

the Creative Writing Society

Compendium



Winter 2023

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Editor's Welcome

Welcome to the seventh edition of the Creative Writing Society Compendium! All of the pieces within these pages have been written, edited, and produced by members of the Creative Writing Society, and have been discussed and improved in our weekly meetings. This digital, termly publication displays the work of our talented, marvellous group of writers, in a collection of prose and poetry with a variety of genres and styles.

We are incredibly proud to publish this. It has been a project for us, and the involvement from the members of our society has been staggering. We'd like to thank all of our writers, editors, and members who have worked tirelessly to make this happen, this couldn't have been possible without you all.

If you're a writer or just enjoy hearing/reading others' writing, we'd love to see you at one of our meetings! The details are all on the next page, and if you're interested in getting involved with the next issue of our Compendium, 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.

We offer a space for writers of all types and abilities. Whether you like high fantasy and adventure or sombre, introspective poetry, you are more than welcome! You will find a group of enthusiastic, creative fellow writers, who get up to more than a few rounds of shenanigans. So don't be afraid of being a bit goofy. In the end, we are all here to improve as writers and make new friends. And who says writing shouldn't be fun?

The Creative Writing Society Compendium was originally created in 2020 by our former Vice-President, Alastair Fyfe. Since, the Compendium has only grown, and become a grand, award-winning tome of wonderful works.

Open to students in Aberdeen and those connected to the student body, writers and readers alike, AUCWS welcomes you. 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

Once the academic year resumes in January, we'll meet on campus at 6PM every Thursday. If you're unable to join us in person, you can do so via a Google Meet link that will be given out on our 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!

Instagram: [@au_creativewriting](#)

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

E-mail: 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!

Martin Beretti

Un Cimitero: il Tempo, l'Amore, la Rabbia, la Morte

Content notes: gore, bugs, violence

Dead – Gone

A day – A year

My longing is terminal and unescapable

Would you like to see me – my rotting flesh?

Come

meet me at the graveyard

dance with me under the moon

(he smiles at us)

until the sun rises

(she weeps)

and lets you see

the worms

in my stomach are dancing too

Do I disgust you – enough?

Swallow me

make me die again

I gut you

I grip your throat and make you cry

I eat your skin

All of my devotion turns violent – sacrificed on an altar

My rotting lips

would kiss yours just fine

Decompose on me

Love

the dead flies around us

in the negative space

sleep and rot – we can enjoy it

My love is vengeance
and I'm a dead man
unlovable

Tommy Berntsen

K1//_SWITCH

Content notes: panic attack, gore

He could not see more than two metres ahead. The rain hammered on his synthweave coat. He could not hear much besides that. The gate into the apartment block parking lot did not work. He walked through it without paying. The parking lot had seven cars and a van. He looked at the windows of the apartments. The lights were on in three of the windows. He saw a man sitting by one. The man was crying, and another person held him. He walked into the apartment block. The hallway had stairs going up, and stairs going down. He went up four flights of stairs. Each level had people. He walked past them. The people looked at him. He did not look at them. The hallway continued in both directions. He walked left. The numbers on the doors increased. He stopped past door four two three. The wall was thin. He used his optics. The people inside were shown in red. He saw a person against the wall. The person was smoking. He saw two people next to each other. The two people were moving their hands. He saw one person sitting. The person was looking at their hands. He saw one last person. The person was away from the others. He took a breath. The bar displayed in his vision. He saw the bar emptying. The text was red.

DISABLING E.I.S.

Xander pulled in a breath. The air in the hallway was thick with the smell of mildew, smoke, and stale piss. It crawled along the walls, oozing into his nostrils and he had to fight not to retch. He loathed the idea of leaving his jacket on the floor, but it would not stand up to what was about to happen.

As he pulled his arms free of the sleeves, he felt it. It crawled in the wake of the slimy, hot air in the hall. He steadied his shaking breath, but on it crept. The tide was rolling in.

The jacket wavered as he put it on the floor. The breath in his nose drew in unevenly and he felt sweat run into the grooves in his skin. His subdermal armour felt tight under the skin and the wire nerves in his arms jittered. His hands shook.

The walls closed in around him and his breathing failed. The flood roared closer, and his vision shrank and his hands shook and his breathing came in stutters. He was here. He was there. The pitch-black waters lapped at his ankles; he could not breathe.

His voice. His eyes. The longing for his touch.

Her voice. Her eyes. The way her touch felt.

Their voices. Their words. They talked. They hated.

He was different. He was not of.

He should drown. He should not be.

He drew back a fist and tightened the other on his pistol. He felt the synthetic muscle of his left arm coil and tighten. It jittered. But no longer with fear.

With a glorious peal of thunder, the wall crashed around his impacting fist. His fingers found the neck of the person on the other side. The cacophonous sound of yelling harmonized with the wild firing of guns. And he fucking loved it.

The person in his grasp struggled as the wall finally crumbled away. Xander looked into what once was the apartment's living room. Now it was occupied by a table covered in beakers and burners, a table covered in money and three hapless gonks about to learn why you do not market your shit in a fixer's territory. At least not without giving them a cut.

The people by the money table stared slack-jawed at Xander. He bathed in their awe and fear like a god. A percussive clap snapped him from his reverie, and he felt something impact the side of his head. The goon in his grasp had dared a cheap shot!

Xander smiled down at the person, who looked a shade paler now, before looking back to the other two. "I hope you try a little harder."

He closed his fist, delighting in the snapping of the man's skin as it gave under his bionically enhanced strength. And the crunch as his spine caved was, ironically, spine-tingling. The limp body slumped onto the debris of the wall and Xander stepped into the room. He was sure to crush the head on the way, leaving a crimson and ivory-dappled rose on the floor.

The wet pop seemed to awaken the other two. In a flash, they grabbed irons and opened fire on Xander amidst a hail of profanities. Once more the symphony of ultra violence stirred, and he danced to the percussion of gunfire and the screaming melodies of panic.

In two steps, the spring pistons in his legs carried Xander within reach of the first victim. His eyes were hard and angry, but his bullets ricocheted impotently off Xander's body, ripping only through his clothing and skin.

As a response to his gun's call, Xander discharged two bullets into his knees. He yelled and fell backwards onto the table. The Eurodollar chits hailed down around them, a roll to the symphony.

With a flick of the wrist, Xander extended the rectangular blade from within his forearm. It revealed itself with a satisfying click only to slide into the belly of the remaining goon. The blade twisted in her gut and Xander flashed a wicked smile at the woman. Along with the man's, her howls of pain gave chorus to the symphony.

With a wet, stretching tear, Xander ripped the blunt side of his blade out of the woman's abdomen. He threw a scarlet brushstroke along the dirty floor; a red carpet to be decorated by the crimson tinsel of intestines.

He turned back to the man on the floor. He loved the look of hatred and defiance in his eyes. He needed them to be angry. He needed them to hate him. He needed to snuff out that indignation.

Xander emptied his gun's entire magazine into the goon, ripping flesh from bone and spraying a fine crimson mist on the walls. When the gun clicked its finality, Xander hurled it manically into the man's chest.

A flush. Seemed the unfortunate goon on the shitter had finished their business. Xander stared at the door as it opened, revealing one unfortunate fucker with headphones around his neck.

Before he uttered a word, Xander pounced. Closing the distance in the blink of an eye, he struck the gonk in the muzzle, peppering the doorframe with pulverized teeth.

He grabbed him by the back of his head and thunderously crashed his skull against the toilet rim. The metal warped on the first impact and Xander drew back to strike again. Again and again, he smashed the man's face into the toilet bowl, which warped and bent with each impact. Finally, when the walls dripped with red, and life had left the man, Xander pulled back. The warped bowl pinched the skin on the man's face, tearing it as he fell to the floor.

One person left. Or so he thought. His optics showed no more red outlines. Aside from the front door, only one option remained. Xander kicked the final door down, only to be met by the cold night air and sound of rain. The window was wide open.

The rain was both deafening and blinding as he stuck his head out, yet he could just make out a shape. It was running down the street, casting glances back.

Perhaps it was for the best, he thought. Leave one to tell others not to sell junk in Gabriella's territory.

Xander walked back through the carnage he had wrought. The bloody stains, bullet holes and debris gave him one last rush. One, which faded far too quickly.

He had not even reached his jacket in the hall before the waters lapped at his feet again. His chest tightened. His breath failed. The jacket bounced like a synthleaf in the wind as he hurriedly threw it on.

The questions. The fear. The anger. It was too much. It was too much!

ENABLING E.I.S.

THE EMOTIONAL INHIBITION SYSTEM IS A PRODUCT OF MÆND TECH.

MÆND TECH. YOUR ROAD TO RECOVERY

He saw the bar fill. The text disappeared. He walked away from the hole in the wall. The levels had no people. He walked down the stairs. The lights blinked. He walked out onto the parking lot. The rain hammered against his synthweave coat. He saw a man sitting by a window. The man was being held by another. He saw the man was no longer crying. The man was smiling now. He walked out through the gate. The gate did not require him to pay. He did not. The rain was continuing. He walked away from the apartment block. The rain continued. He walked towards Gabriella's club. The rain still fell.

David Bliss

Cut

Content notes: violence

cut
the sweet juice dripping
I part my lips
another sin
slips in
seeps out
a piece twisting in my throat
I swallow

“cut the man right out of me”

my freedom
her revenge
the taste of it on her tongue
neither bitter
nor sour

unlike the aftertaste of shame
or guilt
which she knew all too well
we both did
and wished to be freed

with one cut

perfect time

try feeling like
coming back is leaving
hot is cold
clear as night:

me is you; intertwined
my feelings never
glittered like gold
reflected on the glowing faces of onlookers

a perfect time does not exist
except when
you
long for a kiss

like you have in the past
you'll be sending me
back
and forth. left to right
upstream. down the paragraphs

you bet on a lie
knowing that the truth will never win
perfect time
before my ego hits the floor

shattering. is what you see yours?

drunkenness turned into burning lips
fight or flight?
the smell unknown
you dare look me in the eyes

at a perfect time?

Pink Speck

Each stroke
an act of repose
the colour of yolk
inmost, she knows

the flecks of paint,
which always adorn her,
have no restraint
finally, in the corner:

a single pink speck

the hairs on my neck
stiffen like the bristle

Ringling Remnants

The thoughts in her head were ringing
back and forth
Or rather singing
An aimless echo
beckoning
Each synapse a brightly coloured fizzle
bursting to fade into the background

With a sour taste on her tongue
she noticed, for the first time,
the breath of the pebbles beneath her feet
Their lungs heaving; heavy with air
 and debris of the dust
The weight of the sky
likewise pushing down on her
Her spine almost giving into the pressure
Til, ultimately, her form would be oozing
 into a puddle on the floor
Her bug bites begging for relief
Each one a toddler anxious to receive attention

 Finally, her voice cut through the brimming silence
The white sea foam in the sky shifted
And the remnants of last night in her eyelashes
 glittered in the light

red shirt

rude
every hair in place
flashing smile
red shirt
on the floor
show me something wild

beauty's pain
what to hold close
water bottle
turned stale
cool tiles on my skin
full is empty
empty is full

pick me up; would you
see you later, boys
anything but this
but i wanted this
pinch my skin
sink into my flesh

Emma Bristow

Flower I

Were I but a flower
Reaching as much as I might
To catch you as you fell,
I would not succeed.

But I can be pretty,
The last thing you see
As your eyes flutter closed for the last time.

I can grow over you,
A blanket of leaves and roots
To keep you warm as you decompose.

And I can weep,
As my petals fall away
Scattering in a mix of blue and white.

How I wish I had not been cursed to this
That I could have done more
But, as your blood waters me,
I can tell that you understand

I could have done nothing more.

Flower II

You are my whalefall, my love,
Even the most beloved of gardeners,
Will one day rest in the ground,
The flowers they tended above,
Relishing the taste of what remains.

I will feast on you as you decompose,
Drag you into my roots,
And create flowers tall and beautiful enough
To create a worthy tomb.

You should be grateful, my dear,
That a plant such as myself,
Cares enough to remember the name
Of the flesh it feeds on.

Please, understand,
I am but petals and leaves,
That could be blown away by the wind.
Why did you ever think I could have saved you?
I could have done nothing more.

Duncan Cameron

The Serial Killers

Content notes: gore, death

The rain never ceased in Paraska. Hodur had learned that before the other mechanoids and, what was more, he had learned to *like* it. How it trickled down his camouflaged plateskin and sniper's cloak and cooled his high-powered rifle.

Other robots had their own pleasures, at least the ones who had the processing power. The near-mindless gun-golems loved nothing more than hammering the same bunker network for the fifteenth hour and the, even worse, the *single-minded* Thor line breakers enjoyed rendering platoons of human soldiery back into primordial gore. Others, however...

He watched through his optic-linked scope as it ripped the throat from Colonel Van Vuuren. The man's mouth opened in a wordless howl, almost as wide as the dent in his neck. The creature was transformed into a crimson silhouette, tearing claw and grotesque mask spattered in arterial vitae. The colonel's face immediately turned an empty white and crumpled behind the bombed-out masonry. His bodyguard, flesh and blood and steel and rivets alike, were slaughtered with their commander, like cattle instead of frontline veterans. More of them were crawling out of places Hodur couldn't see or leaping from shadowed vantage points, down into the blood-mingled muck. He picked up cackling, an evil static that made his internal systems judder and reset.

Unease, he wondered. Uncertainty?

Fear. He felt fear.

He rose, a wraith within the rubble, ready to hunt the demons down. Wise Owl, prototype-primogenitor of Hodur's robot subspecies, the Strix-class Intelligence/Recon Unit, had opined to his younger siblings that they were as much a groundbreaking social experiment as a fulfilment of a much-needed tactical niche. They could process what it meant to feel emotion and, as such, had the trust of the human officers to operate independently within reasonable parameters.

The Strix were a success, proving the warrior-mechanoids were not just durable fodder but tactically invaluable if used correctly. Hodur had learned from Wise Owl that they had 'hearts'. Not the functional muscle, which pumped the red oil that fuelled the humans, his equivalent of that were multiple tiny generators and locomotive processing units which were superior to the circulatory system mankind had relied upon. These mechanical blessings allowed him to traverse the hellish landscape before him as quickly and as silently as an iron phantom.

It was black as deactivation, 0340 hours to be precise, and a Strix was custom built to be precise. Not better or superior to the mortals as the brutish Thors may think, in their mass-produced thought-waves.

Precise. So spoke Wise Owl, and so believed Hodur.

These beasts, however, shared that quality. They had struck hard, before even his optics had registered them. Van Vuuren, his command squad and what other troops he had guarding his position had been massacred without mercy. The kind of killing that required a certain precision. Strix-level precision.

He hunkered next to the colonel's bloodless corpse lay. His glazed eyes looked past Hodur, cutting into the weeping Paraskan heavens with the intensity of the murdered. Hodur understood in the advanced warfighting sections of his tech-brain that this was psychological. The few remaining humans left on the Paraskan Front, the commander-controllers who directed the bulk of the robot

army and their staff, the gunners of the gun-golems, the manned tank squadrons and the footsloggers of the skirmish companies, would see this broadcast on every channel. It would be whispered on every radio frequency and talked about in hushed rumour. Mortals would be crushed under the bleak tread of despair. That was a foe that even Hodur and his kin could not vanquish, nor the Thors or any other mechanoid battalion.

He knew this because it was what he had done many times to the enemy. The very ground sullied with Van Vuuren's exsanguinated life-stuffs had been in large part gained by the efforts of the Strix. Much of the mechanised strength of the enemy was nowhere near as advanced as his, and the flesh troops of either side shit themselves at the slightest bang, even the most understanding Strix could not deny that.

He surveyed the slurry that was once men, women and robots. He knew who's reaving talons and wicked blades had done this. He knew why and he would take them offline. He would ensure their parts were sent to the Smeltzone where they would languish in a half-melted purgatory.

They were his kin.

...

Strix ran as he shot. He'd followed their trail of hellish death to an abandoned enemy outpost. The ochre and silver colours of the enemy still flew, ragged and sodden. The dome's roof had been blown through by a shell, Hodur that had been why it was swiftly depleted of manpower; why defend something that was already rubble in a city, a nation, a continent that was slowly being consumed by it?

He took one through the glaring red optic. It whirled; the high velocity shot blasted apart half of its sculpted terror-visage of a faceplate. One more lunged at Hodur as he was scanning for another target. They were well-hidden in this sludge of mud and debris. That was why Wise Owl had bestowed upon him his name; a blind god worshipped by the ancient flesh of the world who had tried to see past his calling yet had doomed a celestial civilisation through his gullibility.

Always looking further away than he needed to, Wise Owl had said of him. How Hrym wished his mentor was with him now.

The lungers went down; a shot through the chest and motive coils. Two more fell to him, the first had its mouthpiece shattered and the second had talon meat arm-scythe. A glinting half-moon extended from Hodur's lower left arm and sheared through the malevolent spikes that made the creature's hand and bit deep into its metal cranium. Synthmatter burst out like Van Vuuren's blood had gushed from his neck, splattering Hodur in the lukewarm fluid.

'STR66059-432! STR66059-432!' Cackled the last one. It was wounded, clipped by one of Hodur's earlier shots. It lay immobilised upon the churned ground and leaked several dark liquids from a nasty gash where a human's rib cage would be. Sparks and mangled infrastructure peeked out from the wound. Its bolted-on demon's rictus leered up at him, arrogantly defying its killer.

'Present and correct,' Hodur said out of mock formality. If that hole wasn't fatal, what he was going to do to the traitorous thing would be.

Serial Killers, that's what he had been hunting. A branch of the Strix-class, they were close-quarters shock troops, sent in with a designated target's coordinates, set kill-count to reach or, where the moniker came from, a target's identity-tag serial number. A terror weapon, in all but name. Command had instructed him and the other Strix that a cohort of them had gone rogue, mad with the pleasure they found in killing. They had begun to nightmarishly chant the numbers of their own leaders behind the lines and slaughter them, using the same tactics of demoralisation as they had on the enemy *for the pleasure of it*.

Hodur shot it. Its head burst like a fragmentation grenade, showering the surrounding muck with shrapnel. Hodur hated them. He hated that they were essentially *kin* to him. Mostly, though, he hated himself.

The pleasure he took in executing it was something he would not let blind him.

Blair Center

Coming Gales

One falling conker cracks as it impacts the wet paving—
soft pale silk flesh beneath bleeds between and out outside spines,
all, all of it all—wings of seed—set to melt into mulch.

The last sluggish wasps groan irritable in October.
Tarrying butterflies flicker long, in fading flame's dance,
upon branches ablaze and desperate with all of them.

And that an old man should rest upon a quiet deathbed,
in his home village's hospital, before coming gales:
the winding down of things. The long season's sighing beat.

Penmanship

My father kneels slow to the lively hedge,
bare knees in grass, cap on the balding head
whose hairline serves as a promise to me,
a one way tide, like an inheritance.

My mother stands and watches his work,
most likely directing.

I cannot hear them from here, where I stand,
indoors, matching bouquets by the window.
Here, I read their anniversary cards,
where my father draws each kiss one swoop loop
with each cross-bottom tied fast to one side
like a superstition, ink-bottling love.

I try to shepherd words to tie love in.
Granny knits kisses, her line-tops hooked crooks.
The pen kisses the paper, hugs the page.

Oscar Cowan

How Gods Fall

Content notes: religion, suicide, gore, death

A King stands above his people. The people of Thebes who have lived in the beauty of peace for so long. He stares down at them, through the eyes clouded by ego, to the mass of faces below. Hears their cries, ones of sorrows and woes. Talking of disease, of the pollution of the town bringing destruction. He hears their calls, but they are meant for another. They are for the Gods. For Demeter, for Hestia, for Zeus. Yet their pleas remain unanswered.

“Why would they look to the Gods when I stand before them now?”

He responds to their shouts, with pleas for them to trust him. He will rid the kingdom of this blight, drive out the evil within the walls. Yet his words are a dagger, one pointed at his own breast. One his own hands held, twisted by the fate he was forsaken with. Words flow out of him, poisoned by fate, eagerly lapped up by the people who call him their Saviour. Who call him their King. Who call him their God.

A Saviour stands amongst the unknown, in a time long ago. The one that saved them from the Sphinx, Oedipus, the scorned prince of Corinth. All it took was one man, one broken stranger from outside to test the Sphinx, after so much bloodshed. They called to the gods and the gods blessed them with him. Their Saviour, their King, their God.

He was blessed with gifts. Of power, as he left this place without its King. Of love, tainted with the poison of shared heritage. Of wealth, left over from a father that he never knew existed. Our Saviour, our King, our God. For a kingdom without a king is a system without a heart. He is paraded through the streets, adoring hands touching him from all sides, faces full of smiles.

“How desperate are these people for someone to rule?”

He looks amongst the crowds, the faces blurring together in a sea of wordless mouths, desperate eyes and clawing hands. They cry their adoration, a mixture of sorrow and elation. He kneels in front of his advisor, one that shares blood, he knows this is what he deserves. He is a prince, rightful to a throne, rightful to this attention. He chose this path; he believes he has won.

As the crown is placed on his head, the poison falls into his eyes, obscuring his true vision. He turns to face the people he now rules, the people who look to him with such wonder. The people he will ruin, the bloodline he will scorn. As he stares out to the crowd, someone who has outwitted the Gods. Their Saviour. Their King. Their God.

The Ignorant gazes upon the enlightened. He has spent days finding this man, gathering all the resources he can. The all-seer. The so-called ‘prophet’ of this town. Blessed by the gods to know all the wrongdoings of every man, a curse for the king. A man who can see everything yet refuses to say anything.

Tiresias. A man blind to the world, yet all-seeing to the actions of the gods. One who refuses to kneel before his ruler. While others fear to defy the king, his defiance is keeping him alive. The many fall to the blight, yet tearing a family apart is a burden he wants not to bare. His intentions are twisted in the eyes of the Ignorant.

“How dare he mock me?”

He radiates heat, the world turning red. Anger seeps through his veins like blood, pumping into his heart and around his body, but it mixes with something else. Something more corrosive.

Fear. Fear engulfs his lungs, his head, his legs. Fear of the unknown, that the fate he tried so desperately to outrun, has somehow found him. The figure in front of him begins twisting into a new shape, writhing, and contorting into something no longer a man.

His skin becomes dull, the wrinkles on his elderly face become a patchwork line of scales, his fingers wrapped around his cane becoming sharp, ends elongating into talons, and his eyes. His eyes. Usually unfocused yet bright, now daggers pointed towards him, vibrant in colour, staring straight into his soul. Almost pulling it out from inside his body. Oedipus begins to shout at this thing before him, this thing he no longer recognises.

He can take those eyes no longer. His soul can be observed no longer, for it may take out what he has tried to escape for so long.

“Why do you fear me as your leader?”

Still, Tiresias stares. Stares back at the Ignorant, for his rants mean nothing. For he knows the truth that Oedipus has been so blind to. After the man has stopped with his ranting, claiming him to be a traitor, to have his head for his crimes, finally, he speaks. With one sentence he undoes the empire upon which Oedipus stands.

The truth of his ignorance, of his defiance having brought him more pain than anything that the blight could ever do. Fear fully engulfs him now, tearing through his body until it taints his vision. His fate stands in front of him now, sucking all the air from around him, a black hole for the joy he has experienced over the years. He knows he has slain this beast before, it can't have followed him here. As it extends its shadow towards him, a void that will take his soul, prying it from his still-beating heart.

An invisible barrier comes up to stop the truth from getting in. It protects his mind because his heart has already been broken. He sends the seer away, screaming that he is a fraud to anyone who will listen. The crowds gathered to see his performance, awed at what their King was saying. Of course, they come to him, they come to ogle at his display, agape at his words. The Ignorant pleads to the sheep, yet he can't change their minds.

“For he sees not what misery he has fallen.”

The Tormented strides through the crowds. He fizzles with anger; it seeps into his entire being. His mind swims with the revelation that he has lost it all. As he pictures the world, it crumples behind him. His life was a lie, he never outran his fate. Fate has dripped into his entire being,

seeping into his decisions, his love, his rule. The ideas swirl around his head, battling each other to settle into his ideals. He outran this life; he has bested the gods. Yet none of it was true, everyone had lied to him- even himself.

“I bested the gods; they should bow down to me.”

The people laughed at him; his entire kingdom was built on lies. Both his fathers are dead, though only one he carries the blade for. Yet both brought utter turmoil over his life. He storms through the streets, towards his solace. There she waits in his palace, protected from the horror of his life.

Jocasta. The queen of Thebes, a woman tangled in the web of the fates. Both her child and husband lost to it, yet gifted her lover, her children. She has been the constant for Oedipus in all these years, always by his side, a never-failing source of love. A love that was poisoned. He may have been blind to her fate, but never blind to her beauty.

Still, some parts of him wishes, wishes to be wrong about her. She is all he has left, no matter what she is to him.

He pushes his way into the house, thoughts pleading in his head to be well. The servants point upwards, towards their room. The room they have shared many a night embraced in each other's arms. The only place he has felt safe.

He flings open the doors, ready to embrace his love. There, she hangs, body still as pure as the moment he met her. His lover, his own mother, dressed in the robe from the night they first met, tainted by his fate. He has done this. She drips with the same darkness that came from Tiresias before, tainting her body from him. He cuts her down, grasping ahold of her body before it hits the floor before she is taken below.

He breaks. He weeps and he sobs. He lets go of everything he has lost; of everything he has broken. He weeps for his own torment and the trials that he has gone through. He stares out at the sun sinking over the city, painting the sky with vibrant golds and reds. He grabs Jocasta's hair pins, her favourite that she wore every day and raises them towards the sky, the gold in them mixing with the gold in the sky. He takes one more look and plunges them into his eyes. The blades pierce into his skull, sinking into the fate that created them, dripping that same dark colour.

For no more will these eyes see such torment.

The Accused stands among the accusers. He was drawn to this place, whether through fate or free will, and it was the first place he truly felt at home. Now he has nothing. Not even the people care for him now. They look down on him like he used to look down on them. They whisper and they judge, though they were the ones to welcome him in the first place. He pleads before them now, not for his safety, but for his children's. For the children he held so dear, no matter what they are to him now. He looks for solace in their protection, as it is the only thing he has left.

He embraces them, no longer as a father, but something more. A tainted past that only they can bear. One that will take maybe their children and their children's children, dripping like poison through their blood. He stands and faces the crowd, blind to their faces and bodies, yet reminded of

a moment from the past. As he walks through the crowd, towards his banishment, he feels the same adoration he once felt turn to disgust. Their Saviour, their King, their Blight. He is doomed to wander alone, cursed to never see the world again. Yet he bears it with his head held high.

“For no one has suffered as much as I.”

Ennis Freeman

Don't Go // Stay

Content notes: homophobia, war

I am where I always am when I wait for him.

I linger outside his house, like I always do, leaning against the railing of his porch, like I always do. Between my fingertips lies a carelessly plucked flower, found growing on the side of the road, taken to sate the rush of my mind. Spring, torn away from its shell to be held in my hand, having forgotten its true purpose. Perhaps this is that purpose, what it was meant for when it blossomed in the gentle warmth as seasons changed. But it means little, whatever purpose had lain in its bloom. It will die in a few days, anyway, and nothing will be left but a dried husk of its former beauty, preserved only by death.

There's some poetry to that idea, perhaps. Some terrible metaphor hidden beneath the petals, waiting to be plucked free into the world. If only I could see it.

When he finds me, he finds me where I've always waited, lingering outside his house, desperate for an invitation inside. To know I am wanted, to know I am desired, to make my mark outside this ghost of a being that I am here. His face, when I see it, is guarded, walled-off, like it never has been before around me. I long to dig my fingers behind it, pull that mask away from his face, and see the truth. But I would never allow myself to get so close, and he would never give up his safety so easily. We stand. We do nothing.

Dusk threatens the horizon with an end of everything, and it splashes amber light across us both, harsh in the sharp lines that cut our faces and hands. I wonder what the world will bring when dawn arrives. New beginnings, perhaps, for a butchered end.

"Is it true?" My voice sounds so pathetic, so weak, like the little boy I was when he first found us. We were so young, then, so afraid to voice the things that burrowed deep into our souls. The only difference, now, is that we're older, wiser, and the fear turned to surrender. We can't change the world. There's no point in trying.

He comes up to me, then, sits down on the steps, and doesn't look at me. "Is what true?" His voice is tight, and I hate him for it. I hate him for all those times where neither of us said anything, when we couldn't change the world, but maybe we could have been happy in spite of it. And now he's throwing it all away.

"You know what I mean," is all I say in return, because I can't say it any more than he can.

Maybe he truly hadn't expected anyone to know, he'd wanted to escape in the night without so much as a letter left behind. Maybe he thought everyone would just forget about him, and that he would run away from his own grief in the dark. There's a guilt that clings to him now, held close to the chest as if he's terrified it would fracture the walls he's so carefully built. If I were a better person, I wouldn't blame him for them. After all, my own walls are piled high around my heart, and I only ever grow them thicker, taller, stronger. But I am not better than the worst parts of me, and I despise him for it, because it's far easier than despising myself.

He reaches over and picks the flower from my fingers, studying it with a careful kind of quiet. I wonder what beauty he finds in it, if there's any poetry he can see that I cannot. Does he understand it better than I? Could he? "It's for the best," he finally says. "Trust me."

"Why?"

"Because you always have."

He's right. He's right, he's right, he's fucking right, and I wish that I could pry honesty from his lips and hear the truth, the real truth. Because if he doesn't say it, neither of us ever will. "That's not what I meant," I just say. "Why are you leaving? Why— No one comes back. You know that." The words feel like a death sentence and, in this moment, I realize that the path he's walking on is one I can never follow. He travels through the woods, across the world, towards a war that will only leave him with a broken body and shattered mind. I am tied here, unable to sever the rope that binds me to this land, a noose around my heart. But the other end of the rope is tied to him, and he's leaving. He's leaving me.

"I can't stay here. It's worse for you if I stay here. And there... maybe I can make a difference. And if it's a losing battle, and the world will never be the same, at least I tried. Tried to make it better."

"But why you?" I sound like a child, when I say it, a pathetic, petulant little child who can't imagine his favorite toy taken from him. But he isn't a toy, he's real, breathing life, standing before me, and I'm losing him. I can see him leaving me, and I can't stop him. "It doesn't have to be you."

He laughs, softly, like a terrible joke has passed between us. Part of me wonders if that crazed smile means that he knows. He knows that tonight, this one, last evening, is the final time he'll see me. That he doesn't expect to ever come home, come back. That he's saying farewell. "Some people come back. Some people get lucky."

"You're betting your life on luck. Is that enough for you?"

"No. I'm betting that my life, however inconsequential, means that at least someone stands up. Stands between the darkness in the Wastes and here. This town, these people..." Words fail him, for a moment. Then: "You."

It's more of an admission than either of us have ever allotted. We've known each other since we were old enough to know what a beating heart meant, since we were old enough to linger a breath too long on touches, since we were old enough to know that lingering too much longer meant death. We both know that terrible thing that hovers between us, that thing that cannot be said. We've known it since we were boys, together, and now he's becoming a man, and he's leaving me behind.

In these moments, as empty as they are of words, the silence is filled with the sense of him. Every breath fills the air, every sigh is as powerful as the wind, and I need to reach out and take his hand and beg him to stay. But I don't, because the ravine that splits us in the middle has always been deep and cavernous.

My breaths are shallow compared to his, and he has no right to be so calm in the face of death, whereas I am feeling every rotted bone in my body dropping away, leaving me with nothing. Honesty pulls from my mouth like a tooth, it tears from my chest like a rib, cracking out, and it's as painful as a wound.

"Don't go."

He becomes impossibly still beside me. "Don't say that."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't say no to you."

It's a war between how little I am willing to say, and how little he gives in return. We stand on the precipice of true honesty, the beginnings of a bridge to cross that ravine, and yet neither of us can truly say the words we mean. They are too terrible, too damning, too precious to be spoken aloud.

But still, I say them. "Stay here. With me."

"Stop..."

“You don’t have to go. I’ll protect you if they try and come for you. We can run away—”

“Don’t do this.”

“Don’t leave me, just stay here, please—”

“Stop!” The desperation in his voice stalls me entirely, words dying like flowers on my lips. “Please, don’t make me choose between two impossible things. Not between you and... and my duty. Don’t make me choose. Just... just go home, and forget about me.”

It’s sudden, it’s impulsive, but I shift to kneeling on the stair below him, and my hand is placed firmly over his heart, gripping his shirt in a fist, and I look him in the eyes and beg him to *listen*. “You are my home,” I hiss. “Don’t fucking leave me, please.”

“I don’t have a choice—”

“Yes, you do! Fuck, just stay here, run away with me, something else than what you’re doing now! Don’t send yourself to the front lines of a war that only wants to use you as a sacrifice, don’t send yourself away from me to die for nothing. Stay with me, and we can be everything. Everything we always wanted, everything we always dreamed, it’s here. It’s right here, right in front of you, if you just *stay*.”

He swallows. Once. Twice. Then, aching slow, his hand comes up to take mine, and he plucks it from his chest like it’s nothing. Like it means nothing. When he speaks, his voice is terrible in its earnestness. “With me, you’ll always have nothing. I’m drowning you, everything you could become. Let me cut myself loose, and you can find a life outside of me. Maybe, then, you can be truly happy.”

I feel that hate, that pain, that unrelenting grief that gnaws me hollow except for the parts of me that are wholly his. “Don’t you say a word about what makes me happy, not when you’re taking away the one thing that’s ever given me joy. The world is cruel, it is harsh, and it hates us. It *hates* us, but you were the one thing in this cruel, harsh, hopeless world that made each day worth going through. If you leave, I don’t... I can’t...” My eyes are filled with tears, and I give the closest thing to an honest plea that I can. “Hear me. Please tell me you hear me.”

“I have to go—”

“Hear me!” I almost scream. “Listen to my words, please, and hear what I can’t say. I can’t say it, you know I can’t, but you know it’s there, you’ve always known, as long as you *look*.” His hand hasn’t let go of my wrist, and I grab it forcefully, pressing it into my chest, not letting him go, not letting him leave me. “Do you feel that? That’s my heart, beating. That’s *your* heart, because it’s never truly been mine, not so long as I’ve known you. So, please, don’t go fight in a war that means nothing just because you cannot bear to stay. We can make something. Together. *Us*.”

His answering smile is pulled from what must be true anguish, the way it twists. I feel its echo carved into my heart. “I am nothing. No one. An orphan who stumbled out of the wrong side of the Wastes. And no matter what I made here, how much I managed to escape that past, no one will ever see me differently. I’m an outsider. I’m unwelcome. I’m a stain on you.”

I suppress a sob. “Don’t you dare,” I snap, the gravity of it lost in the tears that I can’t fight any longer. “Don’t you dare group me in with the rest of them, not when I’m me and you’re you, and not when I’ve fucking— All this time. All this time, and it doesn’t matter what they think, not when you’re worth more than the heavens themselves.”

“Exactly,” he replies. The word feels empty. “That’s the problem. You love me.” It’s the first time either of us have said it. “As long as I’m here, you’ll never be able to make anything of yourself. You’ll always be throwing yourself to the mud. You could have a life, a family, a home with a warm fire and a soft bed. Look at this house. It’s old, it’s rotting, it’s an empty shell of a dream that I once pretended was real.” His hand pulls from mine, and I can’t fight it, not anymore. “It’s not real. None

of it is, none of this is. We're just drawings in the sand, being washed away with the tides. Nothing lasts forever."

The words feel like papercuts, each small enough to make a miniscule scratch in the walls that bind our hearts away from each other. And I'm tired of it. I want to give up, to curl up into a corner and hide from everything, pretend as if I just dreamt all of this. It would be easier that way, to let it all slip away without a fight. But I'm so fucking tired.

I surge forward, I cross that ravine, and I kiss him, because I need him to stay.

Words become meaningless as he kisses me back.

A thousand unsaid things pass between us in this moment, truth and honesty becoming pretty little ideas that are inconsequential as understanding consumes us, as the sharp lines between us blur, and our hearts finally, *finally* beat together.

"Stay," I murmur in between breaths, as my forehead rests against his, "with me."

Hesitation. Then: "Alright."

But when the sun rises, dawn splitting the air like a knife, I'm alone. I'm alone, and he's left me, and I wake up to brave the world on my own. There's no final letter, no half-hearted farewell waiting for me on the bedside table. The only proof of the truth between us are the sheets tangled around me, *his* sheets, cold but still smelling of him, of *us*. If I reach over, I could touch the place in the pillow where his head had lain, I could feel the last echoes of him that still remain as spectres. But I don't reach for it. I don't let myself feel those echoes. All I'll find is the same hollow thing that beats in my chest.

Instead, I stand, feeling a weary part of my heart rattling around in that cavern. There's nothing but emptiness in this ghost of a house, promises that would never be fulfilled lingering in the spaces between walls.

I knew, in a way, that his farewell had been decided long before he found me where he always did, lingering in front of his house. Perhaps I could fool myself into believing that I'd nearly convinced him, nearly brought our hearts together for eternity. It would be easy to do so. But that part of me, so easily fooled, is gone. The heart that should have beat, that should have felt anguish and sorrow, that should have been overcome with grief, was silent. No drum to echo in that vacant shell.

Stay here, with me, murmur the halls of his house, begging for one last semblance of life to remain within its walls. It was old, rotting, rickety, and so dearly loved for every ghost it held. Every ghost that had been made by standing outside the door, waiting, praying, hoping. I had hoped, once, that his own voice would be saying those words to me. That I would be welcomed here, welcomed inside, and asked to stay. *Stay here*.

When I leave, I don't turn back. I don't see the small patch of wildflowers that are beginning to bloom under the stairs. They'll die, no matter if I see them or not.

Spring is a bitter taste to me, now.

Isabell Gdaniec

Maggots Upon Eden

Content notes: religion, gore, sexual content

in some tongues, the word for *pride* and for *deliciousness* is one and the same

has it been pride that led me to this? or simply the flavour of what I'm eating? the hard, sweet and sour flesh of a quince — sweet enough to be considered an apple

laying there beneath the tree, it seemed to already decay as the two large beasts over it shouted and shouted. the noise meant nothing to me

the fruit meant everything. a meal, a new day, the next day — the assurance of a future. I, biting into it, in greed, in gluttony

sweet, and sour, and hard. in that moment, I understood — I'd sinned. biting into it, digging into it, writhing into it, I'd sinned. the flesh squeezing its juice out on me, flooding me

I'd sinned.

i understood that as i understood the words, the world, the Word, around me — a set of rules that exists only for its own sake. something i wasn't meant to understand

something only he who rules, He — and His Humans, were meant to. such that He— *he*, who means nothing to me, could exist by man's will, for man's will, through man's will

such that man could take the bread and rosy wine of another and proclaim it His — and i, still here, in the fruit. sweet, and sour, and soft for me

i dig in further. longinus into the heart — but i find not bread and wine, not water, but pus, and rot. festering — black oil from the earth of your hole, a sign of an *open wound*, they say

rot and pus. sickly yellow and pale black — *gold* and *bordeaux*. honey and figs, not bread and wine. a taste *prideful* and *delicious*

i dig in further. the fruit in front of me — you, and in you, the wound of a spear, a spear of man, forged just so, with a notch at the end, of *synthetic metal*

you, a fig — said to *really* be a quince, only allowed to be an apple. a fruit made only to be forbidden

I, a sinner.

Zeta Gdaniec

like fish

Content notes: abuse

children, like fish, do not speak
they patter about,
and they ought to be taught
how to be good, be sweet,
be quiet

children, like fish, have no fists
you ought to protect them
keep them safe in a house
after all, will they fight back?

children, like fish, can not fly
nor flee, nor run, not particularly fast
fish can not blink
fish can not feel pain
fish can not think
and fish
do not complain
they do what they are told -
they gather up into a school
and they are taught:

they are annoying - they are loud
they are slimy—they cry too much
they are gunky, and they smell
and they rot fast outside of water
a good fisher throws them back in.
after all, children, like fish,
ought to know how to swim

Daniel Kearns

The First Steps

Content notes: death, violence, blood, thalassophobia

Part One

The sound of the doorway opening up gave way to an odd silence, broken through the air with the sound of water brushing up against steel walls, and the occasional ‘bump’ against a wall. A group of 3 walked in, each of them cautious and wary, peeking around every corner, making sure it was safe for them to be within the room. Once the coast was clear, the group all lowered their guard and took simultaneous sighs of relief.

One of the group, a woman with dark skin, wearing a park ranger’s uniform with a large, full backpack strapped over her shoulders. She surveyed her immediate environment, her attention drawn to the nearest tank, noticing a few faded signs and partially scratched-off stickers providing some details on what was inside. Though she couldn’t quite make out what they were saying, the images she was able to see painted enough of a picture for her to know what was going on. There was an image that appeared to be the traditional silhouette of a shark, though its dorsal fin seemed strange, looking more like an ironing board than the traditional iconic fin. There was a name written above the image, bordered by red warning triangles; *Stethacanthus*.

“So... sharks. Sharks. As if all the other crap we’ve had to deal with getting up here was bad enough, now it’s sharks! Consistency be damned.” The woman ranted for a brief moment, her frustrations clear at the predicament they were in the middle of. She bashed her fist against the tank’s wall, before walking away from it and turning toward her group.

Things had not been easy for the group the past few days. Trapped in an abandoned research facility, having to deal with increasingly dangerous obstacles and creatures that none of them had encountered or even heard of before. Their journey had taken them across a range of different environments, with this rusted, neglected and foul-smelling chamber being their latest stop. Looking around, the woman flung her backpack over one of her shoulders, resting it on the ground in front of her as she opened up one of its many compartments, taking out a wooden clipboard with several sheets of paper curling up at the bottom. She flipped through them one by one, her eyes quickly darting over them until they stopped.

Unclipping a single sheet of paper, the woman walked over to one of the other members of her group and placed the sheet in their hands. “Dillon, take this and see if you can find the exit point.” She spoke firmly, as Dillon, an exhausted-looking young man with a large scar across his head, nodded and took the sheet before pulling himself to his feet and walking away from the group. Watching him walk away, she quickly turned to another group member, who was staring up at the walls surrounding them. “You see something, Sky?”

Sky, dressed in a ranger’s uniform, their hair dyed with a couple blue streaks to contrast against its natural brown colour, looked toward the woman. “Nothing, just...” They trailed off slightly before turning to look at the woman again. “Hey, Allie, doesn’t this seem kinda familiar? Remember that aquarium we went through with the ick- icky- ickythy- the fish dinosaurs?”

As she looked around, Allie had begun to notice similarities to this area and the smaller, livelier area they had explored previously. The biggest difference was that the prior area was decently polished and populated, while this area had been long-abandoned, left unclean for seemingly months, the viewing areas on the tanks only showing murky, dirty water, and the vague outline of a shark swimming through.

“Huh, yeah, this place does look similar, but why’s it so unclean?”

“Beats me. The sooner we get out of here, maybe the sooner we’ll start to get some answers.” Sky shrugged their shoulders as they moved themselves toward another tank. This one seemed to be in slightly better condition than the one labelled as the *Stethacanthus* tank, with a less torn label on it describing the inhabitants, another species named ‘*Squalicorax*’, its picture looking more like a typical shark. Sky leaned closer to the sign, their eyes scanning over the words as they began to read. “*Squalicorax*, also known as the crow shark, was a species of predatory lamniform shark that originated from the Cret-”

“Yeah, Sky, I don’t need a science lecture on a shark. Sharks bad, getting out of here good. That’s all we need to know.” Allie interrupted, looking around the tanks before her eyes fell on a particularly large tank, sitting near the end of the room.

The outside of the tank held clear evidence that other travelling parties had visited this area prior to them. The tank had spray-painted warnings advising travellers to stay out of the tank and turn away, with one particular message screaming ‘IT IS IN HERE’ with a bright yellow that contrasted the rusted grey of the tank’s outer walls. Allie seemed a little unsettled, mostly from the mystery of what ‘it’ was referring to.

Dillon returned to the group, folding up the sheet of paper he had been given and clapping his hands together. “Okay. So, I got some good news and some bad news. Which do you want first?” He asked, an awkward smile plastered on his face, glancing between the pair in front of him. Reading their unenthusiastic expressions, he knew exactly what they were wanting him to say. He took a brief pause. “Okay, so, good news, the exit point is just at the end of this room. Bad news...we need a key to unlock it. Anyone wanna guess where the key is?” He gave a slight, disingenuous chuckle as Allie’s gaze shifted toward the large tank behind Dillon.

She walked toward the tank, her eyes focused on the text spray painted onto the wall. “I think the key might be in here.” Allie’s eyes gazed up toward the beams hanging above the tank.

Darting across the room, she spotted that the smaller tanks had shark cages dangling above them, ready to be lowered into the tank for easy exploration. The largest tank notably did not have a shark cage hanging above it, sending a small chill down Allie’s spine.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me...” Allie planted her face against the wall of the tank and gave a slightly muffled sigh before turning to her group. “Right, who’s our strongest swimmer?”

Dillon and Sky looked between each other, before Dillon grabbed Allie's backpack from her shoulders and opened it up, digging around its contents and pulling out a diving suit and other diving equipment. "Guess that's me. Can you at least tell me what's in that tank?" he asked as he retreated behind one of the smaller tanks to change into the diving suit. Allie looked for the sticker to get some indicator of what was going to greet Dillon, but the sticker had been almost entirely scratched off, leaving behind a few flaky pieces.

"Sorry, Dill! Sticker's gone, you're just gonna have to be quick." Allie spoke with a hint of concern in her voice as Dillon emerged, fully clad in diving gear. "Be careful in there, okay?" She seemed genuinely worried, watching with fearful eyes as Dillon ascended a ladder and dunked himself into the tank.

Once Dillon was below the surface, he found that his vision was surrounded by darkness. The water was unclean, it had grown murky and cloudy, to such an extent that Dillon could hardly make out the hands in front of his face, let alone anything swimming around him. Believing that the key was probably at the bottom of the tank, Dillon made his descent, unable to shake off the feeling that something was alive in the tank, watching him and just waiting for the opportunity to attack. A shiver travelled down Dillon's spine as he kept swimming, his eyes playing tricks on him. He noticed a large shape moving in front of him, disjointed and unrecognisable. He opted to keep ignoring it, to keep searching for the key, though the thought couldn't get out of his head.

Dillon's swimming eventually stopped taking him further down, and he soon deduced that he had reached the floor of the tank. Feeling his way around the floor, Dillon had brushed his hands against something hard, his eyes only able to tell him that whatever it was, it was broken with several markings embedded into the surface. Perhaps it was bone, but he couldn't confirm. Feeling around some more, Dillon had clasped his hands around something metal; the key. Feeling overjoyed, Dillon grabbed the key and danced around the floor of the tank, unable to contain his excitement.

His excitement was cut short when something large, heavy and fast rammed into his side, sending him into a panic, his goggles almost falling off his face. His breathing and heartbeat rapidly increased as he found himself thrust off the floor, looking just in time to see a large tail retreat into the darkness of the water. Deciding he needed to leave now, Dillon continued to swim, his hand gripping the key and his mind focused entirely on getting out of the tank. He swam as straight as he could, his heart pounding against his chest as he tried to watch out for the shark, panicked about not being able to see anything clearly in this water.

As he felt himself getting closer and closer to the surface, Dillon was rammed again, this time his invisible attacker knocking the oxygen tank straight off his back, trying to snap at Dillon with its jaws. Dillon began to punch at the shark, trying to get it off him. This only seemed to increase the ferocity of its attack, slamming Dillon against the tank's inner walls and scraping him against them while trying to grab him. After a few seconds, Dillon managed to kick himself away from the shark and swam to the surface of the water, practically jumping out of the water while gasping for air.

"Help! Help me! Allie!" He cried out, looking around him and briefly seeing a fin slice through the surface of the water, sending his panic over the edge.

Swimming frantically toward the stairs, where Allie had climbed and was now waiting for him to make it across. Waving her hand out directly in front of her, she breathed a sigh of relief once Dillon had made it, handing her the key. "...That got pretty intense." Dillon breathed heavily, laughing slightly to try make light of the panic he had been feeling just moments before. Allie smiled and started to laugh alongside him, the two enjoying a relaxing moment.

The fun was cut short within an instant, as a massive wave sent an equally massive, scarred shark digging into Dillon's midsection with its circular jaw, splattering blood onto Allie and sending her falling backwards down the staircase as the predator vanished below the surface with its prize. Allie landed with a thud, her eyes wide with shock and horror.

"What the fuck..?" she muttered as Sky ran over and helped her up to her feet, shaking from the abrupt death of their friend.

Sky looked equally horrified before Allie slowly composed herself, grabbing her backpack and slinging it over her shoulders, turning away from Sky as she began walking around the large tank and toward the exit point Dillon had found. The pathway they had unlocked led into a vast, dark tunnel. Steeling their resolve, the two friends made their way inside, hoping the next stop on their journey would bring them closer to a way out.

Part Two

On the edge of a grassland plain, beneath a dulled grey sky and fading sun, a mound of dirt rose and fell, the sound of something beneath the earth pounding against it muffling as the mound fell back into place. It rose again, only to fall just as it did before.

"Ugh, here, let me try it." A voice came from beneath the ground as the mound rose a third time, toppling over to expose a steel trap door beneath the surface.

A light-brown backpack emerged first, being tossed upward with some effort and landing sideways onto the ground as a woman climbed her way up shortly after. She was wearing a tattered set of clothes; her trousers torn in numerous places and her shirt's sleeves almost completely shredded, exposing her scarred arms, coated with healed bite and claw marks. Once Allie had pulled herself up, she reached back down and pulled another person up out of the ground. The second person's clothing was similarly torn, though they also had a light coat tied around their waist and a holster on their side. They were quickly pulled up and sat down beside the woman, who closed the trap door with her foot before looking up at the colourless sky.

"Bit dull-looking, but... doesn't look like anything's going to try and kill us. Least not right away." She shrugged slightly as she pulled herself up onto her feet and began to walk around their surrounding area.

She could hear squawking, the sounds of large creatures calling out to one another, though they were distant, not a current issue. Still, she was wary of what she was hearing, the sounds clearly

coming from some sort of large creature. She didn't want to risk losing her fellow traveller, not after their last casualty. She closed her eyes, her mind briefly revisiting those quick but graphic images.

Shaking her head, she turned to the person she'd helped up, who was pulling something else up out of the ground, dusting it off before holding it up. "You find something there, Sky?"

Making her way back over to her friend, she looked at what they were holding: a cracked tablet device. Sky twirled the device in their hands for a few seconds before they tried to turn it on by holding down a button on its upper left corner. After around a minute of trying, the device's monitor flickered to life, displaying images of a giant winged reptilian, the name '*Hatzegopteryx*' written below. They tried to read further, but the screen shorted out and went black.

Sky held the tablet in front of Allie. "Thing's dead. Not sure if it just needs a charge or if it's properly busted, but given our luck..." They trailed off before handing the tablet over to their friend. "So, we're going for a walk, Allie?"

Examining the tablet herself for a second, Allie tried herself to turn it on before pulling up her backpack and opening one of its many compartments, stuffing the device inside and zipping the compartment back up. Lifting the backpack off the ground and hauling it over her shoulder, she turned to Sky and gave them a nod. "Yeah, walking time. Seems safe enough, for now at least."

Sighing a little before pulling themselves up to their feet and joining their friend's side, Sky began to lead the walk into the grassland. Despite the natural look of the area, there was still an artificial feel to it. The unmoving clouds that would normally offer a glimpse into a clearer day, the sun that just seemed so wrong, in a way neither of the two could really describe, or the lack of insects or other smaller creatures going about their usual routine. The feeling served as a reminder of their predicament, trapped in some kind of weird research facility with a host of prehistoric creatures, brought into the present through unknown means. Time also seemed to be inconsistent, some areas being long abandoned while others either freshly left behind or still populated, the natural flow of time apparently non-existent here.

The pair's walk came to a stop once something began rustling through the grass nearby. Allie swivelled herself around to face the direction of the sound while Sky lowered their hand to hover above their holster, ready to draw. Both of them were cautious but ready for whatever was going to emerge. Allie's mind began making its way through the options before the identity of the mystery creature revealed itself.

A small bipedal lizard burst out from the grass, a mouthful of plants held within its beaked jaws. It gazed upward at the pair of humans in front of it, the creature only reaching up to their knees in terms of height. It seemed a tad agitated, shrinking back the way it came while some of the feathers lining its back began standing up, as if to try and make it seem intimidating so it could make its escape. Allie and Sky looked between one another before they began lowering their guards, bringing themselves down to their knees to get level with the creature standing hesitantly in front of them.

Allie took a quick look around them and noticed a batch of the same plants the lizard was eating. Reaching down slowly so as to not alarm it, she took a handful and tore them from the ground before holding them out to entice the creature toward her. "Okay, here we go... be a nice little dinosaur." She spoke softly, watching with some awe as it spat out its current mouthful and slowly approached her, its head tilting to examine what she was holding before she opened up her hand.

Glancing between her and Sky, the little dinosaur began to pick the plants out of Allie's hand slowly, taking a few seconds before it got comfortable enough to eat out of it. Smiling, Allie reached forward with her other hand to gently stroke the dinosaur as it continued eating. It darted up at her other hand and pulled back a little, before allowing itself to be patted down.

Sky looked at Allie slowly befriending the new dinosaur, smiling to themselves as they looked around. "Quite nice to meet a dinosaur that doesn't immediately want us dead. Makes a nice change."

They began to resume walking, Allie grabbing more plants to see if the dinosaur would tail them along the way. Picking up where they left off, the duo continued venturing through the grassland, this time with a small feathered dinosaur skulking behind them to eat whatever Allie was dropping. The pair chuckled a little, glancing backward to watch the dinosaur grow increasingly comfortable with them as it fed on the dropped plants.

As their trek went on, Allie began to run out of offerings for their new companion, wiping her hand against her shorts to take off some blood as the small dinosaur had accidentally nipped her palm whilst feeding. Choosing to stop and grab some more, Allie knelt down to pick up plants based on which ones the dinosaur was staring at the most. She smiled, tending to the needs of their newest friend, ignoring Sky's fading attempts at calling her name. Brought back to reality when she was lightly punched in the shoulder, Sky brought her attention to a large shape coming down toward them from the air. The dinosaur Allie had been taking along with her glanced up toward the sky before immediately breaking into a sprint, getting ahead of Allie and Sky, who seemed frozen as the shape grew larger and closer, emitting a loud shriek as it pulled itself into a position to land.

Gracefully placing itself on the ground, the shape had revealed itself as a large flying reptile, standing up to the height of a giraffe, a large crest atop the back of its head, its beak chunky and sharp-tipped. The two friends looked up at the massive creature as it began examining them, prodding them with the tip of its beak to see what they would do. The pair remained frozen in shock as the creature began glancing between them while snapping its beak open and shut in quick succession, watching the small dinosaur running off before another of its kind swooped down and grabbed it within its beak. Allie and Sky turned around, watching helplessly as the poor dinosaur was swallowed whole by its predator, who choked it down within seconds before it departed into the air once again. Briefly recalling the name on the tablet, Sky knew that they were now faced with the *Hatzegopteryx*.

Their attention quickly returned to what was standing in front of them, as the pterosaur raised its neck, beak opening before lunging forward and grabbing Sky, thrashing them around inside its mouth as Allie tried desperately to grab a hold of her friend. Raising its head into the sky, it tried to swallow Sky, but found itself choking on them instead, their legs shaking as they tried to push

themselves free. It threw its head around, tapping its beak against the dirt before finally managing to spit Sky out onto the grass. As they began to crawl away, the large reptile closed its beak and rammed it into their body repeatedly, stabbing into clothes and flesh as it furiously attacked them.

“Sky!” Allie began to panic, her mind rushing back to the death of her other friend Dillon, the same fate now coming for Sky.

Wanting to try and save them, she threw her backpack onto the ground and opened it up, reaching inside one of the compartments and pulling out a large hammer. Deciding that this would suffice, Allie ran over to the ongoing clash between her friend and the *Hatzegopteryx* and jammed the sharp end of the hammer into its eye, staggering it backward as it shrieked out with pain. Unsatisfied with just blindsiding it, Allie grabbed the hammer’s handle and pulled it out, using her other hand to take a hold of the creature’s head crest in order to keep it where she wanted it. In a rush of fury, she began slamming the hammer into the side of the reptile’s head, screaming out as she kept striking it, splattering blood all over herself as she continued her attack, ignoring the cries of the predator as it struggled to move its head away.

Eventually, Allie had brought down the attacker, delivering a final strike that cracked through its skull, leaving a battered mess on one side of its face, the flesh caving in and giving way to the bone underneath, its eye having been torn out from its socket. Taking deep breaths to calm herself down, she dropped the hammer and looked at herself, her hands coated a darkened red with the creature’s blood. She calmed herself some more, taking in what she had actually done, before her attention returned to Sky, who lay motionless next to the dead predator. She got onto her knees and looked at them more closely, bloody holes poked through their chest and stomach, the killing strike having been dealt to their throat. Their final moments of fear still carried on their face as she closed her eyes, hands resting on Sky’s body.

The sounds of other *Hatzegopteryx* flying above drew Allie’s attention away from her fallen friend. Shedding a tear, she ran her hand over Sky’s eyes and closed them, putting her friend to rest. Gazing upward at some of the pterosaurs approaching, Allie grabbed her backpack and bloodied hammer, wiping off the remnants of the *Hatzegopteryx*’s eye before running. She made a sprint, only looking back to see one of the others landing and inspecting the carnage that had just unfolded. One grabbed Sky’s corpse and gulped it down, Allie turning her head away and focusing on the path that lay ahead of her.

Reaching the end of the path, Allie found herself at a mossy cave with a puddle at its mouth. She laid a hand on the walls, catching her breath and wiping the tears from her eyes with her wrist. Glancing at her hand, the realisation of what she had done sunk in. This was never where she wanted to find herself. How was she going to tell their parents what had happened once she escaped? Would she even escape?

Venturing into the cave, Allie noticed some stray vines obscuring some writing on the stony wall. A dim light struggled against the vines to stick out and make itself known, as she reached out and brushed them aside. The rocks and mud had parted to reveal a rusted metal with faded yellow writing upon it. Squinting her eyes to read, she could make out the words ‘PaleoBiologics’ and

'Sector 2 Access - This Way', with a dull red arrow pointing toward her left, deeper into the darkness.

Taking a moment to look behind her, making sure nothing had attempted to follow her inside, Allie made up her mind. She gave herself a nod and proceeded to the left, hoping to finally get some answers and make her way home.

Jacob Lang

The Statue upon the Hill

Content notes: violence

There is a little village upon a mountain, out there. Though only the villagers call it a mountain. It is more like a hill. And the village is not really on the hill either, despite what they say. There are a few houses cast across it, but most of the space consists of the remains of a castle keep. The space is now used for the festivals that come in the winter and summer, and by the children who run between turrets and half-open walls even though their parents tell them not to.

The most striking thing about the hill is the statue that stands in the courtyard, right in the centre of the castle grounds. It is a huge creature twice the height of the tallest villagers, and half as wide. It has no face, but two small holes for eyes in its dome-shaped head. According to legends it was made in the likeness of a guardian spirit, who once protected the town from a great demon that had come to devour the firstborn of every family. The story is told to children who do not settle into bed at night, a useful tradition for keeping the unruly in line, and harmless enough that the church sees no point in curbing it. Every year there is a festival where the eldest child gifts it something it has made or found, a flower or an apple or a little carved toy.

The presents are gone by the next day.

The residents of the village enjoy relative prosperity compared to their neighbours. They are not a capital city by any means, but their crops are bountiful and their sheep are rarely lost to the wolves. Even in winter they suffer little. They, of course, have enough food to sustain them through the more bitter months of the year, but there is something more. The snow never seems to pile too high in the streets, their people never find themselves trapped out in the cold, and their firewood stocks are always piled to the rafters. Nobody seems to remember how any of this occurs.

There are rumours about the statue. Children claim that they hear it hum. Others call it a friend, and others swear that it moves in the early morning. Of course, children are not supposed to be up in the early morning, so they usually only claim this once.

The statue is old. Even the most ancient elder cannot tell of a time before it, described in their oral tradition as eternal and everlasting. Even as moss grows over its body, it only serves to conceal and hide the cracks and breaks in its skin, to alleviate the damage the winds and the rains have brought upon it.

After the harvest, when the grain stores are full and the people rest after their winter preparations are finished, the village is not plagued by bandits. The next one over may be, perhaps a nearby town or even city is held at sword-point, but not this one. Rogues and thieves do not stalk the streets or the fields. The villagers pride themselves on this; "Those looters are wise to stay away from such hardened workers!" they say, but that is not why they are left alone.

One autumn, raiders ran amok in the countryside. They were new to this, drafted soldiers who had grown used to glutting themselves on the meat and grain of other's toil, and who did not desire to return to their humble farmlands. They marauded and rampaged all across the land, threatening

and stealing and murdering wherever they went. On one such outing, they heard tales of an especially impressive village, Borgpeak, where the sheep were fat, and the stores were bursting. Some even said it was greater than the towns to the east. And so this group of newly-made cutthroats made their way to the village. Evil as they were, they were not fools. They took care to conceal themselves from their targets, making camp in the woods as a staging area and making sure to keep their fires small and minimal. The day before their attack, they sharpened their blades and rubbed their hands with glee as they dreamt of the loot within, and when night came, they moved to take what was theirs.

The only problem was that they were not alone in the forest.

A huge creature towered over them. It was twice the height of even their most impressive warriors, and about half as wide. It had no face, but two small eyes on its dome shaped head blazed red. It did not speak. It did not move.

It did not have to.

The group of bandits, once laughing with glee over threatening the young for their mother's jewellery, ran. There was no unity and no plan, every wretch clambering and scrambling over each other in a desperate move to save their own skin.

The statue waited patiently for them to flee. It did not shift until the last had fled back into the woods, weapons and provisions abandoned in their terror. It shifted, slowly, carefully, to collect the discarded items strewn across the forest floor. Massive fists easily accommodated the various weapons and provisions that had been abandoned, and, once the forest had been cleaned of their scourge, the towering golem ambled home.

When morning came, the village was alive with noise. The armoury was fuller than it had ever been, with all manner of cruel devices hung upon its formerly barren walls. The merchants scratched their heads at the mysterious pile of goods left in the town centre, cheeses and fruits from faraway lands having appeared overnight. But the most curious was that statue upon the hill, with dozens of trinkets and baubles scattered around it, most of which now adorned the heads and arms of children.

The villagers praised the gods with far more fervour than they usually would, thanking them for yet another bounty that had been laid upon them. The gifts, however, were far too egregious for their small community, so they took it upon themselves to distribute it to their neighbours, beneath the watchful eyes of a statue that had devoted itself to its kin.

Ronan Lynch

Drums of War

Content notes: violence

A storm is nearing, the sailors say
When darkened clouds are heading this way
Batten the hatches, brave the winds
And hope we live to see the day

The spray of salt dampens soil
And all breaks out in vast turmoil
All must strive to find a way
To save the ones they deem as loyal

The drums of war like waves in the sea
Against the madness all shall plea
But none are clear of steel and blood
When among this chaos enters he

The tide of violence begins to turn
And all who oppose shall crash and burn
Fear did follow the wrath of the one
This land's respect the stranger did earn

The drums of war like waves in the sea
Against the madness all shall plea
But all are clear of steel and blood
When among this chaos triumphs he.

Drums on the Horizon

Southern Kansas, 1860

"There's bison down there," Tommy said, shielding his eyes from the piercing new morning sun as he scanned the wide valley beneath their hill. He laughed with little humour. "Daddy's favourite animal."

Behind him, George was packing up their supplies. He stopped when he heard this, sighing slowly.

"You were always his favourite," he said gently.

Tommy turned, a smirk on his stubbled face. "You were always Mother's."

"Explains why we're so different I s'pose." George said as he shrugged.

Tommy's smile was gone.

"You and I are the same. We're blood. The only way we survive in this world is by sticking together, believe me."

George nodded slowly before returning his attention to packing away the camp. He took a swig of water from his canteen, glancing in Tommy's direction once again. The older of the brothers was still gazing out across the valley. After a long silence he spoke again, so quiet that George almost didn't hear it.

"Blood and soil, that's all we need."

With that he turned and collected his pack from the rock and the two brothers headed back to their horses.

Before long they were on the move, taking it easy as the descent increased dramatically while they began to dip into the valley.

"No fights this time," George called, leaning in his saddle so Tommy could hear. "We get supplies, we stay the night, we leave. Ain't need to be anything more to it than that."

Tommy laughed.

"Perhaps we'll hear something about this war everyone's been going on about." His eyes would not leave the grasslands before them. George followed his gaze and realised he was still staring at the herd of bison, slowly trekking their way across the expansive plain.

"You really think there's gonna be a war?" He asked, turning back to his older brother. Tommy sighed loudly.

"I'm at war with myself every day, I ain't got the room for one more. Besides, this country ain't so bad the way it is."

"You're more lost than even I took you for if you believe that," George replied.

The terrain grew far more treacherous up ahead and the two brothers dismounted from their horses, electing to guide the animals with their reins rather than risk a trip and fall on the steep decline.

They meandered among jagged rocks and slopes of dry cracked mud. They walked beside each other, their horses trailing not far behind them. Neither of them spoke.

The silence however was broken when George looked up to scan the landscape and something caught his eye.

"Stop," he said, pointing towards the long ridge of the mountains to their right. "Look."

Tommy followed his gaze.

Five figures were making their way along the narrow peak not far from where they were pathing their descent. Their attire was a series of thin loose furs. Even from their vantage point the

brothers could make out the deep red of the intricate patterns depicted around the edges of the ponchos.

Feathers plumed from the tops of their heads and the smoothly curved telling thin sticks on their backs revealed that they were armed with bows and arrows.

“Savages,” Tommy hissed, his hand going immediately to his gun. George seized his arm, stopping him from drawing the weapon.

“They ain’t a threat. If they were, we’d already be dead.” He turned away from his brother, looking back at the group of five.

The leader had stopped walking and now she stood facing in their direction.

“Shit,” Tommy grunted, hand reaching once again for his gun. “They’ve seen us.”

“They already know we’re here,” George hissed, clapping a hand to his brother’s chest, indicating firmly for him to stand down. “The border into Osage territory ain’t far. As long as we don’t cross it, they have no reason to attack us. Nor us them.”

His gaze returned to the leader, still standing staring back at them. Slowly, George raised his arm upwards, palm open, facing towards the small group who had also stopped and were now following the leader’s gaze.

Then, her arm raised too, mirroring George.

A sign of peace. An understanding, perhaps.

They stayed like this for one long moment, and then she turned and gestured to her people to continue their journey. They began once again, tracking their way along the mountain pass.

The brothers pressed on too, descending the slope side by side, Kitt and Paris following in the wake of their silence, whinnying gently as they kicked up dirt and stones. The temperature rose as the day lumbered on, the steep rocky decline proving harsh on their progress.

They stopped several times to water both the horses and themselves, as the sun beat down upon the sweat of their backs.

George turned briefly to check on Paris and in doing so took his eyes off the terrain ahead, his leg giving out as the dry dirt crumbled beneath him. His knee slammed into a dusty jagged rock and he cried out as he recovered his balance, grimacing at the cold, stale sensation of blood drying on the inside of his trouser leg.

“Keep moving,” Tommy said, with little more than a glance back.

Eventually, as their legs grew weak and it seemed they were doomed to trek the mountain for eternity, they finally reached the foot of the slope.

The terrain flattened out in front of them and the tough grass, although dry, was a welcome sensation.

Tommy reached once again for his saddlebag and pulled out his canteen, grateful for taking a large swig of water.

George sighed, turning to Paris and patting the animal gently on her neck.

“Let’s hit the town and be on our way,” Tommy said, water dripping from his chin. “And let’s try and avoid any more mountains for a while if we can help it.”

George nodded, taking a drink of his own. He paused, staring across the plains at the tiny shapes of houses forming in a narrow street. The grass took up most of his field of vision, wafting slowly beneath the distant town. He was still all too aware of the sun pelting his skin from behind.

“Do you ever get tired of this?” He said, regretting the words almost before they left his mouth.

“What?” Tommy asked.

“Living like this?”

The older of the brothers frowned, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Don’t matter what I’m tired of. Ain’t got any other choice. Besides, I can’t think of a life with any more freedom than this.”

“Don’t you want a home?” George continued. “Maybe even a woman to settle down with?”

Tommy grinned, wiping the still-dripping water from his chin, the smile giving way to a brief chuckle.

“No woman can settle me down for more than a night,” he said.

Behind Tommy’s back, George shook his head very slowly as the older of the two brothers stowed his canteen and jumped in Kitt’s saddle, scanning the horizon opening out before them.

“Why would I want to settle? I’m free. Free and running like a river.”

“All rivers reach the sea some day,” George said, hoisting himself up into his own saddle. Tommy looked over at his brother, meeting the younger man’s eyes for a moment before dropping his gaze to the ground beneath his horse.

“Don’t hold your breath,” he replied quietly, before kicking his heels, digging them into Kitt’s body and the horse trotted forwards, swiftly picking up speed over the open terrain.

George followed swiftly, Paris taking off across the long grass, the two horses and their riders tracking their way through the wide valley, drawing ever closer to the small town before them.

Whispers on the Wind

Isle of Skye, December 793 CE

When news of the Lindisfarne attack reached our people, our world changed forever.

I found myself playing in the small market near the centre of the village, surrounded by the various houses of primarily wood, stone and thatch. I was drawing in the mud. I liked drawing. I often drew landscapes, islands standing among the tide, duels between warriors, or dragons.

That was what I was drawing that day. I had just finished marking out an enormous vicious looking fang, when the bustle of the crowd reached my ears. I glanced up, taking in the large gathering that had suddenly been sparked near the edge of the market as village folk crowded around beside one of the stalls, shrouding the source of the commotion.

With my unusually straight sycamore drawing stick still in hand, I scuttled towards the gathering to see why everyone had suddenly swarmed.

At the centre of the rabble there was a travelling merchant. A mainlander. I thought I had seen him before. He often made the short crossing to our island to sell his wares, or to purchase ours, what little of it we had. A friendly man from what I could make out, if a bit full of himself.

I could tell he was relishing the attention in that moment but all of sudden I stopped caring, when I finally caught the words of what he was saying. His face became grave.

"...The work of devils. Of demons... Of heathens. The monastery burned to the ground. The monks, slaughtered. The once proud church lies now in ruin at the hands of these savages. The heathens have horns, so they say, twisted and vast with rage, wild-haired and demon-eyed!"

I shivered at their description as the merchant continued. They had come out of nowhere and destroyed this holy sight. Barbarians.

There were many gasps from the villagers, many of whom I recognised. The sense of fear of this new danger was most contagious.

"Is nothing sacred!" One woman cried.

"Their ships must be advanced. If they can reach Northumbria, what is to stop them from coming here?" A man yelled to several loud responses, all drowning out each other's words.

Voices rose as panic spread. Among the crowd I heard the shaky sounds of sobbing.

"Don't panic," called out the trader. "There is a solution."

"What? What can we possibly do in the face of these brutes?" Cried out another woman, her voice rising with anger. The merchant did well to retain his composure as he raised his hands to quiet the crowd. When he spoke his tone was calm and matter-of-fact.

"The monks say these heathens have been sent by God to punish any victims for their sins. I believe with the right devotion to God, we will be spared. The demons will not come here." The once-quelled crowd grew again in protest but the trader continued, cutting off their scattered words. "--There is a man from one of the towns I visit regularly. A priest. I can ask him to visit this village in order for you all to reconnect fully with God. You can repent and you can pray, and I promise you... You will be spared."

Before long the crowd dispersed, flocking back to their houses to spread the ill news. I headed home too, and while I walked, I overheard the words of two men just ahead of me.

"You know as well as I do that repenting for our sins will make no difference." One of them was saying. I recognised his voice but could not recall his name. He was a hunter. "Those savages that attacked the monastery are people, just like us. That means they bleed, just like us. What we have to do is fight."

“Don’t fool yourself,” replied the other, his voice dropping with his disbelief. “You can shoot an arrow, maybe. But rabbits don’t fight back,” he scoffed. The hunter sighed.

“However wise this priest, our sins are not what has provoked this attack.”

The thought was long on my mind as I walked the streets of dirt back to my home. Looking up, I knew the sun was trying to set somewhere overhead, but all that spread across the sky were dark clouds, whose edges were tinged blood red.

Would repenting really do nothing to save us? Perhaps this was indeed a trial from God. But maybe he was putting our Fates into our own hands. A frightful thought to be sure, but God was not cruel. He would want us to overcome the demons and, with his good faith, that is what I planned to do.

John MacDonald

Trying to become, another person

Content notes: misogyny

the only thing i want is

To be threatening, beyond reproach.

To be adored, and to be listened to.

To speak, over everything I love.

for someone to love me,

In a leave-the-curtains-drawn-stirring-awake sort of way,

In a face-lights-up-across-the-room-and-the-room-is-gone kind of way.

With a soft-kiss-of-casual-forgiveness.

but everyone who does, i resent

And it **is** my fault.

I don't think, I do speak,

Neither help. I'm sorry.

because why would you ever love me?

You don't like me, I'm just nice

You don't like me, I'm just kind

You don't like me, I just listen

because i will do everything

not to be adored or forgiven or listened to,

but to roll over in the night, and have you roll into me.

Eilidh McDonald

Bloody Blossoms

Content notes: religion, death, abuse, gore, sexual content

The night air was heavy with the scent of flowers and smoke, the hearth in the centre of the room crackling. Upon the mantle lay a glass vase, a posy drooping from over its fluted lip, their petals flickering red in the light. Beyond the frosted windowpane lay the dark and winding Edinburgh streets, laid thick with snow over the cobbles. It was an unfamiliar sight to Matthew, but Nora ignored it. Instead, she sat with her back to the window, watching as the logs in the fire hissed and spat.

Matthew paced, glass crunching beneath his boots. His clothes were ripped and tattered, but he still kept them close—a protective layer against the chill in the air. Only his waistcoat sat heaped by the fire, the light dancing across its golden buttons and illuminating the stains on the navy fabric. Matthew paid it no mind.

“The floor will stain if you don’t scrub it soon,” Matthew muttered to Nora. The room had been in his name, and the deposit the madam had demanded had been costly. Some things could be replaced, but the stains on the floor and the papered walls would be harder to explain, and harder still to pay away.

“It’s a brothel,” Nora replied, her voice distant, as though she was speaking underwater. “They’ll have enough carpets to cover a multitude of sins.”

Nora gazed intently at the fire, sequestered to her side of the room. She sat curled tightly on the worn chaise lounge, her bare feet tucked under the lace hem of her shift. With her face turned from Matthew, her ashen pallor was stark against the red fabric of the chair, her features carved out by the firelight. Her skull loomed from beneath the skin, her cheeks gaunt and her sockets hollow. The months they had spent in the highlands had done nothing for her constitution.

Nora’s distance incensed Matthew, driving him to follow the trail of broken glass around the room—stars littering the ground. When they had entered only a few hours ago, a gilded mirror had hung above the fireplace. Now it lay fragmented on the floor like a still sea disrupted by dark, jagged waves.

Nora remained tight-lipped, her mouth a thin line. But her eyes, deep emerald pools, followed Matthew as closely as a hound at his heels. Her dark tresses were tucked behind her ears, falling loosely around her narrow face instead of pulled back tightly. In the gloom, Matthew could’ve mistaken Nora’s hair for seaweed strangling a bloated corpse, Medusa and her stony glare. He had only once seen her so discomposed, many long nights ago.

She had been just as beautiful then. She had been just as repellent.

He scoffed. “We belong in Hell.”

“This again,” Nora said with a sigh.

Matthew was feverish, his thoughts unclear as though he was deep in his cups even though the claret on the table by Nora’s side was untouched. His feet moved without command, his thoughts black crows circling the rotting meat of his mind. He thought of her, sitting before him. He could only ever think of Nora. She had a way of coaxing him—pulling on his threads and twisting them around her fingers until they were no longer his own.

Matthew spat out his words, his lips stinging from their poison. “Don’t we deserve Hell? Can you look upon yourself and deny it?”

Nora did not blink, her green eyes blazing brighter than the hearth. Her jaw was pulled tight, a serpent ready with a forked tongue, poised to strike. Whatever she felt, whatever poison on her fangs, she swallowed down instead, allowing the silence to stretch onwards.

This only served to fuel Matthew's temper. "For all we have done—for all you have had me do—Hell would not be enough. You delight in it, although you tell me otherwise. I cannot rest for the sounds of screams, for the details I am tormented by," Matthew said, the words frantic. He lowered his head, a mourner's bow. "I cannot unsee the world you have opened my eyes to, and in my sleep, I was blissful. You whispered to me while I slept, awoke me to this unending nightmare. For your words alone, any man could see you are a she-devil."

"Matthew," Nora called out to him, but he was beyond her outstretched arms, her fingertips only just grazing the tattered ends of his shirt billowing behind him as he marched.

"No, *no*. You have dragged me from one end of this forsaken island to the next on nothing but a whim. First, we depart from Glasgow and journey to the highlands. The city grew too small for us, you said to me. The city would only exacerbate your condition, your disease. And yet, we return to Edinburgh at your behest, at the slightest drop of a hat. We could have safely remained in the isles for years without discovery," he continued, kneeling by her elbow. He put a tentative hand on the armrest of her chair. "People know you in Edinburgh, Nora. We will be found."

"*Hush*," Nora said, simply, and Matthew fell silent. There was little else he could do. Even if he continued to pace until dawn, ranted and raved until his tongue rusted and throat ached, Nora would remain unmoved.

And yet, Matthew found himself saying with an edge of desperation, pleading with Nora, "*You* will be caught, *we* will be caught. The city is too small for us to stay hidden as we are."

"There is no reason for anyone to come looking for you, my dear," Nora replied evenly, her eyes gleaming with a cold curiosity.

Matthew recognised her expression with a sickening lurch. She would not heed his warnings. The night would continue like many he had already endured. Nora would stare until the fire burnt itself into cinders and sunlight crept through the curtains. Then, and only then, would she allow Matthew to draw her into a fitful sleep, wrapped tightly together.

"Why are we here?" Matthew asked, his voice rough from a lack of rest. There was an ache beginning to form behind his eyes. He was tired of this morbid business. However, more than that, he was afraid. "Why have you brought us back?"

Nora watched Matthew for a long moment, the silence leaving him waiting with his words lodged in his throat. He stood quickly, a learned reflex, distancing himself from the chaise lounge. Slowly, she rose to her feet, as gradual as a funeral procession. Each hair on the back of Matthew's neck stood on end, a wild tremor running through him. His every sense was screaming, warning him to leave the room, to leave Nora behind, and never return. It was a foolish dream.

For every step she took towards him, Matthew edged further back, the broken glass tinkling under their feet, its whimsy discordant with their knife-sharp tango. Like twins, like a circus act, Nora matched his every movement. If he didn't know better, Matthew would have assumed she was using the glass on the floor somehow. But, if he glanced down to the wreckage of the mirror wreathing their feet, Matthew would have seen nothing at all. Nothing but shadows flickering.

"Why are we here?" Nora repeated, savouring the words in her mouth.

Her front pressed against the length of his body, the weight of her bosom pushing against his bare skin. Nora pushed Matthew back, tripping over his own heavy boots, until he held him against the wall, caged there by her raised arms. Her fleeting caress to his cheek stung like a cracked whip.

Beyond the gossamer thin silk of her shift lay her body, lithe muscles coiled, ready to spring. She moved with grace, but her steps were steady, each ringing heavy against the floorboards. Below them, patrons would hear her echoes.

The neckline of her nightgown hung low, and Matthew caught glimpses of her chest—a marble statue made flesh—as Nora stalked closer. Even now, even after years as her companion, Matthew burned with temptation, bright and sweet. His hands itched, turning to fists, turning to claws by his side, but he did not reach for Nora.

Her words were spectres against the column of Matthew's throat as she said, "We are here to feed."

With her foot, Nora nudged the body on the floor keeping them company. The boy had been younger than Matthew, his cravat jauntily tied around his neck, but he had spoken of money, of family finances, with a sombreness beyond his years. Matthew had recognised that weight, the shadows creeping under his eyes. The boy's fate had been sealed through that recognition. Nora had been drawn to Matthew's singular misery—the boy had been no different.

He had been easy to get whiskey-drunk, Matthew keeping his slumped body upright with an arm wrapped around his narrow shoulders. The madam had given the trio a strange glare, her eyes lingering on Nora as the purse passed between the couple. Whatever questions the madam had were not enough to stop her from charging extra for Nora to follow the two men upstairs.

"I will not drink any more from him," Matthew said, the words a vow. Still in his mouth lay the sweet taste of copper, ingrained between each tooth and fang. "I have not such an appetite as you, Nora. Have the boy, and be done with it, but grant me peace for the night."

Nora smiled, a cold and brittle smile, the firelight gleaming off her bloodied teeth. She tilted her head. "Matthew, you have not yet sated yourself. Join me and let us eat. You are hungry."

Nora did not say it as a question, but an assertion of fact. The truth, in all its monstrous simplicity. Matthew had never been able to hide from those green eyes.

"*No more*, I told you I would drink no—" Matthew began, turning from her, but Nora would not be mollified.

She gripped Matthew by the jaw, fingers steadfast as she held him, pinned like a butterfly with a broken wing. "You have already taken the first bite, my dear," she whispered, vicious in her victory, "Your guilt won't save the boy any more than it can stop your thirst. Your hunger won't end simply because you ignore it. It will only grow sharper, wilder. You may think you can control yourself now... but in a month? In a year? You won't be anything more than your teeth. Our gift comes with a high price, but we must pay it. Within the bloodshed, if you dare to look, *dare to see*, there are blessings."

Matthew felt hot tears stinging at the corners of his eyes, his misery and contempt pouring out from deep within. "Let me rot. Be done with me. You have stolen what little peace I could have had, you will not take my repentance from me, too. Am I not owed that much? I do as you ask, I do as much as I can stomach for you, and more. Do you not owe me a little peace?"

Nora paused, her body stilling but her smile never faltered. It was a terrible thing—sickly sweet and simpering, full of fangs and false pity. "Owe you? I may have stopped your heart, but I have given you something worth far more than any of that. Men would kill to be what you are. To live as you do."

"But why?" Matthew cried, "Why do we have such power? You must have questions. I do not believe that you have never dwelled on our meaning—the meaning of our existence. We are not living, Nora. I am watching the nights pass by simply because you will not let me leave."

Nora's hand turned from a hooked claw to a gentle caress as she murmured soothingly to him. The sounds were empty, however, as she kept him anchored before her, unable to move away. Against his side, Matthew felt her other hand brush against his thigh, his waist. Her touch stole away any warmth the fire could give. The light licked across the pair in coiling tongues, Nora's voice and the crackling becoming one.

"Where else would you go?" Nora asked, tender. "Where else would take you in as I have? A lone boy, with nothing in his hands but an empty bottle and pretty pennies. I carved you into something new. Who else could do the same? Take a chisel and gouge away until your beauty is revealed to you with new, all-seeing eyes. God? A monastery? You'd burn brighter than a funeral pyre within a few steps of the building. What pretty ash you would make, my dear. What a sweet smell of cinders."

"Nora, please—" Matthew whispered.

He was now slumped on his knees, shaking his head as though hypnotised, his breaths hitching as he held back the red stream of tears that threatened to blind him. Matthew gazed upwards at her. Nora's silhouette was blurred, but her smile—deep satisfaction—remained unmistakable. Her thumb rested on the plush of his lip, pulling it down until she could see his teeth; those pointed fangs that shone pearl-like against the red of his stained mouth.

"*There,*" Nora said, praise glowing in her words. "There you are—my Matthew. You are as I am. We share this burden, this blessing as no others can. You want to be compassionate, and I understand, sweetling. However, to give this boy mercy, you must give him death. It is the kindest thing. Listen," she said, pushing down on Matthew's chest. "His breathing is ragged now, he is failing. Drink, and he will only suffer for a moment more. But if you leave him there, you doom him to the weakness of his own heart."

Between the two boys, Nora knelt, bloodying her knees on the glass. She raised the tepid wrist of the boy to Matthew's mouth, her thumb wedged between Matthew's blunt human teeth, the digit nestled between his protruding fangs. He could taste the pulse beating weakly beneath the skin. The boy's blood was pungent—pipe tobacco and spice—strong and masculine over the scent of wilting flowers by the fireplace.

"Take him," Nora commanded, her hand carding through Matthew's hair, gentle, possessive. "Do as we are meant to, and take him."

With the boy caught between his jaws, Matthew bit down. The blood rushed forth, flooding his senses like nothing else could. It was a rush, a high unrivalled by opium or the finest wine. Beneath the metallic sting, he could taste the warmth of the whiskey he had plied the boy with so readily.

Curled over a dying boy on the floor, Matthew knew he would disgust even the worst of sinners. Clean hands and empty stomachs were for saints, for the pure of heart, soul, and mind. Demons were hungry creatures. They had to be fed.

Happily Ever After (Below the Waist)

Content notes: sexual content

The whisper of the trees as they scrape your bedroom window is a heavy reminder. I need to go. Out in the country like this, there's no light but the stars, Virgo blushing as she watches you slumped next to me, asleep. Your breathing is deep and even, a lullaby for the snake's glint in my tired eyes. I've lain awake for hours, watching your back as it rises and falls. You're on your front, and I endlessly, helplessly trace each mole and freckle I can find.

The sheets are drawn up, midnight blue, around our bodies, cloaking us, tucked away. Your hair, sunbeam blonde, frames the pretty back of your head as you lie, buried in pillows. Next to you on the bedside table is a ring, golden and gleaming. The only light to see it by filters through the half-closed curtains, the gloom deepening those notches on your bedpost. You had forgotten about the window, busy pulling off my jacket, my shirt, my head down, down—but I remembered. I'm always keeping one eye open for those headlights.

Beyond the glass panes, the birds call and cry. Mourners waiting for the break of morning. I time my visits by their howling—the louder they get, the quicker I should go. For now, I still have a few more hours I could spend in the pool of my own cooling sweat. I'm twitchy though, lying here like a live wire, nerves exposed and prone to snapping. I can't sleep with you. This bed is not for me to keep warm like that.

I swing my legs and stand. My shadow follows me doggedly, nipping at my heels as I keep the peace by feeling for my clothes by touch alone. You never turn the lights on, keeping us faceless. I can see a sliver of myself in the window, but if I look beyond that twisting reflection, beyond my body, I glimpse the city lights. Your husband works in the city. You've never told me what he does for a living, why his hours run so late, but I know he's out there, somewhere in the dark. I wonder, if I woke you up and asked, if you could say what I do for work either.

I'm not good for many things, but there are a few tricks I know, a few tricks you like. I am a car door slamming shut, three curt knocks on the front door and a creak as you usher me in through the back. Gravel underfoot gives us away in the silence. I am an open hand that leads you through the halls—broad palms and weather-beaten knuckles that curl over your shoulder, over the strap of that lacy red set you hide, entombed, in your drawer. I am a pair of lips, ready to complete you.

You save the best for last—the kiss goodnight, kiss goodbye— as we both know I'll slip away before dawn. It's a peck on the cheek, and I feel like I need a briefcase in my hands to deserve it. Honey, I'm off back home. Despite knowing every groaning floorboard of his house, I don't know what your husband looks like. Whenever I arrive, the pictures on your dresser are already face-down, and the frames in the halls flipped, ready for an Irish funeral.

I stand and burn by your bedside. Never wait for the sun or the porch lights to flicker on—those nasty little tattletales say I should have gone long ago. You'll only kiss me once, so I don't wait by the door. I don't turn over the photographs as I pass them, either. Whether those eyes are greener grass or inky black doesn't matter. You'll never tell me if our backs look the same, if that's why you keep the lights down low.

Your husband will never know that I owe him money for the Egyptian cotton sheets I stained. He'll never know all the lies I whisper to the conch of your ear as I come. The door shuts behind me, instant lock, and the knocker chimes its gripes. The cold night air greets me, playing with the front of my rumpled button-down, fresh from the office. Its touch is chilly, but I am met with far more warmth than you have ever given the man who put that shiny ring on your nightstand.

Ally McWilliams

Moon Blessed Carnage

Content notes: body horror, gore, death, religion, abuse

I

Blood. The world began with blood. Thick, oozing, pulsing through too-small wounds. With screams and cries and tearing through walls upon walls of flesh, a moon blessed carnage. Blood from your lips into mine. Dripping and forming rivers.

It was blood that sealed our fates. Blood that stripped me bare in front of the gods, ground my bones to dust and built me anew, all in four measly minutes.

Blood that lies just under that thin membrane I can't break through. Someone reaches out, pushes into the cell wall, their silhouette is someone I almost recognise in the mirror.

The membrane ruptures and I fall into the dark. There's a strong citrus smell, nauseating and sterile. There's a longing, a thirst, and no means to quench it.

It's blood that binds us.

You're stubborn, my love, set in your ways with an intense cruelty, and yet so very soft. The same hands that rend flesh from bone, knits skin back together. I tear off parts of myself, frozen stiff in fear. You sew me back together with bloodied needles and threads of sinew.

II

The skin holds more of a sheen than a glow, dewy even. Teeth bite into figs, juice bursts down sanguine lips. It drips onto green marble. A feast of pomegranates, cherries and pumpkins are set out, forbidden as the apple. You are my first sin. Indulging in the banquet, sugary sweet evidence etches itself in my skin, into the folds, the creases, and the pores. The blood pools around us.

The blood is hot, almost boiling as I drink, damning me. Fires alight in my arteries and veins. Everything burns and everything is ice. The boomerang nebula and a supernova rage inside and I know nothing will ever be the same. The moon watches and she says nothing. Her's is the only light I will ever know, and she's a capricious lover.

III

I'm cold, my dear.

I remember the warmth of the sun. How he held me close from putrefaction until undeath. He watched the bugs crawl under my skin, the maggots and blowflies building their cities and mounds of pus on my face and back. He called me beautiful. Now he recoils in fear of what I have become and calls for my condemnation.

Drive a stake into my heart, burn my body and bury me at the crossroads. One simply cannot allow a monster to live.

I must be pushed to the outskirts of society. With enough cruelty, I'll hunt myself, do the work for them. I'll drive myself wild with madness, lash out and isolate myself until there's nothing of me that remains. Only the fear, the anger, the loneliness.

I cannot be allowed to corrupt the masses. Preach love to me and burn my flesh with a cross. Use my blackened ashes to mark your penitence. My only sin was thinking the world could be kind.

You shunned his preaching long ago.

IV

The world has changed with blood. Dark red, almost black, it flows in chunks. Iron, mucus, livers, and intestines turn to syrup and flow. I'm coated in a thick layer, sickly sweet. There's a painting of blood as it carves out the contours of my face.

The paint chisels away at my features, an artist of a haunting beauty. I'm left with cramps as the lining of the human body disintegrates.

V

Blood coats everything. The walls, the trees, the moon. The stars themselves are cloaked in a deep ichor. A deep crust that refuses to flake off. I scrub and scrub, peeling the skin off in thin layers. Garlic skin tears apart, exposing muscles and wearing away down to the bone. The blood had tainted everything. My love, it has tainted you.

You are the mushrooms that consume my skin, engulfed in the adipocere and preserved in the bog. We're entwined, your fangs digging into my heart, buried in the same grave. One body and the blood has dried up. Copper lies on my tongue as flowers bloom around me. Aren't we beautiful, my love? Blessed by the same carnage.

Emma Mitchell

The Black Swan

Content notes: suicide

My girlfriend dances for me every night. She is a bit slower than usual. I blame that on the red broken skin that paints the back of her heels. She twirls around just a few steps away from me. Round and round she goes. She falls down to my feet as usual, and I call it a night. I tell her I love her, and she immediately says it back. I go to sleep with her by my side and leave for work in the morning. I turn to look at her before I go, noticing her ankles twitching and her body shifting from one side to another. She didn't have to be awake to dance.

She went to her ballet class. She stood straighter, spun quicker.

Not good enough.

She pointed her toes, straight as a ruler and flexed her calf muscles until they burned. The other dancers watched her spin. Round and round she went. Then she falls and nobody blinks. She was sent away with a shake of the head and a flick of the wrist. *Pathetic.*

This evening, she told me what happened at a dance recital. I stared down at her crying into her hands. Of course, she was upset. After watching her speak, I walked back over to my chair, waiting for her to stand in front of me. She sat there, tears brightening her cheeks and her lips wobbling rhythmically. She trudged forward on red heels, and round and round she went. That evening, just before bed, I reminded her of the reasons she needs to practice more. She passed out beside me and in the morning, I left for work.

She went to class. Her back arched, she spun slowly.

It hurt.

Her toes cramped. Her calf muscles ached.

Everything hurts.

With red heels and a purple stomach, she twisted her body, round and round she went. She tore herself from the floor and dragged her feet out the door. Nobody said anything when she fell. Nobody said anything despite knowing that she was always falling.

I came home to silence. The living room was dark. She knew by this point that channel 4 should be on before I got home. Nothing smelled good from the kitchen. But something stunk. I stood at the edge of the staircase in the hallway, craning my head up towards the other side. There she was. I watched as she moved side to side, showing off her red and purple legs. Her arms delicately swung back and forth. She hovered above me, performing her final routine of the evening. How disappointing. I met her at the top of the stairs, reaching my arms around her waist and tugging her down to my chest. I tucked her into bed before returning to the hallway, Pulling the rope away from the ceiling.

She will dance for me again tomorrow. She doesn't need to be awake to dance.

Jacob Phillips

In My Own Skin

Content notes: gore

These past few years have eaten at me,
A buzzard picking at my innards,
Wolves circle the corpse of who I once was,
I rot into the ground, a reminder of my pestilence.

The more I reflect, drowning in this lake,
The more I succumb to its depths,
Surrounded by smog clouding my vision.

How do I escape this ravenous fog?

I struggle in the dirt,
Tangled in the seaweed on the shore,
The answer I'm looking for just at my fingertips,
Yet as I get a grip my body is reminded of myself.

My hands feel skeletal, bones bursting from flesh,
My chest tightens, wrenching at its form,
Shoulders stiffen, broad in their repulsion.

I rot yet I stand, I hunger yet I starve.

I wish I was built like that, sealed within its labyrinth,
Like he who was cursed by those before him,
He who simply wished to escape his maze.

Why do I wish I was like he who has no legs,
Yet moves through sand and dirt against all odds,
Whose jaw could eat even itself for eternity?

I struggle with myself, in this void of decision,
Am I covering myself in scales and venom to spite others?
Is this to spite myself?
To seal myself off?

These feelings are ageless,
They make the pilgrimage from my subconscious,
Striking when the air is cold and biting.

I can't answer them, fear strikes me,
Their religion soars above my comprehension,

Yet still they convince me,
Slowly each year still.

My eyes see my expansive self,
Swirling mist recede from this swamp,
Trowel in hand, I begin digging,
Asking if this is real.

Now I feel more open,
More ready for their visit,
Yet I still cannot find myself in the mire,
The peat holds me so.

I've been exploring this undergrowth for some time recently,
Deep inside the bog at the bag of my mind,
But my shovel keeps eroding,
Burying my feet in the marsh again.

I see those who have come before me,
Dressed in robes, coloured after gods,
Those who found themselves in the river,
But I cannot reach their hands,
They tower above me, reaching above Olympus itself.

I find myself desiring to cut away at the branches of the tree in my path,
But I also get caught up in its growth, wrapping me in its vines,
Leaves kiss my body, caressing my soul,
Their etchings seeking to answer my woes.

Perhaps I can find myself, draped in silk and cotton,
Surrounded by a cage I know to be mine,
Swaddled in a clay of my own kiln,
Bottled in glass I see myself in.

Kayla Powlison

No Need to Say Goodbye

Content notes: blood, violence, war, religion

Part One: A Quiet Word (Reverie)

No place had ever really felt like home, and that was fine by me.

I was just nine when Mum walked out the door and never came back. I think my dad would have tried to do the same, if he could find a door that'd do the trick. Then again, so would I.

My father drank away his worries and his weekends, leaving me and my younger sister to fend for ourselves. Ever the proverbial runaway, I flung myself through doors with reckless abandon – even before my mother left, but more so after – to no avail. I gave up hoping for results around thirteen. My little sister, not-so-affectionately nicknamed Renny, seemed born to be my opposite. Prim and tidy and tediously perfect, Ren lacked the family predisposition for escapism and I lacked her affinity for obscene cleanliness and blue hair ribbons and flawless skin, as she was all too willing to remind me. And so I drudged my way through sixteen years of life, damp and dreary and decidedly Londonish, until that day on the train platform.

Line 6. Departing in approximately 12 minutes - but they were always late and then so was I, arriving to class in a sweaty, flustered, and generally unappealing hurricane of books and scarf and flyaway hair.

I thought it odd that I was the only one waiting on the platform; I checked and double-checked the timetable and chalked up the strange feeling in my gut to confusion and perhaps too much coffee on an empty stomach. When the train finally came screeching into the station, I lurched forward without a second thought. It was nearly a full fifteen minutes late and I would almost certainly hear from my history professor – again – about the merits of punctuality and how severely I lacked them.

The ill feeling did not fade as I stepped through the sliding doors, however; the world seemed to tilt sickeningly for a moment, my vision blurred, and there was a rushing sensation – a rushing noise in my ears, too – as if I was being pulled or pushed, or perhaps both at the same time.

I must have closed my eyes in an attempt to make the world right itself. When I opened them, nothing was the same. For one thing, there was grass. And for another, it was green. Definitely not London.

I was elated. Like my mother, I didn't look back.

For all its beauty, this new place pulsed with a strange and haunting energy. I could feel it thrumming through the earth, up through the soles of my feet, and into my bones.

My head throbbed and my throat felt dry. I needed water. Panting, I pushed through the vivid undergrowth, convinced I heard the sound of running water. Eager young trees reached out their branches, as if to touch me as I passed, but I shoved them aside. I felt tears of relief stinging my eyes when I finally stumbled upon a glorious little creek rambling its way over green, green moss and smooth, gleaming stones. The water was crystal clear. I knelt on the slightly damp earth, uniform skirt be damned, and cupped my hands to bring some of the precious water to my mouth.

And then I heard a voice that sent an eerie chill skittering over my skin. “Are you lost, little one?”

I looked up, and met the gaze of a wild and unearthly thing. A woman, I thought, or very nearly a woman. But there was something ever so slightly wrong about her. The color of her skin was a shade too pallid, too almost-green. The timbre of her voice, so reedy and thin, a nearly perfect mimicry of a real human voice. Her strange flowing clothing, so perfectly molded to her flesh that I couldn’t seem to tell where it began and where it ended, what was fabric and what was skin.

I gaped at her – and she laughed, the sound uncanny in its similarity to the burbling of the creek. I shivered. “What... where did you come from?” I managed, slowly easing myself away from the water.

“Go on. Drink,” she said. It was permission, plea, and command all at once. I could not refuse her.

I drank. I drank and my troubles disintegrated, fluttering away on the rustling breeze. I drank and the old world faded into a distant dream. There was only this.

She smiled sweetly at me when I lifted my face, dripping, from the water, but I could not seem to tear my gaze away from her eyes: muddy brown with startling points of green. Her eyes did not smile.

“You are a stranger in this world,” she said. “There have been others like you, over the years. Few enough, but some. The Doors leading to this realm are hard to find. Maybe you are special.”

Maybe I was special. Or maybe I was cursed. It is hard to tell the difference, I’ve learned.

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The days flowed by me in a glittering stream, like the waters of Lethe. I was caught up in it, drunk and giddy and light. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. And I became someone I no longer recognized.

The people of the forest took me in. They were not cruel at heart, although they could be dangerous and fearsome when they chose. And they chose to be often, for this was a world at war. The king sought to uproot the forest and erase even the memory of the people whose life was tied to it. All their hope lay in the rightful heir to the throne, their child-messiah. I heard of him incessantly.

Raised in the Old religion – the way of the forest people – by his mother, the boy had fled to the woods seeking protection when his mother died of less-than-natural causes. The Naiad spared the little royal when they discovered that he was a half-breed – half-human and half-naïad – and adopted him as one of their own. In their eyes, he could do no wrong. I was sick of him before I ever laid eyes on him.

And then I laid eyes on him.

I had entered the room – more of a cave, really – with what I thought was a graceful air of dignity, no mud-splashed socks or flushed cheeks or strands of hair escaping my braid anywhere in sight. He didn't even look up from the map sprawled before him and his advisors. His dark hair obscured his face, and I scoffed to myself. A shaggy schoolboy, fancying himself the general of an army.

He looked up then. Perhaps my scoffing had not been entirely to myself. And I had been mistaken. It dawned on me that he was not such a *boy* after all; he was practically an adult. The hair I had thought shaggy a moment ago was thick and just barely wavy, falling nearly to his shoulders. He was taller than I – easily. He had precise, sharp cheekbones, a firm jaw, and light brown skin. Beautiful and otherworldly, like all the Naiad-folk.

His eyes swept quickly over the group of us – I'd been escorted to meet him by what felt like an unnecessary contingent of the forest people – but returned, sharply, to me.

*It's you.*

The thought came to me unbidden, and echoed through my mind.

*It's you. It's you. It's you.*

I recoiled from it as if it were a real whisper in my ear.

My feet stuttered; I felt frozen in his gaze. There was something in it that made me squirm. Something soft.

*Recognition*, the voice whispered.

And then war came to our doorstep in earnest, and I forgot him in the sea of blood. I took up a bow, a knife, a sword. I became something else. Something obscene, godless and terrible.

~~~~~

*The sky is black
Arrows fly like whispers, blood flows like water
Like the waters of Lethe
Drink to forget, drink to remember
My lips hold your freedom.*

*The sky is gray, and arrows fly like whispers
I am no longer a child, no longer a girl
I am something else; a poem half-formed
The thought in the mind of a monster
The sun rises, slow and painful
Sorrow gives birth to hope.*

*The sky is light.
I hold our freedom in my fist, squalling and bloodied as a newborn babe
I paid the price in your blood; our children weep
And we begin again tomorrow—
Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow*

*Drink from me, drink from me
Drink to remember
Drink to forget
The years echo like drops of water in a well
It is a long, long way down
The path of memory is unpaved
Treacherous walking, and lonely
We are older now, and wiser.*

~~~~~

I looked around, drowning in blood. I watched as my fellow soldiers died around me. Panic and despair seeped into my bones; I felt tired and old and very alone.

I survived the night. Not everyone did.

Those who remained to watch the next morning dawn wandered through the blood-soaked streets, mechanically removing bodies, collecting weapons, finding those few among the bodies who were still holding onto breath. Listless ghosts, flitting among corpses.

It felt like the world's longest nightmare.

It felt wrong to be alive still, surrounded by the dead. It felt wrong that the sun should rise just like it did every other morning, for surely this was not every other morning at all.

I sat on the steps that led to the main hall, numb and aching, my body screaming for sleep and my mind terrified of what would happen if I dared to close my eyes for even a moment. I didn't realize he was there until he sat down next to me. I looked up, ready to snap at him. To tell him to go away, leave me be. I couldn't force myself to endure his strange intensity, not when I was a breath away from screaming or sobbing, or both. But there were tears in his eyes and defeat and shame, and the weary agony with which he held himself matched my own. I let him sit. For a long while, I said nothing.

An eternity slipped by, or perhaps two. Finally I broke the silence.

“Your Majesty, I—”

“Caesium,” he said softly. “My name is Caesium.”

“Well that’s... that’s awful, isn’t it?”

He laughed, or tried to. A tear leaked from his eye and trickled down his cheek. My heart seemed to splinter apart then.

“My name is Reverie,” I told him. “My mother’s doing, I think. She had a fondness for weird forlorn shit. Named both her daughters after things that aren’t real.” I reached out, took his hand. Squeezed gently, hoping it would in some way comfort him.

He sniffed, tried valiantly for a smile. “I’ve never done this before, you know,” his voice was wobbly. “Been responsible for so many... I—” He couldn’t finish the sentence, the tears were too close and with a shuddering breath, he was crying. And I didn’t know why or how, but I was pulling him into my arms and holding him as he wept.

His hands were braced around my upper arms, as if I was the only thing keeping him from being swept away. The pale first-morning light crept higher, bathing us in what felt a bit like forgiveness and a bit like grief.

~~~~~

*The night is past.
Now we reside in the pale morning
Bloodstained and heartsick.
What kind of world are we making?*

*This is what I have wrought:
Men die at my hands
Men die without honor
Men are buried without names
I create a new world on their graves
I can only hope it is a better one*

*A dark night and a slow sunrise
What have we wrought?
I am making a new world
with you
I am making the world.*

Come, sit beside me

*Let us watch the sunrise together
Slow and beautiful as it dawns
To reveal a new world, a better one
One where I am not alone.*

~~~~~

Months drift by me like the waters of Lethe. I am just a twig, a leaf, bobbing along on its placid surface, carried along whether I wish it or not.

War is an ugliness I've never seen the like of. That night was my first, and I knew immediately I wanted it to be my last. It was not. War is like a drug. One hit is never enough.

I avoided him when I could. We both felt it, this tug towards one another, the merciless pull of fate. And it was dangerous. He knew it too, but was more reckless than I. Surely he also felt what I was certain of: I could not stay forever. Doors are ever-calling. So are sisters, it turns out.

So I passed the time in the only way I knew how: Between battles, I scrubbed my hands clean. I got on my knees every morning – a thing I had never done before, never even considered doing – to pray to the gods for forgiveness. I put on creamy, delicate gowns on the days I didn't wear leather and chainmail and tried to forget the version of myself that was cold and cruel and unflinching in the face of death. I batted away the voices in my head.

But one voice was insistent. There was something terrible and familiar about this voice. I had heard it before. And although it began as a mere whisper, it was growing stronger day by day until I could scarcely tell the difference between my own thoughts and the voice. She told me I had to leave. She told me many things. She made promises. My sister begged, pleaded, commanded me to come back home. I would have been heartless to refuse her.

Foolishly – perhaps willfully so – I found Caesium walking in the garden to tell him goodbye first.

He gathered me into his arms. I surprised myself by letting him.

"I will wait for you," he murmured, "until you return." I looked at him, wondering whether or not to tell the truth.

"That's just it," I said, trying hard for a brave smile. "I'm not coming back."

He was silent for a long time. I thought, this is the end. We were just two teenagers after all. It meant nothing.

"Then I will come find you," he said. And he smiled.

It did not mean nothing.

I tried to be the voice of reason. "People do this all the time, you know."

"This?" he asked.

I couldn't meet his eyes. "Fall in love." I gestured at the space between us, finally meeting his gaze, willing him to understand, "This has been happening for centuries."

He laughed, clear and ringing. "That doesn't make it common." He kissed me. Softly, quickly, on the lips. *Goodbye.*

He turned to go and I grabbed his shoulder to stop him. Stepped into the space between us. Slipped one hand around his neck, pressing his head down just slightly, and kissed him. Slower, longer. *Goodbye.*

~~~~~

Can you hear me?

I can hear you.

Don't forget.

I won't forget.

Do you think Lethe is evil?

No. Just cold.

Like god?

Like god.

And if we were gods? What sort of world would we make?

A broken one.

And did you think the world would be perfect, once you had love?

Did you dare to dream a dream

And think that I could not listen?

There are no doors that can keep out Lethe

No gates or bars that can hold her

She is the great river of time

And she prevails over all.

~~~~~

## Part Two: Follow The Light (Caesium)

It's dark as shit.

I can't see my hands in front of my face, can't see the ground under my feet. We are all worms in the dark. Feeling, smelling, pawing our way forward.

The sun is a distant memory.

Down here, there is only the sound of pickaxes. Breathe, swing, connect. Repeat. A thousand little bodies moving in the dark.

A deep boom shakes the cavern, and inwardly, I curse the maggots with their explosives. Faster, yes. But also more dangerous. My vein could collapse from the tremors caused by a boom a hundred feet above or below and they would never even find my body.

War has never been a pretty thing, and I have been its plaything for as long as I can remember, but this is a particularly insidious strain of it. Lethe wages war and we are her insects. Mining for silk to feed her ravenous appetites.

Breathe, swing, connect. No light is allowed – no lantern, no candle, no torch. We feel for the stuff with our bare hands, thick dark reams of it. Dark as ebony, soft as dreams. Food for Lethe.

At the end of the day, sucked dry and silent, we form a chain in the dark. A little row of maggots. Every miner with his hands on the shoulders of the person in front of him. Trickle our way back to the cabin.

As soon as the flimsy door shuts, someone strikes a match. It still makes me nervous. An open flame down here, and enough silk woven into these mountains to make the whole thing go up like a powder keg. I keep quiet, though. Gods know we all long for the light.

In hushed tones, the men and women of my crew begin to laugh and joke with one another, begin to strip off mud-caked jumpsuits in favor of softer underthings and thermals, socks and fingerless mittens to ward off the chilly night. I find myself seated at the table – someone is ladling out bowls of thin soup – and staring into the eerie dancing flame.

“--hear that, Jack?”

I am startled out of a hazy daydream. A girl’s face, as haunting as a memory, imprinted on my mind. “Ah, no. Sorry. What, uh, what did you say?”

“They’re sending in another crew tomorrow. Reverend’s crew.”

I hum noncommittally. We’ve been hearing odd rumors about Reverend’s crew for months. I’d been starting to think they might actually be made up – a tall tale to pass the hours in the dark. But I guess we’ll find out soon enough.

I run a tired hand through my hair – too long, too sloppy, by my own standards; I’m long past due for a trim – probably smearing it through with a layer of silkdust. I need a shower. Desperately.

When I finally throw myself into bed, the memory of the flickering candle burns against my eyelids. It fades, eventually, replaced by her face. The face that has been haunting me for years now. She is the last thing I see before I fall asleep.

~~~~~

*The world is only darkness,
The world is only Lethe...*

*We are children no longer.
You close your window
And I am just a crow, perched on the ledge
Leaving trinkets
Remember me
Remember me
Remember me*

*There are too many doors between you and I
Would you come back to me if I called you?
Could you even find me if you tried?*

*Keep visiting me in my dreams
I beg you not to go—*

~~~~~

“Fucking maggots and your fucking lanterns, how many times do I have to—”

It’s her.

My heart is pounding so wildly I swear she must be able to hear it – it’s her. I can’t think, can’t speak, can’t move.

She stares at me with a cool level gaze. Gray eyes. Just as sharp and bright as ever. “Care to finish that sentence, miner? Something about fucking maggots, I believe.”

I laugh and it sounds harsh. I recognize her, of course – I would recognize her anywhere. But I hardly recognize myself, how could I expect her to. I’m covered in black grime and my hair is disheveled and I curse like a miner and laugh like a madman. I feel a wave of repulsion sweep over me. I was never good enough for her, but now...

“Reverie,” I say. “It’s me, it’s—”

“Yes, I know. Caesium—”

“Jack. They call me Jack here,” I mutter, rather embarrassed.

“I can’t imagine why,” she says archly. “And how do you... you called me Reverie just now?”

I raise an eyebrow. "Because that's your name. Isn't it? Reverie, don't you remember—"

"It is my name, yes, but I go by Rev among the crews. Or Reverend." A ghost of a smile plays around her mouth.

"Rev. Short for Reverie."

She looks perplexed. She doesn't... she doesn't remember me at all. "Yes. But how...?"

"Would you come with me? Please?"

She tilts her head. "To where, exactly?"

"Just the bunker. Please," I say again.

She hesitates for a long moment and I feel as lost and adrift as I ever have in that moment. Finally she nods.

"You really ought to put out that lantern."

"How will we make it back to the bunker without light?"

"I know the way. Just..." I take her hand and place it on my shoulder. "Just follow me."

~~~~~

"Why are you here?" I ask quietly. It feels strange, having her so close. Knowing that she does not know me as I know her.

"For Lethe, of course." She is glib. She wasn't glib before.

"No," I tell her, frustrated, "I mean, *why are you here?* Why did you... why did you come *here?*"

"My sister," she says very softly. "I'm looking for my sister."

"You never told me you had a sister."

She snorts. "And why would I..." she trails off. "You're a strange man, Jack."

I stop. She stops. I can feel the waiting. I can feel her question without her asking.

"Reverie."

"Yes." She sounds nervous, out of breath.

Why did you drink the water? You promised...

“Reverie, you don’t remember me. But we’ve met before.” I tell her. I tell her the story and she remembers – or at least, she does the next best thing, which is remembering that she cannot remember.

“Have you seen her?” she asks, at the end. “My sister.”

We sit together in the dark. “I doubt... well, what does she look like, Reverie?”

“Ren,” she whispers. “Her name is Limerence, actually. But we called her Ren. Or Renny. She hated that nickname. Because she’s this...” she huffs a rather unladylike sigh, “gorgeous, perfect, otherworldly sort of thing.”

“I might need a bit more in the way of detail...”

“Blonde,” she says. I can almost hear her rolling her eyes at me. It makes me smile in the dark. “You know, classic beauty. Slender. Delicate. Graceful. Everything I’m not.” The faintest twinge of resentment.

I nod along, absolutely uncomprehending. I can’t conceive of what beauty means if it doesn’t look like her. My mind races. I lean my head back against the wall and think carefully before I say my next words. “I’m sorry, Reverie. Truly. But I haven’t seen her. And I’ve been here... well. It’s felt like an eternity. But perhaps just a few years.”

“Years?” she whispers. She sounds lost and afraid and desperately, desperately sad.

“I... have been missing you,” I tell her, “for as long as I can remember.”

I take her in my arms then, frame her face with my hands, wishing there wasn’t dirt in the lines of my skin, under my fingernails, in my veins, and I kiss her like it’s the first time because for her, it is. Tender as a goodbye. Gentle as sunrise. Filled with all the hope and longing that I’ve been starved of every day she was gone. And I pull away and brush my thumb over her lower lip.

“We have to get out,” I murmur afterwards. “I’ve finally found you, Reverie. We have to leave this place. Together.”

“No.” One word and I feel my world crumble. “My sister. I have to find her. I will not leave this place without her. I know she’s here, Jack. Once we find her... Only that. Then we can all leave together.” Her voice is brittle and bleak, laden with responsibility.

“How do you even know she’s here, Reverie? She could be... anywhere.” *Tread carefully, Jack.*

“Rev,” she replies softly. “Here I am called Rev. It fits better. And I know she’s here because we came together.”

I sit up straighter. “Then how—”

“We got separated in the crossing. Something... something went wrong. I felt her... being pulled away from me. But she’s here. I know it.”

I nod, although she can’t see it. “Okay. Okay, then we stay. Until we find her.”

And the days grow up thick and dark around us like the forest of Lethe. We make a home, such as it is, in the dark. She sleeps in my arms that night and all the nights after it and yet I feel her slipping away. The shadows creep in slowly, twisting and writhing between us.

~~~~~

A single blue ribbon is my undoing.

“You lied to me.”

“Rev—”

“Fuck you.”

“Would you just let me explain?”

“It won’t change anything.”

“I didn’t know she was your sister then—”

“But you knew when I told you, Caesium! You knew. And you lied to me about it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really fucking sorry. Please. Please don’t do this.”

“This?”

“Don’t leave. Please don’t leave.”

“I’m sick of this place. And I’m sick of your shit.”

“And you think I’m not? This place – this place is eating me alive, Rev. It’s under my skin, it’s inside me. I feel like I’m being poisoned from the inside out. I swear I’m living the same fucking day over and over again, and I thought...”

“You thought? You thought what?”

“I thought you being here... I thought we could be happy. I thought it would be enough.”

“But it isn’t. Is it? You fucking lied and you schemed to keep me here – to keep me in your prison with you so you wouldn’t have to face it alone and look where that got you, Jack. It wasn’t enough. You feel like you’re being poisoned? Well you poisoned me right along with you. And I’m getting out.”

“You got cold, you know that? Or maybe you always were and I just thought... thought maybe I could change you.”

“Oh, fuck you. You know what you got? You got fucking angry. You didn’t used to be like this, Caesium. You were kind, you were... you were so kind.”

“I got older.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It was inevitable, Rev! I couldn’t stay the naive little boy who fell in love with you! Of course I’m angrier than I was. How could I help it? I’ve seen too much shit not to be angry... I’m so tired. Of starting over. Of losing you and finding you and—”

“Well. You don’t have to be tired of finding me any longer. This is over.”

“Don’t.”

“Goodbye.”

“Reverie.”

“I love you, too, Jack. In another world, we could have been happy. But this one is killing us.”

~~~~~

*And we are lost to each other once more
Maybe we never go home
Maybe I will always wander, looking for you*

*Maybe I've seen you a thousand times
In a thousand faces
And I just haven't recognized you yet
And yet
And yet
I feel that i would know you, in any time, in any place, in any universe—
I would find you*

*Even if we were dead and dying and dreadful?
Even if we were cruel and evil and cold?
Even if we were soulless and lost and sick?*

My heart would know yours.

*I hate to say I am lost without you
But I am lost
And I am without you
Perhaps it is not too much to think
the two things must be connected.*

*And the years and the years and the years,
They keep crawling on and on and on.
And I am like a tiny speck floating on the stream of them
Wishing that I would collide with you again.*

~~~~~

### Part Three: Back to the Beginning (Lethe)

In the end, the girl returns to her home. But nothing is the same.

The girl walks through the door with her heart in her hands. The boy will be there, she thinks.

For the first time in her life, she is looking forward to what is on the other side. Not just eager to run away, but eager to arrive. Eager to stay, to belong.

No one would ever have thought it, least of all me. She was always the runner.

The girl opens the door, her hopes as high and soft as a balloon. Waiting for the tree branch, the thorn, the dart. Destined for it.

And the boy's face is the first one she sees.

Oh, she is so soft. She is wide open. The girl is lovely and golden and so, so weak.

She stands there waiting for him to speak, for him to answer, her tender heart pounding so hard I think it might shatter.

She tries valiantly for a smile. It falters, wobbles... breaks.

The boy is still and quiet. He does not kiss her. Why doesn't he?

The boy and the girl. They are frozen and dangling in mid-space, staring at each other, sharing breath but not words.

He knows her, she thinks. There is something like recognition in his eyes – and love too– but also confusion. Even alarm.

The girl opens her mouth to speak–

But a voice from within the house cuts her off, calling...

Calling the boy's name. Not hers. His.

The boy almost startles at the sound – jolted out of a dream, I think. A dream where they are dreaming of each other.

He speaks to her: "Won't you come in?"

How odd for her to be invited into her own childhood home. She smiles at him rather abashed. The smile of people who share a history.

The girl's hands tremble. The boy doesn't notice.

They arrive in the sitting room. It is dim and warm and cozy. Tears rise to the girl's eyes.

The boy turns to face her – abruptly. She almost runs into his front. He half-reaches out to steady her.

She doesn't understand his restraint, why he does not simply gather her into his arms and kiss her. But she responds in kind, restraining her own hungry heart, her hungry hands and eyes and mouth.

The boy's voice is very low, very quiet, when he says it: "You..." he tilts his head to the side, as if trying desperately to remember something – a dream, perhaps, or a face he knew in a dream once – *"she looks so much like you."*

The boy's eyes gaze at her for a long, long moment as if he could never get enough. His hand twitches at his side. Hungry.

The voice calls the boy's name again and I realize what a very familiar voice it is. Bright as springtime, cold and blinding as winter.

"Jack?" the voice says. "Who's this?"

The voice comes into the room, and settles by the boy's side.

"My wife," says the boy, placing an arm around the voice's slender shoulders.

The voice belongs to a woman. She wears a blue ribbon in her perfect, golden hair.

## Morgan Royall

### *Kirkyard Dog*

*Content notes: death*

Nicht falls, an as aw'ways  
Ah lay in Greyfriars kirk; tha' plot o' land  
Where he sleeps, ma Maister. Where  
Ah lay on top, awaitin fae his wakin'.

The patch is big, an' ah am wee,  
Nae typical o' a kirkyard dog, ah ken,  
Yit nonetheless ah protect ma Maister,  
'Til he wakes, an' can return the favour

They say ah'm withoot an owner, now  
Yet they lie, ah see him everyday. Whan ah sleep,  
He lauchs, an' we chase an play, as we usit tae,  
Him sayin' 'gid boy' an' the like, as he did.

The groundskeeper approaches. Ah bark, aw loud,  
Hackles raisit an jaws waitin' tae snatch,  
He usit tae make me leave, ye ken,  
But now he jus' nods, respectin' ma protectin' post.

It's been years, ah'm gettin auld, joints a' achin'.  
Ah'm startin' tae fear he won't come back.  
Ah mainly lay bi a fire now, half-angry,  
Ma agein' body no staunin' the cauld it once coud.

His daughters, they say they'll bury me  
Wi' him. They think ah dinna understand thaim.  
Ah dinna wan' tae dee, ye ken, but yit, on some leivel  
Ah await, wait fae the day we can play again.

*Kirkyard Dog (Translation to Eng.)*

*Content notes: death*

Night falls, and as always  
I lay in Greyfriars Kirk, that plot of land  
Where he sleeps, my Master. Where  
I lay on top, awaiting for his waking.

The patch is big, and I am small,  
Not typical of a kirkyard dog, I know,  
Yet nonetheless, I protect my master,  
'Til he wakes, and can return the favour

They say I'm without an owner, now  
Yet they lie, I see him every day when I sleep,  
He laughs, and we chase and play, as we used to,  
Him saying 'Good boy' and the like, as he did.

The groundskeeper approaches. I bark, all loud,  
Hackles raised and jaws waiting to snatch,  
He used to make me leave, you know,  
But now he just nods, respecting my protecting post.

It's been years, I'm getting old, joints aching.  
I'm starting to fear he won't come back.  
I mainly lay by a fire now, half-angry,  
My ageing body not standing the cold it once could.

His daughters, they say they'll bury me  
With him. They think I don't understand them.  
I don't want to die, you know, but yet, on some level  
I await, wait for the day we can play again.

*Closing up, Closing in*

*Content notes: death, gore*

You had a home once, down on the Close.  
Poor, rotting, and squalid, yet yours.  
Sickness, sprouted and propagated through rats  
Through packed streets, flowering into decimation.

See the ring of roses, swiftly, Bubonic boils  
Breaking out, multiplying in close quarters.  
Pestilence taking its fill, devouring, until,  
An order to leave the Close.

Your home.

The street goes:

Down

Down

Down,

Underground, left to rot, quickly forgotten,  
Left to decay over time, to seal disease  
With little acknowledgement to its  
Residents, to you, who lost,

Your home.

The walls go:

Up

Up

Up,

'Til not a single trace remains. No sign of the  
Plague-ravaged bodies who haunt  
Those halls, those abandoned streets.  
You feel you should be among them.

You find yourself questioning, some days, just this:  
How you escaped the fate of those trapped in the tomb  
Of your residence. Or even, whether you still now remain,  
A living body, rotting; forever enclosed.

You're home.

16.

*Content notes: death, gore*

It was truly in our right, you know,  
To earn the rent you dodged by death.  
And even over your dead body,  
You will pay your overdues.

*And really, why would anyone say a thing?*

You must understand, you realise,  
Graverobbing is so much more work  
Iron mortsafes to prevent disruption, for only  
A rotting body, your freshness is valuable.

*And why, at all, should they need to know a thing?*

It's bad for business, your sickness,  
Come on, my friend, you're already half-dead.  
We'll cut you down, he'll cut you up  
And Knox on wood, We hope and pray,

*They won't find out, they'll never know a thing.*

Lock the rooms tight, my friend,  
And make sure to hide the smell of blood  
And rotting corpses, as they lay under beds.  
All it takes is a witness.

*We know at least, the 16 dead, they can't say a thing.*

A lodger house is no place for murders,  
Was it any wonder we were discovered?  
And my dear friend, my dear fellow fiend  
You should have gotten your alibi straight.

*They've found us out, I'll tell them everything.*

And really Burke, why would you ever trust,  
The word of the man you murdered with?  
A prisoners dilemma, my freedom for your hanging  
Another body cut down for medical halls.

*And really, were you even worth anything?*



## Taliesin Schafer

*Torn*

*Content warning: gore*

When you were born,  
you were cut into three.

Torn.

A piece for your motherland, the vast expanse of sand,  
the old Bay Tree she always wanted you to see.

Torn.

A piece for your fatherland, with history as dark and forlorn,  
but free, so perfectly like he.

Torn.

Then there is your land.

Your land could be desert, vast and shining.  
Your land could be dark forests, green and thriving.  
It could be far East, West, South or North,  
lands you have never seen, but you dare go forth.

Some torn children believe to wander,  
roam from sea to land, only to ponder—  
Where is my heart? When can I rest?  
Where is the home, where I'm no longer the guest?

Other torn children mark their own land,  
to find a place where they won't be damned;  
They come, they see, they conquer the fear  
and finally have a place that they hold dear.

And some? Some live out of a suitcase.  
All places fleeting, all places not quite.  
Giving up on the unending race,  
to be old, and to be in the place that's just right.

## *The Stranger*

Two cups. Boil the kettle. Two teaspoons of sugar for her and just one for me. Two teabags wait at the side. She'll be home at seven, when we'll sit together and sip at our hot drinks in front of the television. She'll have eaten by then, and while she showers, I have something light. If I don't, I end up with a stomach ache by ten, when I should be sleeping. Then we'll spend the last half an hour in bed, as she reads with her crooked glasses perched on the edge of her nose and, I take my painkillers so that if my back twinges in the night, at least I won't feel it.

Steam steadily billows from the kettle as the clock ticks closer and closer to seven, the long hand nestled on the forty-seventh minute. My wife prefers her tea to be warm, not hot, so over the years I've learned to time meticulously it so that the temperature is just right. I prefer my tea piping hot with lots of milk, so sometimes I reboil the kettle. Usually I just sip my tepid drink as my wife talks about her day at the office.

As I lay out the coasters, a bright light sweeps across the windows looking out onto the road. I frown, glancing at the clock. There were still thirteen minutes till she came home in her sluggish beige car. So, I just stand completely still, hearing an engine sharply die and the gravel crunch underneath a pair of feet. The knock at the door finally slipped me from my reverie, and I sidled over to the door, taking a breath before slowly opening it, making sure to peek over the old chain into the hazy night.

The man standing before me smiled at my suspicious gaze.

"Hello." He said hoarsely, straightening his posture like a schoolboy in front of his teacher. "I think I took a wrong turn back a couple of miles, and I'm completely fucking lost. How far are we from Letchworth Garden City?"

I wince at the expletive, but he doesn't seem to notice. After a beat of silence, I finally speak, opening the door a bit now.

"We're not that far, but it would be a bit of a ride. This is St. Ippolyts." I glance behind him at the wooded park I live in front of, with the church standing silently in the night, the clock tower ever watchful.

"Fuck. Alright. Mind if I use your phone real quick to call my friend?" He asks. I shuffle a bit, slippers squeaking against the linoleum.

My wife likes to watch the news at night, and she always holds my hand when there are bulletins about break-ins, robberies, and home invasions, even though those happened in London, Birmingham, Manchester. Not here. I had that much sense at least.

So I open the door, mumbling about the stranger taking his shoes off, no doubt splattered with mud. I was in no mood to clean up. I vaguely gesture to the phone on the wall and shuffle back to the mugs, pouring the freshly boiled water into each one.

His voice was low, throaty, the kind that carried without him meaning for it to. Not like my wife. She's always soft-spoken, almost lilting with her words, like a songbird warming up for a tune. When we argued, it became shrill and I'd apologise when it started to hurt my ears too much.

"Yeah, so, I'm just following the way I came in for about 45 minutes and drive along the- Oh, tea! I'd love a cup, if you wouldn't mind?"

I grind my teeth a bit, but glance at him, his helmet hair plastered to his face, framing his dark eyes almost pleasantly.

"How'd you take it?"

"One sugar, and plenty of milk." He smiles at me, and I can only focus on the tiny scar on his bottom lip.

I glance back at the two cups and sigh. Taking my own perfect mug of tea, I hand it over before taking my wife's one in hand. Nothing is more awkward than waiting for someone to finish their drink without also having one. I take a sip and purse my lips.

The Stranger looks different under the light of my kitchen. He's bigger than me, not just in height. Stockier. Dark eyes, like the pebbles you find at a stony beach, beaten into smoothness by the sea and the weather. He could hold our old, chipped mugs, the ones we got as an anniversary present, in one hand, while I had to cradle them with two.

"Waiting up for someone?" He eventually asks, after taking a long swig, as if trying to fill the silence.

"My wife."

"Ah. Married long?"

"Longer than you've been alive probably." I answer, a bit curt, but it makes him chuckle richly.

"Couldn't be me. Confirmed bachelor."

The way he grins a bit after speaking made the hair at the back of my neck stand up, a ghost of a lover dragging his fingers over my neck, barely even a memory.

"Hm. Back in my day, that meant something else than it does now." I take another sip of my wife's drink before setting it down, distaste pricking at my tongue.

"Maybe." He shrugs. "Maybe."

He looks at me again, a smile tugging at his lips before setting my own mug down.

"I should head out. Take care." He ducks his head like he's a soldier and slips off the kitchen chair to head to the door.

I don't even see him outside, satisfied to hear the door shut behind him. Instead, I focus on his mug, abandoned in the middle of the countertop, and slowly pick it up, thumb dragging over the edge. There was still a bit of lukewarm tea at the bottom, and I quickly sip it down, trying to savour the taste underneath the drink, the one lingering on the rim.

The clock chimes seven, and I hear someone pull up outside the house. Probably a beige car, maybe my wife. I reboil the kettle.

## Charlie Taylor

### *Chance's Lament*

*Content notes: death, suicide, alcohol*

It was 10pm. The lights were low, and at a small roundtable a group of four friends were playing poker. Arrow, the town delivery guy, looked at his watch and then up at Trip, the bar owner, who was behind the counter drying glasses.

"Don't look at me like that, Arrow. He's not coming," Trip sighed and put the glass down.

Arrow placed three cards on the table, "I've been on a winning streak, which means he'll be here."

"You say that now, but we all know how it is. You start off strong, but you never know where the game will go. You've not won yet so don't jinx yourself," noted his friend Mella.

The game continued, and just like Mella anticipated, Arrow fell behind. Another player, Spade, took the lead.

"To hell with that!" Arrow threw his arms in the air. His competitive spirit had gotten the better of him, and it turned into bitterness.

Spade however was pleasantly surprised. "I never win, this will be an unusual night..." The other players moved their coins over to Spade. "I only want to win for one reason, I don't want to see *him*. If I win, he won't come. He *can't* come."

Agitated by the game not ending up in his favour, Arrow took another swig of his beer. "I know he's a bad luck charm and all, but you've heard what's happened so you'd know that it'd make a bit of sense for him to come here and release his woes."

"Something happened?" Mella asked.

Spade put his cards down, "Something always happens, and he's always in the centre of it, or involved somehow. If he shows up tonight he's going to talk and talk and talk. He won't stop, and I'll have to sit here thinking about something that has only brought me pain since. I just can't do that tonight."

Clearly the idea of the bar's infamous regular showing up was shaking up the players. Arrow wanted to try and comfort Spade, but his train of thought was interrupted by a thud. Everyone's heads snapped towards Trip when he banged a glass against the wooden countertop, "I don't think we should talk about him anymore. He's not even here." Trip gestured around the room before continuing to dry glasses more forcefully. The whole room could sense his agitation. "If he was coming, which I'm sure he isn't, he'd be here by now. You say that him being here upsets you, but you're already upset without the guy around. Let's just put this all to rest. It'll do you all some good."

It came as a shock to the players that Trip would have such a sudden outburst; it was unlike him. However, they continued their game nonetheless. Juna, the fourth and final player of the group, had stayed silent throughout the entire game. Her body was still, and her arms were crossed, yet

her eyes gave away that there was a lot on her mind. Arrow noticed that his friend was in a bit of a daze, “Juna, what’re you betting?”

There was no response, only silence.

Footsteps echoed down from the lobby. The sound captured everyone’s attention, and they waited in anticipation for someone to walk through the door. A man entered the bar. He was young, tall, and oddly dressed. Perhaps not odd. He did look smart, but he certainly stuck out. The man wore a white suit with a midnight blue shirt, a plum-coloured tie with a red scarf, and a matching white hat that obscured his face. Everyone became silent as he entered the room. Arrow tried to see any emotions on the man's face, but the shadows cast by his hat were too dark.

Every time this man entered the bar, he followed through with the same routine. He would remove his hat and place it on the coat stand along with his scarf before heading to his usual bar stool. It was located right in the centre by the counter. He seemed unfazed as he went through the motions of his ritual with his back turned to the watchful eyes of the players. They dared not utter a word. Their game didn’t continue, and Juna did not place her bet; they all just simply watched him.

“Trip.”

“Chance. Take a seat, kid. You want your usual?”

“Navy’s dead.”

“My god, and you want to drink?”

Chance’s hand tremored as he played with the ring on his left hand. Tears lined his eyes, threatening to spill. “We were meant to have a future together.”

Reluctantly, Trip poured Chance’s drink then slid it over. “Went down Dig’s path, did he? I don’t know much, that’s all I heard.”

“Jesus, Trip! You’re really gonna bring up Dig? Bit insensitive, don’t you think?” Arrow wasn’t the biggest fan of Chance, but he couldn’t help but feel that it was wrong for Trip to mention his dead father while he was in the process of mourning his fiancé. “C’mon, you know better.”

“He’s right. That’s how he went,” Chance replied.

Arrow’s anger simmered down, “I see. Well, I’ve heard some things.”

“I’m sure you have.” Chance put his glass down, but refused to look at the table.

“And I want answers,” Spade interjected.

“I’m sure you do.” Chance took another drink then sat for a few moments in silence.

Mella looked over to Arrow, “He came here to talk, why isn’t he talking?” Arrow placed his hand on Mella’s arm; he knew very well how impatient she could get.

“Let him take his time. I mean look at Spade, he’s shooting daggers at him. The guy did no wrong. He just lost someone very special to him who just so happened to mean a whole lot to

Spade too.” His eyes darted between the two men. Although they were strikingly different, he could draw one similarity that they shared – they were both hurting. They’d lost the same person, but Spade had created this one-sided rift between them. Arrow didn’t think it was the right way to go about this at all. He watched Chance stare down at his drink with his head hung in despair. It was hard to watch for everyone.

“Navy and I were doing just fine, we made it out of Illuma. Went to the city for a good couple months. Everything was fine. We kept our promises and made it out; that was until he got himself into a bad crowd. He only got more bitter and hateful towards himself. Ren called every day begging me to come home, I never could. Still haven’t, and I won’t. She never accepted what I wanted, or accepted Navy, everything was about her. I had to leave. We had to leave, but perhaps if we didn’t Navy would still be here.”

Everything was just spilling out. It was an odd occurrence. Not only to Chance, but to the players as well. They all knew Chance to be this pitiful guy without much reason, but he’d never opened up like this before. He always found himself in unfortunate predicaments, but would simply let the rumours spread and words travel all round town. He didn’t care, but this was different. Arrow could tell that it was more challenging than ever for him to stay silent. Trip slid over a glass of water to Chance, this usually happened after he’d finished his first drink, but it looked like he needed the water sooner rather than later. At this time, alcohol was not the solution for a broken-hearted man mourning the loss of his beloved partner.

Trip poured himself a drink and sighed, “Your mother messed you two kids up, and I let a lot of things slide, but I’ll never forgive her for that; especially, for what she did to you. Navy was lucky to only deal with a fraction of it. Once Dig went, you were all she had, but she just ruined that too.”

Chance picked up the glass of water and downed it all in a matter of seconds. Tears were trickling down his face. “And Navy paid the price for it. He spoke about that woman in the letter he left me. Kept apologising, God, it stung. Felt blood on my hands just reading every word on that damn bit of paper. I just, I just don’t want to believe he’s really gone. Who was I kidding? Being a married man wouldn’t have fixed me, but I’m just shattered glass without my Navy. At this point, Trip, this place, this bar is about the only piece of comfort and familiarity I’ve got left.”

His hand could barely hold the empty glass of water. He slowly popped it down before running his hands through his hair, and just let himself cry. The tears dropped onto the counter. It was all he could do. Seeing Chance break down made everyone see the humanity in him.

“This isn’t your fault, kid. None of it is. Chance, Navy loved you, and you never hurt him. He only hurt himself.” Trip put his hand on Chance’s shoulder in his best efforts to comfort him.

Chance looked up at Trip, “Is it bad that I don’t believe that? A part of me feels that if he really loved me, he’d still be here.”

The players were listening to all of this whilst continuing their game. Juna finally placed her bets. Arrow placed down three cards and sighed. It didn’t feel right to play anymore. He took a swig of his beer before looking over at Chance, “Are you mad at him?”

Chance’s eyes darted around the room as he contemplated Arrow’s question. He seemed much more upset, if anything, but the players certainly did wonder whether the poison of anger had

seeped in. Chance was going to have to admit that to himself before he could even give Arrow an answer. He always did his best to carry himself with composure, but this time around there *was* anger and frustration in his eyes. Unfortunately, Chance happened to be a beacon of misfortune, and all of this negativity had only built up like a high tower. He just wanted to knock it down and be done with it all. “I am, yes. In some ways, admittedly.”

Arrow gave Spade a guilty look. He didn’t want to speak ill of Navy, but he wanted to help Chance get through this hard time. “You’re allowed to be mad at him, the situation, Ren. Sadness isn’t the only way to process this.” There was tension in the room, it was sickening, and it travelled across the bar. The cold air from outside only made that tension higher. While everyone else in the bar seemed to be getting on with their night, the players were stiff listening to Chance’s woes and watching his emotions unravel. They were dying to know what his next move would be.

Chance got up from his stool and began frantically pacing around. “I have to leave. I can’t keep it together. I’m only embarrassing myself...”

Mella shot up from her seat which came as a surprise to them all. The rest of the players shifted their attention to her, and patiently waited to see how she would approach Chance in his time of sorrow. “Don’t. Think this through, Chance. Calm down. Breathe. Do you think wandering off alone is the best thing you can do right now?”

It was only becoming clearer to Arrow that Chance needed people around him. He couldn’t rely on himself right now. Mella held out her hands, Chance locked his fingers with hers, and they stayed that way for a few moments.

“No, I don’t, but I don’t think I belong here without Navy,” he replied.

For the first time that night, Spade made direct eye contact with Chance. It seemed that they hadn’t acknowledged one another, truly, for a long time. They had both felt so numb, and their emotions had been unable to pour out. They were stuck in a state of stillness, and it only hurt more.

“Spade, I’m so sorry about your brother,” Chance uttered through his tears. Spade got up from his seat and stood behind Mella. The pair of them let go of one another’s hands. Spade began to cry. He struggled to breath properly between his silent sobs, but trudged over to Chance and put his arms around him.

As the two of them embraced, they became one somehow. It was like Navy was still with them. They hadn’t lost a lover or a brother, but gained someone to share the pain with. It was strangely comforting, and in a way, quite beautiful. They stayed holding one another for what felt like a miniscule amount of time, but several minutes passed by. It was what they needed; it was a step closer to a healed wound. They hoped, and they prayed that they would heal. Spade broke away from their hold, gently placed his hand on Chance’s shoulder and whispered something into his ear. It was only for Chance to hear, no one else. Mella had already sat back down, the players’ game had long been put on hold, and they gave in to the beauty of the moment.

Juna pulled over another chair from a nearby table, “Join us, Chance.” A feeling of warmth was brought to the room when Juna finally spoke. Her silence had served her well. Her work was done.



Chance smiled in return, but went to the bar before sitting down. Spade returned to his seat. Arrow shuffled the cards. Mella and Juna proudly watched Chance as he approached the bar once more.

“Another drink?” Trip asked with a smile.

“Yes, and make it five.”

He returned to the table with five drinks. He placed them down by each player, and sat down; no longer alone.

## Megan Widley

*Gone.*

*Content notes: death*

I had a baby last December. We had left the hospital and parked 20 minutes away when I scooped her soft, fragile body out of the car. I could feel her warmth against my cheek as the white powdered snowflakes crunched beneath my leather boots. The sun had turned its back to the moon and the trees had created shadows with their low hung branches bearing the weight of the freshly fallen snow.

I began to walk up the long driveway, snapping back into focus every time a branch cracked, or the wind howled. I should have felt the harsh cold biting my ears, but I didn't. Lost in my thoughts, I startled when I came across a set of steps leading up to a doorway where icicles hung from the door frame. When I looked up, I was met with a deserted house towering over me that looked like it had been abandoned for generations. With one strong gust of wind, it would all come crashing down. The building looked unstable, wavering in the wind.

Clutching my baby as close to my chest as possible, I hesitantly made my way inside. Across the rotten floorboards, directly in front of the door sat a large staircase. As I shuffled closer, I could see that it led up to a few wooden planks that hung by rusty nails to the sides of the structure. The walls had a sparkle, covered in ice with icicles dripping off the door frames of each entrance to the rooms lining the hall. The floors had begun caving in, and as I took each step, the wood creaked and the pungent smell of damp wood became increasingly noticeable. On the ceiling there were glimpses of spider webs clinging to each crevice, shining as they caught the light of the moon through a crack in the roof.

I moved around carefully on the floorboards, trying not to slip, and went into the closest room I could find. It was barren except for the skeleton of a fireplace. I try to unwrap my scarf from around my neck to wrap around my baby, but as she starts to wriggle, I almost lose my grip and drop her, falling to the ground to try and break her fall. After catching my breath, I reluctantly laid my baby down on the damp floor before standing up to take my coat off and placing it on the ground to make sure she had something soft to lie on.

When I turned around to pick her up, she was gone.

My world had disappeared.

My vision became blurry, and I fell to the floor, crawling around desperately trying to feel her warmth.

## *Divine Intervention*

*Content notes: death, mental illness*

You feel her fingers trail down your face gently. She is a woman, her hair flows down in a golden-brown stream of curls past her shoulders trailing off at her waist. She has luminous amethyst eyes, and her lips are rose-tinted. She is elegant, gentle. Her heart is three times the size that you could ever imagine. You may think she is loud and obnoxious, maybe you don't notice her at all, but turn around - she's behind you.

She is the maths test you failed in high school; she is the rain when you planned to spend the day at the beach. She is everyone who has died, and everyone that has been born. She is grains of salt spilling over onto a dark mahogany table folding over onto the stars of the night sky.

She held your hand and guided you through the tangled barbed wire of heartbreak.

She sent the lights to shower down on your sunken body when you had dug that darkened grave. She wrapped the strings of hope around you and when she looked into your eyes, she softened her gaze. She said nothing and everything, her voice is smooth, it's easy on your ears. Her words have a warmth.

It can be hard to trust her when you're floating; it's even harder when you've sunk.

Your gaze meets hers, and she whispers, *"I dare you to hold your head up, I dare you to try again, I dare you to fall in love, to feel your heart glow at life's simplicities."*

She places her hand on your heart; and her touch sends a spark before trailing off. Brief yet intense. It awakens a glimmer of hope within you. You look down and before you even realise it, your once limp, tired body has left the ground. You can see the dusty imprint of defeat become smaller and smaller as she lifts you higher and higher. The feeling of weightlessness overwhelms you. You turn your head from left to right and take in the landscape around you.

You can see where the gleaming sand merges into the sea, being swept under to become shadows underneath the lonely unknown. You can see the way the sun reflects off the land as it's setting, creating bursts of bittersweet happiness. You see tiny moving ants and you wonder if they know what you do.

Moving all too fast, you look around and realise that midnight has come in. But there are no scary shadows, and you are not alone. She is here.

She paints constellations and connects the dots, wild coincidences and lessons learned. Everything shifts into place. For there is no love without heartbreak. There is no happiness without sadness. There is no life without death.

Hopelessly you look her in the eye, yearning for any sense of enlightenment, any spark of hope. She replies:

*"Oh, my love, you are a needle on a record player. The music spinning round endlessly underneath you whilst you wait for the next melody. Trust me, there is an end to your song, but if*

*you choose to stop listening early, because of one bad note, you might just miss out on all the beautiful ones yet to come.”*

You stare into space, trying to make sense of the world around you. You start to think back to the simpler times, when all that mattered was orange juice and summer dresses. But she interrupts your train of thought.

*“No, no, no dear, you can’t dwell on the songs from the beginning either. It won’t let you listen again; you cannot change their melody. Perhaps, in another lifetime, listen carefully, you might just hear them once more.”*

She places you back on your feet. You look around and she’s gone.

Will you be the breeze on a hot summer’s day? Or will you be the sand, once bright but swept under to join the shadows?

After all, what have you got to lose?

## Vin Wilson

### *Ode to a Floaty Woman*

You walk past me, not twelve times.  
Like a breeze, often still, never looking,  
eyes all over the scenery.  
Always first in, first out, scouting.

A warm coffee to heat you  
as you release your breathy gust.  
Cooler, cooler, always moving,  
you're busy, but you'll be back soon.

A mellow soul, you stare,  
and never dare to speak.  
Searching, seeking, scouting,  
but you'll never turn to defeat.

What's on your mind, nosy woman?  
Have you lost your sordid melody?  
Misty meadows of urban bustle,  
you float, you tease, and you fly.

Pay no mind to the heathens, miss,  
you'll float on past the crowds.  
I'll hold you down, a weighted coat,  
or else you'd drift away.

## *Boxed Doll*

(Each line has been taken from a doll box in Spain)

She has a mermaid body.  
Lovely girl, flashing “enter”,  
safe and transparent.

Let’s be friends, fashion trend,  
play with pink together.  
You can touch my hair, friendly girls.

Change my clothes and ornaments,  
I won’t bite, honest.  
Experience a variety of cosmetics.

Romantic Mary, she bawls  
like nature, it’s magical.  
Experience a new feeling of freedom.

Dismantle her.

## *Shitty Night, Shitty Lover*

*Content notes: abuse, alcohol, drug use, mental health*

It was a terrible evening. Rain pelted the ground like cannonballs, the streets stank of stale absinthe and regret. It was something they were used to, sure, but tonight was different. Jameson simply sat and watched the world rush by. There wasn't much left for them in the world but the rain and the alcohol nowadays. It wouldn't be long now until their final lifeline would fizzle away like power lines in a storm. So they chose not to think about any of that right now. Especially not her.

Their phone buzzed against their leg, agitating some scar or burn that should've been long healed. But scars just don't heal for Little Miss Jamie. Before checking it, they sighed and pulled out a damp cigarette. It wouldn't light, of course, but despite that anticipation, the disappointment of it all still fuelled their vindication.

They checked their phone. Another useless threat by their agent. Something something need a new draft, who cares. That was the last thing on their mind, they'd given up on the career long ago. If only their agent would just stop prodding them, so they could still pretend they'd been forgotten by the world.

The crowds continued to whiz by. It was a late Saturday evening: the city's nightlife was in full swing, and any other night they would've joined in with them happily with a joint in one hand and a bottle of rum in the other. But there was something else they had to deal with before any of that. Something they couldn't put off, everyone would know anyway come morning. She was just that kind of girl. Their girlfriend should be the first to hear.

They checked their phone again, absentmindedly clearing notifications, until something caught their eye. Three missed calls. From Theresa. What a bitch.

She didn't need to care about them, it'd make it so much easier if she didn't. But here she was, practically grovelling at their feet, begging. It didn't matter that they hadn't seen each other in a while, or that none of their mutual friends had seen Jamie recently—this was her admission of defeat. They should call her back, if nothing else but to hear her crying—to cement their victory.

The rain got even heavier, almost bouncing off slicked streets, running rivers down into the drains. God, even the rain had somewhere better to be than here with Jameson. And the people, laughing and screaming, all enjoying their night out, had quickly scattered like dust across a cassette tape. Jamie sighed as their hair and clothes quickly matted themselves to their body, outlining their poorly-fastened bra and ruining their eyeliner. They weren't one for make-up regularly, but it was at the behest of... Somebody Jamie had promised themselves to not think about just yet.

With barely any distractions left: the people watching had quickly come to a close and there was no way they could bury themselves in social media in this weather either, and so they decided to make the call. It didn't really matter whether she picked up or not, Jamie just needed to speak their mind on some things for a while. They quickly grabbed their phone and began ringing the accursed number, the screen emblazoned with the name of the woman who'd made their life a living hell these past few days.

They didn't have their phone to their ear, so they had no idea if she'd picked up at all. They didn't really care though, simply using the phone as something to just rant at. Still, they tried their best to shield the screen from the onslaught of rain.

“Hey Terry, it’s me, Jamie. I know you’ve been looking for me, but I need you to stop. I mean seriously, who do you think you are?! You fucking bitch! Don’t come looking for me, and don’t even think about calling the police. You know I’ve got one more chance before they send me off to some private prison. No.” They slump back down on the bench, rolling across its wooden beams, falling ever-so-slowly down. “You wouldn’t do that to me Terry would you? Hell, I remember when I told you I was gay and you forgot I wasn’t still a man and that I’d run off without you. But you still loved me then, and every day I wonder why.”

They tried to not let their sobs show through over the phone, hoping that the heavy rain would mask it enough.

Jamie looked gravely off into the distance, watching as the call timer creped on. They had no idea if Theresa was listening; if she was screaming something back at them, or if she was even there at all. They could’ve punched a wall if they weren’t trying to remain put-together, if only for Theresa. They stood up and continued.

“I just- I don’t know what you’re thinking, ever, really. And although I love it, love you, I just can’t get my head around you sometimes, Terry.” They sighed. “I’ll be home soon, I promise, but you can’t tell anyone about this. I-“ They stammered, seemingly incapable of getting the words out that needed to be said. It was something inescapable, something that she deserved to hear from their mouth, but it simply wouldn’t come. It would be so simple to admit, which was the most frustrating part.

Cheating on her wasn’t something they were proud of, but she knew just how fucked up Jamie was before she took them in. If anything, they should be glad it didn’t happen sooner, and that their demons let them be happy for as long as they were. They grunted, giving themselves time to breathe before speaking again.

“You won’t find me, Theresa, so don’t bother. I’ll tell you everything soon enough, but whatever you’ve heard... It’s true. Goodnight.”

They pressed that blurry big red button, and cried out whatever came to mind; the streets were barren still and whoever may find them would turn and run like everyone before them. That fact was soothing right now.

The rain that night blurred their vision, shrouded their mind in something akin to lies—neat lies that were easier to swallow than anything else. Not having anyone else to listen to, to poison their thoughts, was freeing, if just for an evening.

What they wanted to admit to Theresa, their loving girlfriend who had discovered her bisexuality shortly after Jamie came out and discovered their own lesbianism, was a sleazy hook-up with their mutual friend Bella. They knew Theresa would know everything come morning, if not by Bella, then by someone else who pretended to care for either of them. It was inescapable. Although barely any of them kept in contact these days, exceptions would always be made for juicy gossip. Because that was all it was to them.

To Jameson, it was nothing short of a transgression. It was a breach of contract between not only their lover, but their ex and close friend as well. It made them sick, but not as much as facing the woman they loved right now. Not because they were wrong, but because she was weak. And Bella, she-who-should-not-be-named, well, they never wanted to see her again.



They didn't care if that was the alcohol talking, they were quite happy to let it speak for them. They were also damn well lucky Bella had blocked their number long ago, or else she would be at the end of a tirade as well, and the woman they never wanted to see again would truly be out of their life for good. Things were better this way, of course, but being wrong wasn't something Jamie had learned to appreciate just yet.

After a moment, the rain had begun to clear, and twinges of sunlight had begun peeking atop the buildings. That was something else they weren't ready to face, far too used to the slimy shadows of the city. They picked up their phone and their soaked jacket, making sure to forget about, or even passingly acknowledge, the small pile of bottles which lay at their feet, lest the shame come rushing back like a bad smell that makes you feel the need to puke.

They slipped down a nearby alleyway, eager to forget about this evening and return to a worthless, lazy existence lounging around their New York apartment. That thought, however, was seemingly far too close for comfort for whatever higher power was intent on breaking them down completely and utterly.

Nobody would miss them, nobody would even come looking, or even peep around the corner to see where that lousy drunkard had gone. The last trace of Jameson Jones, writer-turned-alcoholic, disappeared down that manhole that night. A life, in the end, worth nothing but a whispered rumour.

This thought comforted them as they lay there, after their fall into the sewers. The lightheaded buzz that comes from blood-loss and head trauma brought a sense of comfort, a drunkenness that was the closest thing to home they had now.

They would've been happy to bleed out right there, happily forgotten and given up on by those who tried to fix them, but of course, that would've been far too easy.

## Regulus Wolfe

### *Nocturnal Animal*

*Content notes: death, gore*

there's a dead fox on the side of the road.  
its mouth is open,  
jaw stiff in death.

rigor mortis has long passed,  
its skin is sagging on its bones,  
its teeth loosening in rotten gums—  
it's been dead a long time.

each time i walk by,  
i think of what car hit it at what angle  
to make it such a perfect taxidermy  
of the moment it died.

the only wound i can guess at  
is the crushed crater of an empty skull.

i want to bring it home everytime i walk by,  
give it somewhere warm to rest.  
i don't.

my house is cold enough to kill it again.  
my house is cold enough to kill me, too.

*attention*

i do not enjoy spotlights:  
they're warm.

just by getting up in front of a crowd,  
i'm already warm enough.  
the spotlight's warmth does not invite me;  
i am not cold-blooded enough to need it.

they're bright, too,  
blinding, the dangers of fame manifest.  
a crowd is already faceless—  
i do not need help to unrecognise the people there.

i do not enjoy spotlights,  
but i suppose you do:  
your skin is overwarm,  
your eyes are glazed over when you look at me.

look through me.

will you step out of the light, my love,  
or will you leave me alone in the dark?

## Meet the Committee!

### *Tommy Bernsten (President)*

I completed my undergraduate in Language & Linguistics last year and am currently doing a postgraduate degree in Translation Studies. I am a huge fan of writing in specific worlds, to the point where I physically cannot stop myself from world building (I can quit anytime I want). I used to write mostly fantasy stuff but have since branched out into other nerdy genres like cyberpunk, turn of the century core and other nerd garbage.

My time in the Creative Writing Society actually started in a different society, from where I was headhunted. It has been an amazing experience and opportunity to grow as a writer. But as president, previously secretary, it has been so rewarding to see our members grow as writers and find their own words. You will have gotten a taste of the amazing skill of our members throughout this Compendium and I am sure you would agree.

This will be my last year of academia (for now) and I already feel so proud of what I will be stepping away from. Not just of what we have built, but the people who have joined.

### *Megan Widley (Vice-President)*

I am in my third year of studying English with Creative Writing. This is my first time on committee, and my first-time being part of a collaborative project such as the compendium!

I mainly write poetry, but I am always working on improving my prose and world building skills. I remember when I was little, I would always write wild and wonderfully impossible adventure/fantasy stories, and I like to think that young Meg influences every piece I write. Deciding to join the society was one of the best decisions I made at university. Being VP has been incredibly exciting and daunting, but I wouldn't change it for the world. The society made me feel so welcome last year, and I have met so many talented, wonderful people as a result. I cannot wait to see where the rest of the year takes us!

### *Regulus Wolfe (Secretary)*

This year is my third year in the society, my final year of my English with Creative Writing degree, and my first year on committee. I primarily spend my time not writing anything, but I have a love for developing new characters and new worlds to use as a sandbox to play in, and at any point in time I have several longform projects on the go, along with a small selection of poetry on the side.

The society has been a home for me in the past three years, and I'll always be thankful to it for providing that. I'm thrilled to have been able to support it this year on committee, and I'm even more excited to see where it goes next!

### *Morgan Royall (Treasurer)*

Hello! I'm halfway through my third year of an English with Creative writing degree, and this is my second year on committee! This past semester, I've mostly been focusing on coursework, but aim to get started on some larger creative projects in the new year. I mostly write horror— though also have been known to write some comedy and angsty poetry— and have an interest in all things queer and gothic, and how those intersect.

In addition to it being my second year on the committee, it's my third year in the society as a whole. I've loved so much watching how it's grown and developed, and look forward to seeing more in the years to come!

### *Vin Wilson (Social Secretary)*

Hiya! I am yet another English with Creative Writing student here, and this is my third year here in the society. This past year, I've been working hard on a couple novels and novellas; from harsh, challenging fantasy to trashy disaster rom-coms, (usually with some found family goodness thrown in, of course!)

I've enjoyed every moment I've spent in service to the society: watching a community I care for so deeply grow and develop has been incredibly rewarding, and I'm always glad to accrue more members who must endure my wonderful graphic design skills over on Instagram.

I can't wait to see what the future has in store for us!

*John MacDonald (Academic Liaison)*

Hi ! I'm John (They/He). I have a degree in Language and Linguistics and am currently studying for an MRes in the same! I have been writing as a hobby my entire life, and have a keen interest in Fantasy and Sci-Fi. I've been a member of the society for only a year but I am now the society's academic liaison. This means I am responsible for arranging events between the society and relevant academics to provide some insight on creative writing! I am also responsible for anything else academic with regard to the society, and always happy to chat or provide resources for adding a little bit more academic rigour to any creative piece.

*Ennis Freeman (Pre-Honours Representative)*

Hello there! Rounding the group out with yet another English with Creative Writing student, in my second year of learning, as well as with the society! My writing encompasses a large spectrum of genres, from period pieces to fantasy to contemporary, but I've often defined my writing philosophy as "if I can make it queer, I'll make it." As of now, I'm working on a number of short stories, as well as a longform fantasy novel, many of which deal with themes of religion and belonging.

My time in the society has been full of incredible friendships and amazing writing evolutions, and I've enjoyed the time I've spent both socially among my friends and professionally within the committee. I am very grateful for the society, and cannot wait to see how it grows!

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*!

