hand waving and heels clicking. “Kit you are not doing that!” His pleas ignored, Jack slumped against his locker once again before checking his watch, cursing and heading off to the Gym hall.

It was outside the changing rooms that Nick Corrigan greeted him with a fist-bump. Nick was like that. He'd gone up to Jack one day, decided that they were 'bros' and apparently that was all it took to make a friendship.

"Bro!" His teeth gleamed white at him, curly hair bouncing in his enthusiasm "You're cutting it close there! Where you been?"

Jack began to pull his gym clothes out of his bag. "Sorry mate, was talkin' to Kit."

An exaggerated 'Oooh' sound filled the air. "Oh fuck off Nick." He groaned, "I said talking."

"And, what were you an' the Bird talkin' about?"

"Well," Jack clipped, ignoring the nickname, "What do you think a couple would talk about considering a certain day coming up?"

Jack felt a certain idiot drape himself over him. He felt strangely warm, hair standing on the back of his neck. He felt the odd urge to shiver. He brushed it off. It was usually warm in the changing rooms, sweaty bodies and all. "What you gettin' her?"

His breath brushed up against Jack's neck, voice vibrating against his spine. Jack ducked out from under the arms, starting to change his shirt. "We don't do gifts." He pulled his top over his head, turning back to look at Nick, who was looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "Very romantic." The other boy remarked mockingly. Jack flushed, feeling an odd desire to justify himself to the other.

"We're going on a date though. After practice on Monday. There's a couple's discount at a cafe and we're getting brownies."

Nick snorted. "Bro, if we were dating, I would treat you like a fuckin' princess."

He had his shirt off.

His arms were stretched above his head, position showing the toned muscles hard won from years of sports. He had freckles. Nick whipped his shirt to the ground, grinning at him. "A fuckin' princess," he repeated with a wink.

Jack felt like the world had dropped out from under his feet.

Oh no.

Jack laid in bed that night, mind racing.

He didn't think a straight man would think like that about his Bro.

Maybe he was bi? He searched his brain, but to his growing panic, he couldn't find a single instance of when he'd felt the way he had this afternoon about a woman. And it wasn't even just

this afternoon. Moments he'd previously dismissed as a want for friendship suddenly swarmed into his head like a swarm of particularly enthusiastic bees. He rolled over, burying his head in his pillow. Maybe he should scream into it? Kit always says that helped.

Oh fuck, Kit!

They had been dating for over three years now. Valentine's day was coming up. He trusted her more than anyone.

He didn't want to lose her.

They'd known each other longer than either one of them could remember. Their Mums had been friends from work, and they'd been inseparable since basically birth.

There had always been the occasional joke when they were kids, stuff like "They're so close you would think they were married!" Which had been steadily ignored, because, well, they were kids.

Even when they began to meet with other children, ones who had said that girls were gross and they shouldn't play with them, it was always them. It was always Kit. Jack and Kit, Kit and Jack. *Two peas in a pod*, as his mother would say.

And now he might lose her over a stupid sexuality crisis.

They'd been fourteen, sitting in his room, playing MarioKart together. Her Rosalina had just hit his Koopa Troopa with a shell when she had paused the game.

"Y'know how people always ask if we're dating? And then don't believe us when we say no?"

He'd looked over at her, eyebrow raised. "Yeah? It's annoying as fuck."

"Well," she paused, hesitant. "What if we actually just date? People say we act married already and then they'll stop bugging us."

He remembered thinking it over. It had seemed logical at the time. There was no other girl than Kit he could imagine dating. "I'm down, but I don't think I want to kiss you," he'd told her.

She'd stared at him with a crooked smile, leaning into his shoulder. "We can say we're taking it slow. And if they pry we can say they're being nosy little bitches."

He'd laughed, and that had been the end of it.

It had seemed a good choice at the time. Now all he felt was dread. The thought of keeping up the farce had crossed his mind, but he couldn't do it. He thinks it would hurt her less if she knew that he really hadn't known.

He screamed into his pillow. Kit was right. It did kind of help.

Fuck, Kit.

He went to school the next day feeling like a live wire. Kit, seeming to sense his mood, flip-flopped between giving him space and over-performing in an attempt at a distraction.

He'd tell her at lunchtime.

They sat on what had become their wall. Kit was chatting, and from the few words that made it past the cotton in his brain, he thought she was recounting the new developments in what they'd been referring to as the "Robertson saga", as overheard via the girl that sat behind her in art class. Apparently, her boyfriend had gone to surprise her at her house, leaving her side-piece to shimmy down the drainpipe.

"I think I'm gay."

Kit paused in her retelling, hands frozen mid-gesture. "Well, duh."

She resumed her story with gusto, before seeming to catch his expression. Horrified realization appeared on her face. "Oh shit, this is news to you?"

Jack flailed, a piece of lettuce flying out of his sandwich. "Yes, this is news to me! This isn't news to you? Why the fuck are you dating me if you knew?"

She dragged a palm across her face. "There seems to have been a lack of communication in this arrangement."

"Arrangement?"

Kit groaned. "OK, so I'm a lesbian."

"You never told me that!"

"I thought you knew! I have a lesbian vibe!"

He looked her up and down. The mismatched neon socks, the acid-green lipstick. The many Claire's clips adorning her blonde hair. The paint-tube earrings. He remembered she had some that looked like boobs. Oh. Lesbian vibes.

"I realise that now."

Kit continued on. "And from my perspective, we became a thing to get straight people off of our backs without outing ourselves."

Jack put his head in his hands. "That makes a lot of sense." Kit patted him gently on the back.

"What about Valentine's day though? We're going on a date then?"

She laughed. "Yeah, because there's a discount, and straight people will assume we're a couple."

“And the brownies there are really good.”

“Yes, and because the brownies there are good.”

They sat there for a few moments, sitting in a sort of stunned silence. Kit turned to him. “So how’d you figure it out? The gay shit, I mean.”

Jack felt his cheeks heat up. “I think I have a crush on Nick.” He muttered.

“Corrigan?” Kit laughed again, a wheezing cackle.

“Don’t laugh!”

She wiped her eyes, smudging her eyeliner slightly. “Fuck, OK, sorry!” She attempted to compose herself. “Jack, I mean this with love, but you have truly awful taste in men.”

And he found himself laughing too, the tension he had been fighting since yesterday dissipating along with something he hadn’t even noticed, but suspected had been there since they had started dating.

“If I do have a crush on Nick,” He started, “I’m not gonna tell him just yet. I don’t wanna come out. I barely even know what I’m feeling right now, it’s too soon.”

“That’s valid,” Kit replied.

“So, can we still go out on Monday together? I really want that brownie.”

She smiled, linking her small hand with his larger one. “I’m down for that. Still crashing your Rugby practice though.”

“Don’t you dare!”

A sly smile graced Kit’s face. “Or maybe,” she said in a honeyed voice, “The reason you don’t want me to come is so you don’t get embarrassed in front of a certain somebody?”

He felt his cheeks go red once again and pushed her so she nearly fell off the wall.

“Oy! All I’m saying is, two dudes getting muddy together on a pitch, wrestling all over each other...”

They sat together in silence for a moment, processing the events of the last half-hour. Jack turned to Kit, and smiled, reaching his arm around her to squeeze her into a hug. She leaned in, head tilted into the crook of his neck.

“So, What happened next in the ‘Robertson Saga’?”

And as she began with renewed enthusiasm, he knew with certainty, for what may have been the first time in years, that everything would be alright between them.

## *Ahoy!*

It was a rare day when Benny the cabin boy was summoned into the Captain's office.

She was an ominous woman, Benny had always thought. The shadows of her office only served to further highlight the dense cabling of her muscled arms, the beady dark eyes glinting from a mass of black curly hair.

Benny gulped. "You wanted to see me, ma'am?"

The Captain stood up and not for the first time, Benny cursed his short stature.

"Ah, Benny, you took so long I'd feared you'd gotten lost," she paused. "But no matter. I need you to send a message out to the crew."

"I'll be as efficient as I can ma'am."

She looked at him, lips peeling back, revealing a mouth full of brilliant white teeth.

"I'm leaving the ship tonight," she said. "An old associate is in town and we have some catching up to do, if you know what I mean."

Benny had absolutely no clue what she meant, but nodded anyway.

"Well then," the captain said with a clap. "I'll be on my way. Get to it then."

Below deck, Cutthroat Carrion the Cunning Cutlass lay in their bunk, staring at the ceiling.

"I'm thinking of changing my name," they said.

Yang looked up from her poetry notebook. "What brought this on?"

"So Carrion's great, poetic right?"

Yang hummed in agreement. "Ominous, too."

"So it's poetic, but most people don't get the ominous bit. If I really want to scare them I have to go with Cutthroat Carrion the Cunning Cutlass and that's long."

"So, what're you changing it to?"

The one formerly known as Cutthroat Carrion the Cunning Cutlass tossed a strip of jerky in the air. It bounced off of their nose. They cleared their throat.

"I was thinking Pirate."

Just then, the door creaked open with the hesitation of a man not in his element.

"Hey, knock why don't ya- oh look Yang, it's the Baby!"

Benny scowled. "I'm in my 20s, Carrion."



“Not Carrion anymore, say hello to Pirate.”

“You’re two years older than me, Pirate.”

“And those two years make you the youngest on the ship, and thus, the baby!”

Yang let out a sigh, effectively interrupting their squabbling. “Did you come in here for a reason? You’re killing the poetry vibe.”

Benny puffed himself up. “The Captain asked me to deliver a message.”

Pirate paused in their chewing of another slice of jerky, “Go on then,” they said.

He cleared his throat. “Ahem. ‘I’m leaving the ship tonight. An old associate is in town and we have some catching up to do, if you know what I mean.’” He paused, tilting his head to one side. “Pirate, Yang, what did she mean?”

The duo looked at each other wide-eyed.

“Nope, not telling,” Pirate said.

“Absolutely not,” Yang agreed.

“Well,” Benny said indignantly, “If you won’t tell me, I’ll go ask someone else.”

And with that, he stormed out of the room, ignoring the growing snickers behind him.

After a while, Pirate spoke up once more. “You think we should’ve told him?”

Yang crossed something out in her poetry booklet decisively. “Nah,” she said. “I ain’t handling that. Hey, is streaming or pouring a better descriptive for tears in this context?”

Pirate glanced over at the tilted notebook. “Oh, streaming, definitely.”

Old Tom was wallowing in the mess Hall.

“I’m not really old, am I? Old Tom’s just a title, ain’t it?” he said. “Got any threes?”

“Go fish,” replied Even Older Tom, causing Old Tom to let out a string of curses. “And nah, I don’t think ye’re tha’ much of a geezer. Barely a wrinkle on ye!”

The two of them glanced over at the third player. As usual, Tom-Who-Was-Really-Just-Bones remained silent.

“Besides,” continued Even Older Tom, “Age is just in th’ mind.”

“Eh, suppose ye’r right,” Old Tom murmured before glancing over his cards and turning to their silent companion. “Got any Kings?”

Tom-Who-Was-Really-Just-Bones fell forward, revealing his entire hand to the duo. It did, to be fair, contain two Kings.

“Sucker,” chuckled Old Tom to himself. “Bastard never learns.”

A knock at the door was heard.

Old Tom got to his feet, grumbling about the noise. Even Older Tom muttered something about his knees.

Tom-Who-Was-Really-Just-Bones didn’t complain about much at all, but remained seated anyway. The other two looked over at him.

“He’s right.” Old Tom nodded, “No need to get up, they can let themselves in,” he said, calling out the last part.

Benny stomped in.

“Aye?” said Even Older Tom.

“Captain has a message, she’s off tonight with an old associate and they have some catching up to do, if you know what she means.”

Old Tom cackled. “Well good on her.”

Benny squinted at him. Clearly, this was a man who knew what she meant.

“You clearly are a man who knows what she meant,” he said.

“Aye,” came the reply.

“Mind telling me what that is?”

Old Tom let out a bellowing laugh. Even Older Tom waved Benny off with his hook. “Ah, dinnae bother yerself with that, laddie,” he said, “Fancy a game o’ Rummy?”

Tom-Who-Was-Really-Just-Bones watched, sagely as ever, as Benny slunk off pouting.

Upon reaching the deck, Benny sighed. Nobody there. Guess it was his job to clean up then.

He got to work, swabbing the poop-deck, drawing in the gangplank, but it was as he was making sure all the rigging was in order that he hit a problem.

Around two metres of the spare rope was missing from the box. Seriously, who stole rope of all things?

A lightbulb went off in Benny’s head.

“Ohhh...”

## Lillie Sanderson

### *Mine*

Press kisses down my spine,  
And tell me you love me.

Whisper words against my ear,  
And lay your body against mine.

Run fingers down my skin,  
And meet my lips with yours.

Wrap your hands around me,  
And make me see stars.

Brush hairs off my face,  
And promise never to leave me.

## *Spring*

In these late February days,  
As the life of spring desperately fights the death of winter,  
And everything is a miserable shade of purply brown,  
I wish I had someone to love me.

In these long days  
And impossibly longer nights,  
I wish I had someone to hold me,  
Someone to chase away my perpetual fear of dying alone.

In this last stretch of cold days,  
And frosty mornings,  
I wish I had someone to warm me  
And remind me that I do not exist alone.

In these last moments before fresh life emerges,  
And sun warms my skin once more,  
I know spring cannot ease this pain  
Nor cure my fear of death.

Spring holds no promise,  
Yet I long for it in the depths of each winter,  
As I long for the warmth of another body near mine,  
And a reprieve from the misery of a seemingly endless winter.

## *Little Town*

I called this little town home once,  
These streets were my friends,  
The trees knew my name,  
And I could recall all its tales gleefully.

I called that little town home once,  
And at some time unknown,  
I outgrew its small borders.  
All too soon confined,  
By its well-explored corners.

I called that little town home once,  
And at some time known,  
I stopped.  
I found a new home,  
With new streets to befriend  
And wider borders to explore.

I called that little town home once,  
And now it remains,  
A permanent chapter in my life.  
A childhood friend.  
My first outgrown home.

## Holly Swan

### *The Gods Problem*

*Content warning: Blood, death*

The ritual was complete. I knelt, half-dead, as the Forest God bloomed into the throne in front of me. His leafy, massive form was only visible for a few seconds before he melted into the throne, and the temple around it, and the trees around me burst with new life, life on a scale that hadn't been seen since before I was born. Life on a scale that my mother had only told me about, in her stories of the old ways and her own mother, of before the God Cull.

Figures stumbled out of the newly-enlivened trees, in broken and battle-worn armour, their bodies made up of green leaves. I recognised these figures from my mother's stories—the dryads, who were the Forest God's truest worshippers and his army. Her stories told of the battle that had raged between the human forces and the dryads, the one her mother had hidden from, that ended with the Forest God defeated, and an end to the bloody war between human and Gods a hundred years ago.

The dryads saw me, and pulled rotted weapons from the ground, as I swayed on my knees. My mother had told me that the dryads, if they came back, would fear humans as killers, since the dryads had known all along what humanity hadn't: the Gods were essential to the makeup of our world. But humanity had sought to control the world, and had seen killing the Gods as an essential part of this.

And so the dryads surrounded me, placing rotted weapons to my throat and back as the rot melted away. I tried to stay upright and to tell them I wasn't a threat, but they couldn't understand me, as they whispered amongst each other in their spectral language.

The ground rolled underneath me as I collapsed forward, the dirt of the forest rushing to meet me. My vision went dark and I felt soft hands on my skin before the rushing in my ears overtook all meaning.

I stood on inky blackness, feeling out of place. A form I recognised stood before me—the Forest God. He bowed his head, and I did the same.

"You have brought me back, child." His voice echoed in the darkness.

"I did?"

"Yes, I can feel it." He moved towards me, and suddenly I wasn't stood anymore—I was floating, and my body felt lighter than air. "Why would you, a human, bring me back when your kind fought so hard to have me killed?"

His eyes blazed with fury, but there was a softness in the barky nature of them.

I found my words flowed out of my mouth before I could think of them. "The others don't see it. They haven't heard the stories—your stories—and they don't think we need Gods."

“But you can see that you do?”

“I know it. Humanity is suffering because they can’t control the world like the Gods do. Like you do.”

The Forest God caught me in one massive green palm, and I felt my form become more solid, as though I’d been made of mist before. He hummed in the dryad’s language, before he turned his words back to me. “There were many Gods that fell in the Cull. There are some that I can revive myself. But I will need the help of another.”

“Another?” I asked, as he lowered his hand, me caught within it.

“Another God. You have drained your life-force to bring me back, and it will take just as much to bring another God back. I will not ask you to do more than you can.”

“I want to help. For my mother.”

“Your mother, dear child?”

“She told me of your stories, stories from her own mother. She is dying now, and I need the Gods’ help to save her.”

The Forest God turned, the massive palm taking me along with it. I caught sight of another figure, almost blended into the dark, as the Forest God addressed it in an unrecognisable language. The figure bowed its head, and reached out skeletal hands. The Forest God spoke again, in words I recognised. “I will do what I can for her, if you will do what you can for me.” He pushed me upwards, releasing me to the inky blackness. I felt myself solidifying, more than I had in the Forest God’s palm, before the skeletal hands caught my form.

My eyes opened to the forest canopy. The dryads clustered around me, and I felt the Forest God’s presence in the back of my mind. His voice whispered in the dryad’s language, and they seemed to hear, stepping back and bowing their heads to me. I felt my strength returning as the Forest God’s presence faded from my mind, and I sat up. The shrine and the throne before me hummed with life, the symbols which had lain lifeless before now thrumming with energy.

As I analysed the scene before me, I saw what I had done before. Here was the place I’d smoothed herbs onto the runes, there was the place I’d poured water, all around was places I’d filled with my voice, chanting prayers and hymns from stories my mother had told me her mother had used, back when there were Gods.

I rose to my feet, anxious to get back to my mother, to see what difference the Forest God had made. Because of our connection to him through my grandmother, I hoped that it would be at least some. At this thought, I went to the foot of the throne, saying a quick prayer and giving thanks for the strength that he’d gifted to me.

When I turned away, the dryads had a gift, wrapped in soft, new leaves, which they offered out to me. I bowed my head towards them, a sign I hoped they would take as thanks. They scattered,

dancing back to their trees and disappearing up into them. I peeled off the leaves, placing them in a small pile below the throne, and looked at what they'd given me. It was an old cloak, forest green, with flowers sewn into the hem. I wrapped it around myself, the worn silken material cause for comfort.

I began the journey back home, the sudden emptiness of the forest jarring. I picked up my discarded backpack, the emptiness of it cause for both comfort and concern. But I was glad to have taken my mother's advice and overpacked for food, because the three days' journey meant I had been and would be completely reliant on my pack.

The forest, which had been lifeless and rotting when I'd first walked through it, burst with new buds, colour lining the once-sullen branches. I breathed deeply, and even the air smelled different. It would be a whole new world, I thought, with over a hundred years since anyone had seen new buds on the trees. If my grandmother had been alive now, she would have shouted to the sky, her God finally able to answer her prayers again. In honour of her, I made a promise to her spirit that I would shout her prayers for her.

The roads leading into the forest were clear, but the muddy surface had changed since I'd last walked over it. Bumps were forming in the road, like goosebumps, and when I smoothed them over with my hand, bright green shoots jumped out. Grass. So different to the brittle yellow stalks I was used to playing in. This grass was soft, and I could almost imagine it as the grass my grandmother used to talk about rolling around in as a child. I plucked one, rolling it in my fingers. It twisted, rolling over itself, the shoot bleeding green juice onto my fingers. I'd never experienced that before, and the newness of it hit me all at once.

I smiled. The Forest God worked fast.

The three days I spent travelling home went by without much to comment on. Everywhere I looked, everywhere I pitched up, greenery was growing. New buds in the trees exploded into new leaves, growing bigger and more numerous with each passing day. The grass grew taller and taller, until I had to flatten down patches to pitch my tent to sleep at night. On the third day, colour began to blossom, along the sides of the roads and paths, in the trees, in the cracks and crevices of walls, in all colours, like the stories of rainbows my grandmother had told me about.

When I finally reached my home, I didn't recognise it. Garlands of flowers lined and hung from the roof, while more still grasped for the sky from what had been the muddy dirt we'd tried to build a garden in for my grandmother. Here was her garden at last, growing too late for her to see it. But I saw it, and for her, I said a prayer, dragging my fingers through the overgrowth as I walked through it. My grandmother would have laughed, and reminded me of her stories of how she'd battled with her mother's plants, how they'd need tending before they got out of hand.

Tomorrow, I'd cut it all back, and make it the garden she had wanted to see.

Inside, because of the overgrowth, it was dark. I lit the lanterns as I walked through the house, finding my mother slumped over at the kitchen table. For a moment, I feared the worst, before she stirred at the light.



"You're back?" She slurred, and I could see that she'd tried to do the household tasks I usually did by herself. "That's good. I was beginning to think you were gone for good."

"How long was I gone, mother?"

"Oh, I don't know." She said, sitting up with effort. "A while. Longer than you'd said you'd be gone."

"I'm sorry."

She groaned, standing and using the chair to support herself. "I wasn't worried. I would have known if you'd—"

"What?"

"Where did you get that?" She threw herself from the chair towards me, and I barely caught her. She ran her fingers down the hem of the cloak I was wearing, and I could see surprise in her eyes. "This is your grandmother's cloak—I sewed these flowers for her, when she was particularly sad."

"I did it, mother. I revived the Forest God."

She looked at me with horror in her eyes. "What did the bastard take from you?"

I guided her back to her chair. "He didn't take anything, mother."

"I knew I shouldn't have told you those stupid stories." She groaned, and I moved about, setting the kitchen back to rights where my mother had tried to make a meal. I'd left her enough to get by for a week, with extra for the housewife next door to sit down with my mother when she came to check up on her.

"You only told them to me because grandmother told them to you. And besides, the world could use the Gods returning if only because the produce is starting to—" I held up a shrivelled cabbage head— "do this..."

"You shouldn't have gone, Bran. The stories all say that any dealings with the Gods are only advantageous to the Gods, and nobody else."

"The stories are wrong, mother. And besides, I didn't make a deal with him. I revived him. He's in my debt—look at the difference it's made already!"

"Bran."

"You couldn't have stopped me, mother. And you shouldn't have." I sighed, the kitchen half clean. "We can discuss this later. Right now, you need rest."

I helped my mother into her room, situating her into the heirloom rocking chair as I danced about, changing her bedclothes and whirling around mopping up the accumulated dust with a wet rag, before I put her back into her freshly-changed bed. She patted the coverlet down around herself, and I could tell that she was pleased that I was back. I put a candle down on her bedside

table, close enough that she would be able to roll over to blow it out, but far enough away that I knew it wouldn't harm her.

I closed the door to her room, before going back to setting the kitchen to rights. The shrivelled vegetables that littered the countertop went back into bags, and boxes. Each one had cost more than the one it was replacing, the farmer's fields producing less and less each harvest.

With the Forest God reinstated, this year's harvest promised to be the best of my lifetime, perhaps even the best of my mother's. Perhaps the vegetables would even be juicy, overflowing with wetness the likes of which I had never seen. My mouth watered as I imagined what it would be like—whether the vegetables would even taste the same. As I went to bed, that was the last thought on my mind.

When I woke, my dream drifted away, leaving me with only the blurred memories of fat vegetables, an ancient language, and a call to do more. I threw my coverlet off, and set about preparing for the day. The garden called to me, and I went outside to see what it contained. As I looked over bursting flowers, a tiny insect landed on my arm, the tickling sensation something I'd only felt once before. Its furred body was striped with yellow and black, and I let it crawl onto my finger to place it into one of the flowers.

"A bee," my grandmother had said, when the first insect had landed on her hand-sewn shawl. "That's what this is called. And you must always treat it with respect, Bran, as there aren't many around anymore." and she'd let me take it from her shawl, watched me as it crawled about in my hand. She'd instructed my mother to make it a shallow bowl of water, and my mother had returned with it, watching with disgust as I'd guided it to drink.

I probably didn't need to make it a drink, but I made one all the same, carefully carrying the shallow dish outside and placing it on the wall. The bee had flown off by then, but there were more than I'd ever seen buzzing around, landing on every flower they could.

I set about making breakfast, the simple dish of porridge like always, before I went into my mother's room. She was still sleeping, her light snores drifting around the room. I noticed that the candle had been allowed to burn down to nothing, and that a book had slipped from my mother's grasp to the floor. I picked it up, smoothing the pages down where they had creased against the floor.

The book was about the various plants, fruits and vegetables, written by hand in handwriting I recognised as my grandmother's. The page I had open talked about a fruit called "strawberries", with a painted illustration of the fruit—one I recognised from outside.

"That was your grandfather's illustrations."

I started, almost dropping the book as my mother spoke, clearer than she had in recent years, and I turned to her. "I've never seen this book before."

"I hid it from you." She patted the bed next to her, and I crawled close to her, like I'd done in years before when I was a child. "I didn't want you to see it and ask about it. But you went down that path anyway."

"But why?"

"Your grandmother described all of these to your father, and he painted them over and over again before she'd let him put them into the book. He wanted to see them—wanted you to see them—you were so young—so he left. The same as you. He wanted to resurrect the Forest God, and he left us to do so. He didn't come back."

"But I did."

"You did. And I wonder why." She traced the strawberry lovingly.

"Maybe he needed two people to try."

"Maybe."

"I saw some of these outside."

"Your father always said they were his favourite ones, out of the entire book."

I smiled, giving my mother a kiss on the cheek. "Maybe we should try some. To honour him."

I walked outside, spotting the little bush filled with pink strawberries, the stems of the bush battling with another bush adorned with yellow bulbous fruit. I cut a few strawberries off, bringing them back inside and offering one to my mother. I popped one in my mouth.

"Euughh!" It was sour, and a little hard. I spat it back out as my mother laughed.

"I don't think they're ripe yet, Bran."

"When will they be ripe, mother? And will they taste better than that?"

My mother pointed to a little diagram, roughly drawn but beautifully coloured, that showed the pink fruit with a little arrow pointing to a larger, redder version. She was still giggling a little, and I realised how long it had been since I'd heard my mother laugh like this. "I don't think they're done growing yet," she said.

"I realise that now," I said, my annoyance more for show than anything.

My mother's face looked better than it had for weeks, the gauntness pulling out of her features and her eyes sparkling more. The Forest God was making good on his promise to me. My mother offered the book. "You should have this. You're going to be the one in the garden, aren't you?"

"Does this mean that it was a good idea for me to revive the Forest God?"

"Don't be cheeky when I'm offering you a gift!"

I laughed, and helped her out of bed. "I made breakfast."

We ate our breakfast by looking over the book, and I figured out what was growing in our garden. I recognised tomatoes as the yellow fruit beside the strawberry bush, and my father's dutiful drawings of the leaves of plants helped me decipher the rest. But by then, my mother had grown suspicious of her recovering condition.

"It was my health you made him promise, wasn't it?"

"Mother, don't worry about it."

"What did he ask for in return, Bran?"

"Mother..."

"What, Bran?" She took hold of both of my hands, the euphoria of my grandmother's book finally overshadowed. "I'm not worth anything. What did he ask for in return, Bran?"

I sighed, pulling my hands away. "I think he asked me to help revive another God."

She gasped, and got up from the table. It was then that I became aware of how much she had truly recovered, because she got halfway to her bedroom before I caught up with her. "Bran, I'm not worth your life, or the life of any of the stupid Gods!"

"Shh, mother, he'll hear you!"

"Let him hear! You aren't giving your life for another of those Gods. I already lost your father, I can't lose you too."

I heaved a sigh. "I can't lose you either, mother. Which is why I made him help you."

I put her back into bed, before pulling her door almost to a close. I knew at some point that she would argue with me again, but I let her have her privacy. I had no idea how to revive another God, and given it had taken my grandmother's hand-me-down stories for me to even have an idea of how to revive the Forest God, it made it nearly impossible for me to revive another one.

The door opened, and the housewife from next door came in. She took a moment to realise I was stood in the cottage, before she opened her arms wide. "Bran, you're back. And good timing, too," she pointed outside.

"Hello, Anwen." I went and accepted her hug, before stepping back. "How was she?"

"She was getting worse by the day, and then, one day, she just started getting better. It was a miracle."

"That's good. Thank you for taking such good care of her, Anwen."

"No problem. Did everything go well with your trip?"

I chuckled. "Everything went as planned, but I'm glad to be back."

“And we’re glad to have you back.” Anwen smiled. “...What was your trip about, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, right.” I said, having forgotten I’d kept my journey secret. “I went and revived the Forest God.”

“Bran, I didn’t take you as a joker!” Anwen laughed, before catching sight of my face. “You’re serious.”

“Yes. And I think I might have promised to revive another God for him.”

“Ah.” Anwen busied herself with righting the chairs at the table. “How are you going to do that?”

“I don’t know.”

Anwen bowed her head, and whispered something under her breath, before looking back up at me. “My grandfather was a Windseeker, a worshipper of the Air Goddess. I’m sure my father kept his journals somewhere, I could get them for you?”

“Please.”

As the housewife left, I bowed my head. Her grandfather’s journals meant I would be chasing another almost-forgotten story into a lifeless place. I spoke a prayer to the Forest God, hoping somehow that I’d be able to complete what I’d seemingly promised to him as well as being able to get back to my mother afterwards. When Anwen returned with the journals, I believed my own prayer. Anwen left soon after she got back, with the promise that if I left to resurrect another God, she would take care of my mother again.

I studied the journals for a few hours—and they told me that I could find the nearest temple for Windseekers situated up the mountain. The journals told me that nobody had been up there since the God Cull. I looked over the crude map on one of the pages, and it looked to be about an eight day journey. That would mean I would be leaving my mother for at least sixteen days, longer than I’d ever been away from her.

I made lunch—meat and bread, the same as before I’d gone away, and thought. When I got her to sit down for the meal, I broached the question to my mother. “If I went away again, to fulfil my promise, do you think you’d be alright?”

“Do you mean, would I survive with just Anwen for company?”

I sighed. “Please don’t be difficult, mother.”

“Well, I think I could. But I told you, promises from the Gods only benefit the Gods. Leave it alone, Bran. Some other bright-eyed idiot will go revive them.”

“‘Some other bright-eyed idiot’? Mother, that’s me and father you’re describing there.”

“And am I wrong?”

“Yes!” I slammed my bread down onto my plate. “I’m not an idiot!”

“You’re nothing but a child, same as your father.”

I stood up, knocking my chair over. “Well, at least you don’t have to blame yourself for this trip, mother.”

Later, I would be ashamed of packing up and leaving without saying goodbye to her. But, at that moment, I was too angry to face her again.

I didn’t leave her totally bereft, though, as I’d told Anwen I was leaving, and offered her the journals back. She refused them, saying they would be better with me—and, three days into my journey, I’d be glad of that.

I was able to make it to the mountain without much pause, taking directions from farmers who passed me on the way, their carts piled high with fat produce and animals that looked like they’d just had the best meals of their lives—which may have been true. Every which way I turned, new growth sprung up, saplings growing lanky and tall along the roadways. I arrived at the bottom of the mountain, the tip enshrouded with clouds, and began climbing. The journals helped, as the path up the mountain split and wound, so that even after a couple hours of climbing, if I hadn’t been rigorously following the directions of Anwen’s grandfather, I would have been hopelessly lost along the mountainside. I stopped for a few minutes, to gather my breath. I still had four more days of climbing up the mountain ahead of me, so I couldn’t afford to waste time, but the mountain was steep, and the paths narrow among rapidly-growing brush.

When it was time to begin moving again, I made a note of where I next wanted to stop—the place Anwen’s grandfather had notated as being a good place to stop for the night. I told myself I wouldn’t stop until I reached it, and I strode up the mountain path with mustered vigour.

It was halfway to my intended destination that I had to stop again, my sides searing with pain. Even though I was in good health, and I’d been able to walk my way back to my village all on my own, I was unused to the steep incline of the path. I drank most of my water, aware that it would run out before I got to the indicated stop. It would motivate me onwards, I reasoned, as I started walking again.

I’d stopped twice more before I reached the flat, open area that meant I’d reached my intended stop. The sun had almost set, and in the dying light I quickly set up camp, before I collapsed inside my tent, and slept all through to morning. When I woke the next morning, I found that the area was beside a small stream, so I was able to refill my water flask before continuing.

The next two days went by as the first day on the mountain had, and as I got further and further up the mountain, the smaller and more twisty the path got. It was easier, then, to walk among the tall grass that lined the path. And, at the close of the seventh day of my journey, I found that the marked place to rest was little more than a cubby hole in the side of some sheer cliff face. There was nowhere to refill my water, though, and after I got myself situated into the hole, I wondered about how I would get up the rest of the mountain.

There wasn't much left to go, I reasoned, as I looked at the map and the directions, and the Windseekers had to have made it up here and back all the time a hundred years ago. So I set off, my water flask empty, but my mind made up.

I began to realise what a stupid idea it was, when I began to slow later in the day. The grass was soft, inviting, but I didn't want to collapse into it and abandon my task just yet. It would be easier going down the mountain than up it, I told myself as I forced my legs onwards.

It was halfway between the cubby hole and my destination that I began to use my hands to propel myself up the mountain. I needed to be up, and my mind offered little resolution now, other than the fact that there might be water by the temple. The grass, by that point, was not so inviting. The edges were sharp, and cut into my hands, leaving small wounds beading with blood. The cuts grew so numerous that by the time I tried to get the blood off of my hands, first by wiping them along the ground, then wiping them on my clothes, then sucking the blood off, the blood wouldn't stop.

As I sucked my own blood, stumbling up to a hazy destination, along nonexistent paths, I began to think that I was lost. But I couldn't be lost, I reasoned, as a structure bloomed into view out of the clouds ahead. I stumbled towards it, my thoughts lost to the overwhelming thirst.

I slipped onto the steps, leaving bloody handprints as I climbed into the structure. It contained a pool of water in the middle of it, and I crawled towards it, leaving smears of red along the floor as all I can think about is drinking from the pool.

I have one bloodied hand in it before my vision fades, and I see the phantasmal outline of a wispy female figure.

And then my strength fades, and I give in to the skeletal arms reaching out for me—the warm embrace of a final death. I'm almost disappointed that I won't see my mother again. But I know she will be well taken care of, and that she won't be alone.

My strength evaporates, and the skeletal arms grow flesh. The black cloak fades and I see a face that I barely recognise as my father. "Daddy."

"Hey, pup."

"Can't I stay?"

He smiles, and I melt into his arms. "It's time, pup."

## Fen Webster

### *A dead man's wish*

*Content warning: Blood, death, kidnapping*

Trevor Hawkins was dying.

He couldn't hear the motorboat anymore, it had long vanished upstream. What would happen to that man? Nobody other than him had been around to be a witness. But besides that, what would happen to him? He clutched at the wound in his stomach, desperately trying to staunch the bleeding. He could tell he didn't have much time left. Anyone could.

The stars twinkled down at him, and Hawkins felt utter despair crash over him. If he died here, the universe would still move on. No matter if he'd finished everything he wanted to do or not, death was inevitable and irreversible. He would die here. His corpse would lay on the sandy riverbank, and not a soul would mourn him.

"I'm not ready," Hawkins whimpered, feeling his tears drip down onto the sand, already stained dark with his blood. "I don't want to die."

A ringtone buzzed from within a jacket pocket. The confusion roused him from his self-mourning, and he realised it was his second phone, and that only one person would be calling. Only one other person knew it existed. Keeping one hand on his wound, he carefully rummaged for his phone and managed to fish it out, flipping it open and holding it up to his ear.

"Seth?" He questioned, not sure why he would be phoning right now of all times.

"Hawkins? Are you okay?" A young voice, anxious and desperate, came through the cheap speaker.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" Hawkins answered, smiling. It was nice to hear from him, one last time.

"I... I just got a bad feeling. Are you sure you're alright? You sound off." Seth was being surprisingly perceptive, and Hawkins felt bad that the young man might accidentally be privy to his death if he wasn't careful.

"I'm, uh, fine, don't worry." Hawkins barely restrained a groan of pain. His blood loss was slowly dulling his senses, making it harder to talk but also lessening the pain. Hawkins had a sudden realisation. "Seth! Are you coming up to Axen soon?"

"I wasn't planning to. Should I be? There's something wrong isn't there?" He asked accusatorially, and Hawkins couldn't deny it.

"I witnessed a kidnapping. There was a young man, walking near the river, and they came up on a boat and took him." Hawkins felt guilty that he'd been so wrapped up in his own death he'd forgotten the crime he'd just witnessed.



“Hawkins! Are you kidding me?! Don’t tell me they saw you, they’d—” and here he paused, heaving in a breath. “Just please tell me you’re okay.” Hawkins could hear the panic in Seth’s voice. He’d been wrong, there was at least one person who’d miss him.

“They came up in a small motor boat to the river near Lenin Drive, they took him, and then they ran upstream.” Hawkins tried to speak clearly. Someone had to know. Had to hear this. How else would the person who’d been kidnapped get help?

“So you’re near Lenin Drive? Hold on, I’m going to call Tam.” Seth put him on hold.

Hawkins managed to raise his arm up to stare at the screen. He’d actually put him on hold. If he died while on hold, he swore he would haunt Seth ‘til his dying days. Still, calling a doctor was probably the more sensible choice. Hawkins probably should’ve thought of that, though he found he could barely hold the phone anymore. He wished more than anything that Seth would come back soon. He didn’t want to die alone. He didn’t want to die.

“Alright, I’ve called her, so just hold on, okay? We’re coming for you.” Seth’s voice rang through the phone again, and Hawkins could hear him doing things in the background, and then the start up of a motor. Seth had a motorbike, Hawkins managed to recall. Wait, he was coming here?

“Seth is that really wise—” Hawkins started, and Seth growled.

“Hawkins you have to hold on, okay? I swear, I’ll help you pick up rubbish, or pass out food, you just have to stay alive.” Hawkins could hear the desperate edge to his voice.

“Yeah. I’ll be waiting. Just stay safe, Seth.” Hawkins managed to say, wishing he had the energy to say so much more. Still, he’d said the important things. Hopefully, the person he’d seen get kidnapped would be rescued. Seth would pass on the info to others, he was sure.

“I will. Hold on, Hawkins, I’m coming.” Seth hung up on the other side, and Hawkins was finally able to let his arm drop. It was okay. He wasn’t ready to go, but who was?

He just hoped Seth wasn’t the one to find his body.

## *The Fall of HMS Northern Point*

*Content warning: Death, gore*

After a certain point, the blare of the alarms almost faded out to background noise. They were so constant, so demanding of attention, that the human brain ended up just tuning them out so as to focus on other things. It knew the alarms were sounding after all, and that was bad, but it had other things to do.

The corridor was a wreck. Broken walls revealed the mass of wires and machinery buried within, toppled storage units littered the floor, not to mention the dead bodies that were slumped against the walls and scratching at locked doors. Her feet were light as they jumped over another corpse, ignoring the plights of the dead to focus on her own: a plight to survive.

Another boom resounded from the starboard side of the ship, near the top of the spacecraft, and she had to lean against a wall to steady herself against the shockwave that ran through the ship. She could tell she was running out of time, but since she couldn't create more time for herself at the moment she just had to keep going.

She wrenched open a stuck door with the pole she carried with her, stepping over another body as she sprinted through the darkened corridor. She became more aware of the alarms still blaring as she approached one of the sources of the sound, the increase in volume bringing it back into her conscious thoughts before she pushed it away again. Yes, she knew the ship was badly damaged. Yes, she knew everything was going wrong. Yes, she knew she had to evacuate. There was no need to keep deafening her when it was very clear that everything was going to shit.

She kept going. She had to keep going. No matter how much of her blood she was leaving in a trail along the floor, or how much damage the ship took, she simply had to keep going until she got out. She was the only witness to the captain's crimes. The only one who knew what he'd done. If he managed to get away, if he got the chance to do this again? He could kill billions. He could cause the genocide of their own people, and for what?

"I'm going to fucking kill him!" she screamed, punching a nearby locker. She quickly tried to rein in her anger, direct it into getting out of there alive, but all she wanted to do was run back and beat him to a pulp. This was one of the biggest scouting ships that existed. Over 50,000 people had been on board. And he'd just killed the majority of them. The logical part of her brain told her that running had been the best option, he'd had over fifty guards after all, but it didn't make her feel like any less of a coward for doing so. She pictured her friends in the engineering department, and knew in her heart they were all dead. "Fucking Bastard!" She shouted, forcing her feet to keep moving despite her pain.

Focus. Stay on task. Don't let your anger consume you. She repeated her mantra in her head as she ran, manta rays don't like mantras, but it very quickly became I'm going to escape, and then I'm going to kill him. I'm going to escape, and then I'm going to kill him. It was much more effective, and she was sure her therapist would be proud.

They had fought on the flight deck, she had tried to wrestle the controls for whatever contraption he had up on top of the ship away from him, and he had cut her badly in the side and on her arm. Those injuries were fine, she had bandaged them with scraps pulled from her t-shirt, but he'd also shot some sort of dart at her. Something that hadn't killed or incapacitated her, which didn't make any sense. She could only assume it was faulty, or long-acting. It unnerved her, not knowing what she'd been poisoned with, but there was no time to analyse her blood and figure out what was in it. She just had to keep moving.

She pried open another door with her trusty pole and ran through to the hanger bay. It was one of the biggest rooms in the entire ship, with smaller spaceships waiting to be deployed, escape pods lining the walls, and mining suits hanging from the roof. Despite the ship's size, all space had to be utilised as efficiently as possible, so it was usually very cramped, but now that half the ships and escape pods had been taken, you could see past them to the membrane that was keeping the air in. Things could pass through it as long as they were registered with the ship.

At this moment, however, she was just glad to see it working and that she hadn't been sucked out of the ship into space. A lot of the remaining ships were damaged, she'd have to find one that was intact. It was better to take a ship than an escape pod. Those were designed to wait for rescue, and, well, she doubted there would be anyone coming to rescue them. Not now.

"Wait... Laura..." A quiet groan barely made it over the sound of the emergency sirens still screaming in every area of the ship, and she turned around to see one of her fellow crew, stuck beneath a pile of rubble she could tell she couldn't move without equipment and time he clearly didn't have.

Still, she came closer, kneeling down beside Robbie who looked up at her gratefully. "Thanks. I know I'm doomed. Could you—" He coughed, adding fresh blood to his face. "Could you drop this in the post system? For my husband. I can't... I need to let him know." He held up his necklace, a silver chain with a small conch shell as a charm.

She took it, before holding his hand. "I'll get it to him, don't worry. I'll get the bastard that did this too. You can be fucking sure of that."

"I know." He smiled, and it broke her heart. "I know." He coughed again, his breathing getting more and more raspy. "Good luck, and stay safe, Sparky." The sound of her nickname, given both for her ability to cause sparks whenever she worked, and her stellar anger management, was bittersweet. There was no one left to call her that now.

He closed his eyes for the last time, and she tucked all her grief and anger deep into her heart, placing his hand back onto his chest and quickly standing. Keep moving. Keep going.

By some miracle, she managed to find a one-man ship in relatively good condition. She clambered into the cockpit. It was a scouting ship, meant for tight spaces and mapping out new areas. It would work to get her to the nearest station, and from there she could get into contact with those she needed to and make sure that bastard got what he deserved.

As the door shut, the sound from the alarms was muffled and she breathed a sigh of relief from the decrease in noise. She started pre-flight, rushing most of the procedures for fear the whole ship would blow right at the last second. She'd wrapped Robbie's necklace around her wrist, and every time she saw it she felt her heart crack just a bit more. She would get vengeance for her fallen friends. She swore it.

The small scouting ship hummed to life, and she punched the acceleration, letting the ship slip right through the membrane and into space. She had to head forward until she was a safe distance, and then turn to head back where they'd come from, to reach a station near the solar systems that were actually inhabited. This one was one they were just beginning to explore. Hence, well, this.

As she reached a safe distance if the ship were to explode, she turned and could finally look to see what had caused this whole mess.

The ship was huge. The Northern Point was created to be the ultimate ship to explore new regions, to point the way to new territory, hence the name. It was about a mile long and three-quarters of a mile in diameter. She'd been near every corner of the ship, and so had a good idea just how big it was.

That made it even more terrifying to see the dragon which was half the ship's size. It had dug its back legs into the ship and was using its arms to tear away at the hull, digging into the top of the ship and pulling out its inner workings like it was made of paper. It stopped occasionally to let out a roar, or to breathe blue fire into the ship. She watched as it reeled back to roar again, the sound muted by the vacuum of space. She had no idea how the captain had managed to summon the beast and incite it into attacking, but the dragon was hell-bent on ensuring the Northern Point was torn to atoms.

Dragons were myths, legends. They were children's stories that even children didn't believe. So how and why she was watching this one kill her friends and co-workers, she had no idea. She just knew it was the captain's fault. He had pressed a button on his controls, then it had come. The dragon had attacked, and he had laughed. She was going to kill him for causing this. Even if she got back and no one believed her, she would hunt him down to the ends of the universe.

Her knuckles were white from gripping the controls. She forced herself to take a breath, and then glanced over at the dragon again.

It was looking at her. Right at her. She could tell. She felt her heartbeat kick up a notch, and then, as it released its grip on the ship and unfurled its wings, she knew it was coming after her. Her heartbeat was going so fast, she was sure it was going to burst out of her chest. The dragon roared, and leapt for her ship. She pressed the controls, and the ship responded, speeding up significantly. They dodged as the dragon took a swipe at them, and she tried to remember the various manoeuvres the experienced pilots had mentioned to her, as they explained what they had done that day.

She couldn't remember any of them, so she did the next best thing and flew as unpredictably as possible, having no idea how she could outrun a fucking dragon of all things. The rulers of space. The first space travellers. The bloody giant fuckers that tore apart ships like a dog ripping up a book.

She dropped, rolled and swerved, still trying to head towards the station. She could get help if she managed to make it, although maybe she'd just be bringing death to their doorstep. But then they wouldn't be able to deny that dragons existed at least. She would be able to explain what her captain had done without people calling her insane.

None of that would matter if she wasn't able to outrun it though.

Like she had cursed herself with the thought, she saw the dragon's paw as it came towards her from the side, too late to dodge.

"Fuck."

She felt her head hit the side, and then nothing at all.

## Vin Wilson

### *From Mountain Fell*

Content warning: Death, war

The smiles of all, a gloried eye;  
Those days still dance with me.  
If Gods themselves contested us  
I'd solve it, if asked he.

And soon it came, a time of woe,  
Of trouble and dismay.  
Across the mountains, rolling seas!  
The foes we trampled lay.

"Oh, come, our saviour  
The one we sullied never!  
To tell their tale  
For ages gone  
Our gloriest defender!"

"Come, meet your fate!" the people cried,  
We learned a lot that day.  
Of waving hands and wondered praise!  
For something far away.

Across the windy moors we bade,  
A friend we laid to rest.  
Sorrow tethered brewed a day,  
A day for "us", our last.

"Oh, come, our saviour  
The one we sullied never!  
To tell their tale  
For ages gone  
Our gloriest defender!"

A hand out-stretched to meet the Gods;  
The ones we fated fought.  
Blood and bone carved fate our own,  
A love we forged untaught.

"We are eternal!" Passed words quell.  
The winds can only murmur.

I sit and smile from mountain fell;  
Your passion made me stronger.

“Oh, come, my saviour  
The one they sullied never.  
To tell our tale  
For ages gone  
My gloriest defender...”

### *Shot, Missed, What Next?*

One day I'll build a rocket to the stars.  
I'll go up and I'll see everything I was meant  
to, everything I was born to see.  
Refilling footsteps made with bigger boots.

It won't take me long to realise,  
that there is almost nothing for me there  
It's simply too dark to see.  
To change direction, I'd need more fuel than I own.

For every star seems to twinkle the same  
Going white, Going yellow, Going dark.  
And not one thought to be different.  
Even the consolation failed me.

I'll take up welding in my old age.  
Gather the scraps I've scavenged,  
and I'll make them into something new.  
I'll form the sight I needed then.

The kitchen will never be without  
some wonderful new smell or taste.  
It might stink of burnt metal  
or smoke some days, but I'll live.

I wonder if my children will build a rocket too.  
Whether they'll see the same twinkle  
in the sky, if it will reflect in their own eyes.  
Perhaps the constellations just weren't built for me.



## *One Boat; One Thousand Stars*

What I had believed to be stars kept twinkling in the sky, just as we knew stars to, ever beautiful. I stared at them as I always had. The bleating waves lapped at the rim of the rowing boat, soft as we were still. We were still because my partner, who only went by The Venerer, was asleep. And I was tired too, but I couldn't take my eyes off the sky. It was beautiful and mesmerising, like pearls floating in air. The soothing breeze of spring jostled my hair, occasionally hitting my face, but it did not distract from the iridescent balls of wondrous light above.

My head ended up falling down to my shoulder at some point, I wasn't keeping track anymore, given up on my stars. Wow, these boots were old. Scuffed, worn and barely held-together leather, tied up my legs by string. Such was the way of a Vagabond, after all. Making do is all we've got. Although we most often travel alone, I was very grateful for my wonderful travel partner. Yes, he was very skilled with a bow, and I was very skilled at not dying. Though there were no wild bears to worry about in the middle of the ocean, The Venerer would think me a madman to be so calm in the current weather, but in my defence, I had no idea what those flaming balls in the sky truly were. Tracing the lines of my torn gloves was much more interesting to my wearied brain anyway.

And I had almost slipped into an equally peaceful slumber, had an ear shattering smash, and an icy battering to the face startled me into action.

Side-lining our balance, I threw myself forward onto my sleeping friend, shaking whatever I could reach, whatever would get him up.

"Bloody hell, you Vagabond! I'm awake, I'm awake! Now get off me! What the fuck was that?"

"Gonna be honest, I thought they were stars."

"Your stars are going to fucking crush us, Vagabond! We need to leave!"

"Better get rowing, then, cause we're not going anywhere without you."

"Fuck up," he spat backwards at me, before picking up the oar he'd cuddled in his sleep. I simply hoped he hadn't caught my chuckling and followed suit.

We continued to row, my own a little faster than my partner's. Neither of us had chosen a direction, but it seems we'd both made the same decision anyway: West. Well, what I assumed was west because I know when we set off, I was facing west and from my perspective we were going forward. It didn't matter. What did matter was we were getting the fuck out of there as fast as we could.

The falling stars seemed to follow us, although I guess it was just a large-spread phenomenon. I wondered about how those I knew back on land were handling this, if it was truly that wide-spread. I imagine having your house hit by a falling star would be a much bigger deal than a capsized boat. Wait, no, they're both bad, and would both likely result in death. West, we continued to head west. In silence mostly, but The Venerer occasionally talked to me when he was so bored out of his mind, he had nothing better to do than entertain me. But he seemed a little too focused for that right now. Ah well. The cold air did wonders for keeping me awake, as well as the occasional sea spray,

and slightly less occasional splash from those huge fucking monsters landing too close for comfort. Well, it certainly kept me awake.

We'd been rowing for what felt like an hour before the man in front of me spoke. It was a relief to hear his annoying, snivelling rasp because it reminded me that I wasn't truly alone in this world after all.

"It's clearing up," he said, tilting his head back slightly.

"Is it fuck? I keep getting spattered whenever they fall!"

"No, look," he insisted, and as I looked to confirm I was entirely more baffled than I was to begin with. There were plenty more in the sky, twinkling elegantly as they fell, but after a certain point up they simply stopped. It looks like the sky had run out of stars to hurl at our freezing bodies, and so relented. It wasn't over by far but it was certainly a relief.

And so, with that eventual solace in mind, we rowed with newfound vigour. The Venerer, every so often, would stretch out his legs to try and regain his balance, and so I had taken to stepping on his feet whenever he did so. In dire times we must find humour in benign ways. I'd laugh, he'd just stare at me like I'd just stabbed him; it was great. Serene, even.

Until specks of rain and rolling thunder rang across the horizon. The Venerer was the first to make mention of it, since I, personally, was rather happy with simply watching the flecks mingle with his perfectly lying hair, even after so many days on the windy sea, and drip down onto the beard that had begun to sprout on him, which was a rarity since he made his best attempt to eradicate it at all times, and I must admit was a lovely change to his ever-stern, never changing face.

"Gods, that's a storm! This ragged hunk of wood won't survive that." In the cold, our breaths were visible, but the way the Venerer was speaking right now, he could make his own fog around us. I, understanding his worries, remained calm, leaning back as far as I could without tipping the boat, and put my oars down for just a second, so I could focus on the other man.

"So? Relax, what's the worst scenario? Our boat ends up capsizing, we drown out here in the cold, stormy waters, and we're never thought of again?"

"Yes. Literally yes."

"And why does that worry you so much, Venerer? A nameless death is hardly the worst fate life could give us," I said, trying to keep my voice low and relaxed so as to not accidentally enrage the beast, "I thought you'd be the calmer one here, my friend, being a hunter and all. Steadying your bow, keeping still. I hardly see a skilled hunter in you right now, the one I almost lost my life for." I could see flecks of shame in the man's eyes, and that continued to annoy me, so I continued, "what we need right now is unity, not some half-baked fear of dying without purpose." I stretched out my hand while still trying to lean back as if to tell him I didn't care that much, and it didn't really matter to me if he went and got us both killed.

After a few moments of deliberation, he took my hand in his jovially. I began to laugh and he quickly joined in, grabbing our oars once again in newfound determination.

The storm continued to brew, but it was luckily still a ways out.

“You know, sometimes I wonder if you do like me after all,” the Venerer said, seemingly out of nowhere. It took me a moment to notice he was speaking, and then another moment to register what he was saying, which caught me quite unaware. He seemed to notice my stuttering and giggled, before tacking on a cheap, “forget I said anything.”

Damn fucking right I will.

I couldn't really make out what he said next, he spoke purposefully under the waves and wind, “You're blushing, friend.”

But he soon sighed and went back to rowing like nothing had happened, and I was eagerly doing the same, mesmerised as the sea rippled up and down in the distance. Ah, it really was rather beautiful out here, all problems considered. I could really get used to this—

“HOLY FUCK! WHAT IS THAT NOISE???” I screamed out, surprising even myself. An excruciatingly loud siren had begun playing, bellowing out from under the fog. My associate had thrown his hands up to his ears almost immediately, while I mouthed something close to “lets chase that stupid siren, it could be other people” in his direction, which I'm sure he was completely and totally paying attention to.

Sighing, I went to pick my oars back up, but before I could actually begin rowing, I was blinded.

“Goddess, is that you?” both me and the Venerer spoke in unison.

“Sit tight, uh, lads? We're coming to rescue you,” a voice of what sounded to be an old man boomed. We, obviously, did exactly what was asked of us because despite the fact I was a hired killer I would rather not disobey a deity in my time of near death.

Apparently, God looked very similar to a yacht, and when he threw his ladder down to us plebians in the sea, we quickly grabbed on, eagerly awaiting our ascension.

“What? Lads, you've got to climb! You're both a little too heavy for us,” the same old man who was much less imposing while speaking at a normal volume, shouted down to us.

I, slightly embarrassed now, climbed up the rope ladder, with my friend following closely behind. I felt significantly less embarrassed when I saw the people who met us at the top.

There were three of them; an older man wearing a tan suit and monocle, a middle aged woman in a dress and another person, similarly in a floor-length, hip-padded dress. They all stared at both of us expectantly, and all I could bring myself to do was stare at the Venerer, who walked slightly in front of me, bowed and spoke:

“My friends, thank you ever so much for saving my associate and I from his horrendous weather. For the rest of our voyage, we are in your debt.”

“Alright, son. You both look quite tired, so we've got some rooms set up for you, if that's alright.”

Me and my friend spoke at the same time: “That's perfect,” and “One room is enough.”

Realising what the other had said, we corrected ourselves.

“One is fine.” “No, go with two.”

The older man, in an attempt to save us, made a polite interruption, “Well, we’ve got two rooms free, so feel free to pick and choose as you see fit.” One of the others behind him giggled behind their hand, while the man leant in close to us, “and you should probably both go for a shower too. You smell horrible.”

“Ah—Thank you,” the Venerer said, stumbling slightly over his words while nodding to me to shut up and follow him. I complied, not wanting to cause a scene so soon in front our captive neighbours for the next few days.

The two rooms that were free were one between two rather loud cabin-mates, and a decidedly quieter one at the end of the corridor and with two windows, so we both decided to settle into that one. At the very least we were lucky it was a double bed, although even a single would be more space than we’d shared during our time on our small boat.

My partner had taken to the beautifully detailed chair in the corner of the room, while I had sprawled myself out across the bed, which felt gargantuan to my cramped, damp body. At least I had the decency to take my boots off at the door, unlike that boor I was sharing a bed with— oh shit.

“So, uh... Where do we go from here?” the Venerer said, perched gracefully on his armchair. I got up so much so as to prop myself up in his direction.

“Well, you could start by taking that shirt off...”

“No, you idiot! About the boat, these prudish socialites! How do we get them off our back?”

“I mean, we are their guests, I guess. Anything they throw at us is a mercy compared to our own boat. Besides, it’s not like we can go back to that decrepit thing,” I trailed off. The other man shot a piercing glare right through me, and I knew that was my sign to shut up. I rolled myself back over onto the bed, which by then was slightly damp from my wet clothes. The Venerer sighed.

“These walls are paper thin, brute. Besides, I don’t know, maybe going back to our own boat would be worth it—”

“You’d rather we risk our lives rather than stay here with some strangers?”

“Well yeah, but they’re really annoying—”

“No! We’re staying here, and we are reaching land. End of.” I thought it was quite strange that my partner on the exquisite armchair hadn’t continued arguing with me, considering it had been one of our favourite activities for the past few weeks, but I soon caught his gaze reaching through me and behind to the—

Our cabin door was open ajar, and I instinctively grabbed one of the daggers I keep on my belt and hurtled it towards the door, it mercifully caught the frame.

“State your intentions friend, unless you’d like a mutiny on board this fine ship,” I say, trying my darndest to sound intimidating through the wind and waves which had practically become my being.

It seemed to have worked, however, as the figure behind the door began nudging it open once more, feet trembling with every miniature kick. After a moment, the view of the woman who met us at the boat was made clear. She spoke, but quietly, and with a tremble in her voice.

“Uh, sirs, yes, I’ve heard that—”

“Speak louder, good lady, for we can’t hear your muttering,” my associate chimed in.

“Of course, sirs. Here are some towels, and a fresh set of clothes for you both.” She had by now made her way fully into our room, and was holding the pile of clean clothes and towels outstretched. I went to pick them up myself, but the Venerer stopped me, which was fair enough the woman would probably faint if she saw the state below me, and got up himself to grab the pile, thank her, and bid her goodbye.

After she had left, we both sighed.

“They have got to stop sneaking up on us like that,” I said below my breath.

“No shit.”

We both look around the room for a second, unsure of what our next actions should be, given talking was seemingly incorrect. I had gotten up and started pacing, staring out of either tiny window as they passed my view. The stars were still falling, it seemed, although it was quite miraculous neither their own nor this new boat had been hit yet. Maybe whatever lives up in the skies just enjoyed seeing us shit ourselves, and it was simply one big game to them.

Anyway, it didn’t take the Venerer long to notice the disgusting state I’d left our bed in, and immediately looked me directly in the face and said, “We are going to the showers right now.”

“Oh—ah yeah, shit,” I chuckled as he crossed his shoulders, sighed, and then shooed me backwards towards the door. I turn, before looking back quickly.

“You sure we’ve got everything?”

“Yes. Now move, you brute.”

I hadn’t noticed the last time we walked through these halls, as I had much else on my mind then, but they were quite tight. The venerer walked in front of me, and his shoulders appeared to hit either wall as he walked, aided by the sway of the boat. I would have had the same problem if my shoulder pads hadn’t been destroyed soon before we departed, but that’s just yet more proof of my wonderful and amazing unluckiness-becoming-foresight abilities (God I’m so cool).

The showers sucked. It was one room, three showers. There was not a lick of privacy, besides the lock on the door... housing all three showers.

As we both stood, staring at the three-showers-one-door-with-the-only-lock marvel, I marched straight in.

“Right, come on, let’s get this over with,” I said with a gruff disinterest in my voice. I was stopped with a hand on the chest.

“Easy tiger. Take your clothes off first,” the Venerer said, with equal disinterest. I stood there, staring dumbfounded at him, so much so that my blinks were audible. The only noise I could bring myself to make was a cross between verbal confusion and a scoff. Like yeah? Right here buddy? He, however, continued giving me a serious look.

Finally, my mouth had unstuck, and I promised to throw my clothes out into the hall once I was in there.

Once I was done, he handed me my towel, and then the clothes the woman had given us. They certainly... Fit? At least I think they were supposed to be so constricting that a single good laugh would rip it apart. It would certainly describe a lot about these types.

Once I was dressed, I did the same for my friend, who was sitting out in the hall meditating to himself. I shook him slightly, nodded to the door, and promptly got to twiddling my thumbs.

Once he was done, I handed him his towel, then his clothes, through humming some old tavern shanties to myself as some sort of anti-socialite repellent. I soon heard the door beside me creak open, and looked up to meet the man my friend was forced to become. It was hilarious, yes, the shoulder seams barely lined up with the man’s own shoulders, any slight give the man's body had wrestled out of the outfit was at its extreme, and the miserable face on the man himself was the cherry on top. I desperately wanted to laugh but, well, I want to remain clothed and frankly I’m absolutely not in the place to tell another man how ridiculous he looks.

He definitely saw me, watching his embarrassed movements, and a redness crept across his face. He went to cross his arms in protest, before throwing them back down after hearing something rip tremendously. We exchange looks of panic, before I cut in.

“We should, uh, get moving.”

“Yes. Yes, definitely.”

We turned to head back to our room but were quickly caught by one of our terrifying new shipmates. He threw his arms out as he saw us, and his eye sparkled.

“Ah, sirs! You both look wonderful, absolutely dashing if I might say!”

“Uh, you can... You can absolutely say that,” I said, not trying that much to obfuscate the mix of confusion and disgust on my face. My partner, just slightly behind me, was trying his best to not move his arms in any way, lest his sleeves shatter.

“Marvellous, absolutely marvellous! Come, we must introduce you to the others,” the garish man ushered us back down the corridor we had just so tenderly escaped and past the showers into

a new maze of tight corridors, accented with me and my friend's shoulders lightly bumping each wall as the waves lightly jostled us.

We had soon reached a large open room, filled with all sorts of tables and games, all surrounding a circle of beautifully decorated ornate armchairs which in turn surrounded a large round coffee table. There were 6 seats, one for each room onboard, of which three of them were filled. Two, I recognised from our first encounter with the vessel, and one neither of us had met, a shifty looking fellow in a big coat and dishevelled hair. Frankly, from the sight of him, I trusted him far more than anyone else right now.

The man soon pushed us towards the table, before plopping himself down next to the woman from before, who had changed into a more relaxed dress which was easier to sit in. We both hesitated for a moment before I took the opportunity to sit next to my favourite shifty fellow, leaving my partner to sit between the man and the other person from before, now wearing a casual suit with a fascinator. They were the first to speak up, grabbing their glass from the table, their movements so clearly rehearsed and forced. It was rather a waste of an interesting-seeming person.

"So, sirs, would you like something special to drink?" They peered into us. The Venerer simply put his hands up and shook his head, while I gave a simple, "I'm good, thanks."

They appeared to be unphased, simply pausing a moment before speaking again.

"I'm Audrey Gallahan. Don't forget it." The Venerer smiled at them and responded.

"Nice. I'm, uh—Ven Deoradhán," he punctuated himself with a sly grin.

I simply gave a casual nod, "Bond Deoradhán." The person raised their glass and toasted the air.

"Well, it's lovely to meet you two boys. Here, would you like to have a quick chat outside?" Their intense stare didn't exactly let us say no. They led us back out to the hall of which we'd entered, myself following behind both the stranger and my friend "Ven".

After we were a good bit away from the rec room's ill-fitting, creaky door, Audrey turned back to us. The calmness in their face was gone, their mysterious edge sliced in half to reveal bloodshot eyes and snarling teeth.

"I don't know who you think you are, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave," they hiss. I, refusing to move my face, go to cross my arms dramatically before remembering how bad of an idea that is, before the Venerer cut in.

"Oh yeah? And who do you think we are, friend?" I don't have to see his face to know of the massive smirk across his face. Audrey points at us threateningly before scoffing.

"I- Ugh, just know I've got my eye on you. Don't go trying to kill anyone."

They try their best to push past my friend, end up hitting him straight-on, and try their best to push past us in the hallway we practically both take up each. Eventually they ask to be let through, and of course we comply because we're not that heartless, but we did have a little chuckle about it before turning back to the rec room.

We didn't exactly make it to the room, however, as Audrey, who was a good few steps in front of us, the second they push past the crooked door, screamed.

"Oh, God! There's been a murder!" They turn back towards us, running as fast as their impractical heels could carry them.

While letting Audrey past, me and the Venerer looked at each other, deciding neither of us really wanted to deal with that right now, and we just decided to go back to our room. We'll get to shore eventually, and at least that way we can do so in peace.



## *Taking Ovar Me*

For Morgan

With a thud of paper stacks, the young man speaks to the person before of him:

“You need to hear this, sir. It’s about, uh—our recent issue.”

“Oh? What’s the update, young man?”

“O-okay, ahem—”

### Mar 18

Dear diary, today was a weird one. Cassie looked at me in the lunch hall today, what a bitch (mum told me to stop swearing). I hate Cassie. We also had a new girl today, although I didn’t catch her name. I don’t think I like her though, she pushed past Matthew in the hall too, he told me, said she wanted someone to give her a drink. I did see her with a few people, I think she sat with Cassie and whoever she hangs out with during lunch, which is good. Good that I can avoid both of them at once, that is. I am happy she’s not alone too; new schools are hard. Anyway, Matthew and I had an AWESOME Beyblade match!!! But then John (the prick) stole my winning Endurance Blade! I hate him!! Whatever, I don’t even care anymore. Ok, bedtimes! Bye, diary!

### Mar 19

Cassie was annoying again today. She and the new girl hung out all day, she didn’t even look at me in the lunch hall, even when I shouted at her to annoy her. I got so annoyed that I went over to see what was wrong with her (what else, I should say) and all she would talk about was how much she hated my clothes. Are my 50’s housewife dresses really that bad, diary? She called me something, too, but I didn’t catch it. Oh, I said hi to the new girl too, she was really nice. Much nicer than Cassie. She invited me to Hot Topik, or however you spell it. I hadn’t asked Mum so I said no, but she was super nice about it! She said I could come next time. I asked her name, too. Her name is Ebony!”

He pauses. The men exchange glances at each other before he continued reading:

### Mar 20

Diary, what do I do? Ebony is being so nice, I ended up sitting with her and... Cassie was really quiet today, actually. I asked her if she was OK, I was used to her being so loud. She didn’t say much, but she was being weird so I didn’t bother her. Her eyes were dark like the Black Parade. Anyways, Ebony and I are getting along super well! She was telling me all about how goth she is- goths are so kewl!! I love them and I luv Ebony <3 We’re going to the mall together tomorrow, I’m super excited!

### Mar 21

Diary, Hot Topic was so coooooo! Me, Ebony and Cassie had so much fun! There were so many kewl black clothez and I bought sooo many of them! Cassie told me I looked like a prep, and prepz are evil and ugly. Ebony agreed with her. Oh, I can’t wait to go to school tomorrow as a goth! All three of us are going to match! See you later, diary!

### Mar 22

Oh no, diery, what do I do now? Matthew thinks I've betrayed him for Cassie and Ebony. I don't really like Cassie, but how do I tell him that? He was in the hallway while me, Ebony and Cassie did our slow-mo, post-makeover goth walk with a shot panning up (we're, like, soo famous now) and he totally ruined the moment by pulling me aside! He sed he was concerned about me? And that I'm changing? As if it's my fault that Eboy is just so kewl and goffik and vampirik. NEway, he told me we couldn't be fred's anymore if I kept hanging out with the goffs, so I decided to prove too him how kewl and noice Ebony really is! They didn't really seem to liek each other, but I hope they liek eech other soon!"

The larger, more gruff man noted a shake in the reading man's hand holding the document, choosing a new spot of him to stare at every few minutes. He pressed his fingers together before speaking up, waiting until after the end of the entry.

"Woah woah woah, hold on. This 'Matthew', do we have an identity, a location on him? He could help us," he said. The other man sighed before staring erratically behind him before talking.

"I, uh, don't think that'll be possible, sir. Here, I'll keep reading." The man's nod led him back in.

### Mar 23

I'm not so sure about Ebony right now. Everything is strange. Finding it hard to express myself. I might go back to just hanging with Matthew; maybe being goth isn't for me. Then again, I did see Matthew talking to Ebony today. I hope I don't lose him too.

### Mar 24

OK so, Enoby is helping me dye my hair tomorrow!! I might have overreacted yesterday. So, us Goffiks were all sitting in the shade together, talking about Good Charlotte and how much we hate prepz, and Ebony was telling us about vampyrez! We were obsessed ofc. Bebnoy said that my red hair was prepie, and I hate prepz so she offered to die it with me! I'm going black because I'm goth and then Ebboy is going to tell me more about vaimpores! So excited!!!! XD!!!!!"

"So, is this the... "gothaganda" we programmed in?" the gruff man responded between laughs, appreciating the humiliating performance playing out in front of him.

"The very same. Seems like it's very proficient," the younger man was as stern as ever.

"Right. Skip forward a bit, young man, and you can start skimming from here. I think we get the point." The younger man gave him a sharp nod before continuing.

### Mar 29

Pairunts and prepz are so UGALIE!!!!!!1!!!! I stuck my middle finger up at zom prepz and pairantes because they're uglees and I h8 dem. Dood, blood is so kewl. Enberry loves blood so eye doo two! Hehe xx ilysm diary X3

### Mar 30

Nebnoby startd d8ing Matnew, well he goes by Caynine nao and heez sooooo kewl and goth lyke us. We all go out and warship Saytin and itz so cool and aesthetic XD. Speekin of teefs, Yenabob sed I can become a vimpiore sewn!!! I'm seeew exceeitad XDDDDDD!!!!!!! Mabee Cassie, no she's called Cascadia now, can bee one two!!! Okee Bai Diareee!!

### Mar 31

AHHHHHHH!!!! OMG!!! Tonites the nite, diarayy!! Erbonym is taking me out in the dusk of nitetimez to do a blood ritual!!!1 AHHHHHH IM GONNA BE A VAMAIPORE DIORIA!!! She said dat dis wood be like a rebirth? I don get it but she said itz soopar kewl and like becoming a new persun. Soooo, I think I'm gonna do a new intro tomorro!!! EEEE dis is sooooo exciting!!

### Apr 1

Hai! X3 My name is Morgan Dahlia D'usky Neurosis Wednesday Williams and I have long dusk black hair (dats how I got my name) wif red streaks down my back and entrancing brite orbs lik an oshead of tearz. A lot of pepol tell me I lewk lick Amy Lee (if you don't know who dat is get da hell outta here!!!!!!) I'm a vampyre but my teef ar strate and white. I'm goffik, in case you couldn't tell. I luvv Hot Topik and I get all my clothes from there. I'm also a witch, I go to a school called—

“STOP! I've heard enough of this drivel, young man! Tell me, what are our next movements to be?” the gruff older man yells from across the desk.

The young man looks up from his lap to see the sterile office.

“The report ends here, anyways. Boss, what is this?” The man says, combing through the entries yet again with his finger.

“This is an excerpt from a diary, supposedly a victim of one of the escapees in the recent security breach. Our bio-weapon has been let loose on innocent children and it's causing havoc. We must get her back; the liabilities already are far too great. We've heard intel she's taken over an entire Wizarding school already. Additionally, we don't know her plans. She may be building a vampire army in an attempt to overthrow our company or even the government. We must detain her at all costs. Got that?”

“Gotcha, sir. Operation “Sweet Sacrifice” is now underway!”

## Regulus Wolfe

*right/wrong*

*Content warning: Death*

you fell in love with me as the world ended  
the heat death of the universe must have matched my eyes

you clung to me as the waters rose  
did you even see that it was me?

i think you were desperate  
for a hand to hold as the atmosphere burned

i don't think you wanted to kiss me, in the end

right feeling, wrong time.

i didn't love you when the world ended  
your eyes weren't as dazzling while the stars collided above us

i let you hold me as the sky rained fire  
did i really not love you anymore?

i think i was just desperate  
for someone to stay with me when the universe tore apart

i'll never know if i stopped wanting you, in the end

right time, wrong feeling.

*your friends don't really like you*

*Content warning: Depression*

your friends don't really like you, kid,  
they talk behind your back.  
don't let them know you hear it,  
don't let your cover crack.

your parents don't care what you say,  
the words you pull from the blue.  
you are not what you say you are,  
don't let your views be skewed.

you're all alone, with how you think,  
no one will agree.  
don't act like it's not your fault—  
dispute won't set you free.

shrink away into your soul,  
agony packed alone.  
you are not how you say you are,  
and no one will ever know.

people pass in shades of grey,  
their whispers hissing drivel.  
don't act like you're dissatisfied,  
you know you must be civil.

you are not who you say you are:  
you are dreams unfulfilled.  
paint your lying mouth with stars;  
swallow that bitter pill.

## *No Sugar*

My parents came to visit last week.

I heard. You doin' ok?

...I don't know.

Do you wanna talk about it?

There's not much to say, is there? It's always kinda weird when parents come to visit.

Especially when they live as far away as yours, I guess.

Yeah.

...

It just feels like an invasion, you know? Like they're trespassing on my life.

They're your parents. That's what they do.

You aren't wrong. It's different, though.

Do you want some more tea? I can put the kettle on. This seems like a 'more tea' conversation.

Yeah. D'you still have that fruit stuff? It was nice.

I have half the box left. Sugar?

No. Not a sugar conversation.

Alright.

...

So how's it different?

Well, you know what it's like if your mum barges into your room, right?

Yeah. So it's... not like that?

No. It feels like they're breaking into my house, somehow.

Even though you technically live with them? And also, you said they could come and stay with you.

I know it doesn't make any sense.

That's not what I said.

You implied it.

Well, I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. Why does it feel like that?

Your parents are kind of everywhere when you live with them, so you're just a bit resigned to them eventually coming in when you're busy.

...

If you want to have friends over, or to go to a friend's, then you need to go through them, right? Like they're... a bureaucracy.

Gotta do the paperwork to have the friends.

Exactly! But when you go away to live without them, you don't need to do that anymore. You can keep as many secrets as you want and have as many friends over as you can manage, and they never need to know about any of it.

So, when they come over to visit when you're up here...

It's like the government just came into my house, and I haven't filed any paperwork in years.

...

...

I feel like this metaphor isn't working anymore.

It isn't, but I'm attached to it now.

...

I know that I don't really live here. But it feels more like home than home ever did.

...

I feel more like myself here than I think I ever could with them.

...Yeah.

...That was a bit depressing, wasn't it?

We live in Aberdeen, everything's depressing this time of year.

You didn't say that when you dragged me out of my very comfortable bed at five in the morning to walk all the way to the beach for the sunrise.

That is an entirely different scenario to this, and you know it, you little shit.

My frostbitten toes say otherwise.

See if I ever take you and your frostbitten toes anywhere again.

## 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 continues to be scary, but also exciting! Whilst I mostly write creatively in Danish to stay in touch with my mother tongue, I've been getting back into writing poetry this year. My writing is often inspired by my research, which deals with depictions of lesbianism in visual art—so lots of references to classical antiquity and queer love.

My time with the Creative Writing Society has been a bit like an enemies-to-lovers relationship. I originally joined in my first year at the University of Aberdeen, all the way back in 2018. After taking a break, I returned during lockdown in my third year of undergrad, was Secretary in my fourth, and this year, I've been President! It's been amazing watching our members grow both as people and writers over their time in AUCWS. We have some brilliant people with great ideas, which you've gotten a taste of here.

I'll be stepping down as President after this academic year, and as the most senior member of AUCWS, I feel a bit like a proud mum. With that said, I hope you've had a wonderful time with the sixth edition of our Compendium!

### *Blair Center (Vice-President)*

I am 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 did not write again until my second year at university, when I joined this society. Freya once referred to me as 'our poetry-guy'; I'm not quite sure how to feel about that. Although, I suppose it is true; I have worked hard to successfully encourage the proliferation of poetry 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 am engaged in the local poetry community in Aberdeen, having had work published by Leopard Arts, and, as I am local, having grown up in Inverurie, I have a strong sense of locality. This emerges in my work in themes of memory, heritage, identity, place, belonging, and in the language I employ, as I occasionally make use of Doric. This is my first year on the committee; it is my third as a member. Take it from me, as one whose skills were developed, formed, and shaped in this society where I have made many friends: joining is one of the best things you will do at university. After this year, I will no longer be the Vice-President of AUCWS. I am proud of what we have achieved together.



### *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 to reprising my role as treasurer this upcoming year. With that being said, I'm also glad to look upon the compendium as a culmination of the massive amount of effort our members continue to put in!

*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, overlooking gift exchanges, and everything our dear president and vice president are too busy to take care of themselves.

This past semester has been a wonderful time, and I hope you all can experience just a tiny amount of the joy that I feel every time I walk into one of our meetings every week. Thank you!

We are super excited to close out our sixth 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 7), and make sure to tune in for the next edition of the Creative Writing Society *Compendium*!

