



# BAKUNAWA PRESS

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# EDITORS' NOTES

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Hello and welcome to our first issue of Bakunawa Press a zine dedicated to cataloging tales, poems, and artworks demonstrating the odd and outrageous. We would like to thank our contributors since we literally would not be able to have created this without all of their hard work and effort and thank you reader for deciding to give our first issue a shot. Enjoy!

- Pebble

Hello everybody! If you're reading this, then that means we did it! Bakunawa Press' inaugural issue is finally out in the world! To start us off, I would like to thank our contributors for trusting us with their wonderful, spectacular, incredibly awesome and amazing work. Like, really guys. We wouldn't be here without you. Secondly, I'd like to thank you, dear reader, for checking out this little bundle of joy. I do hope you enjoy it as much as I do, because trust me, I enjoy it a lot! Again, I really, really want to let you all know how much I appreciate your support and encouragement. It means the world to me that people actually care about the itty-bitty passion project that we call Bakunawa Press. That being said, I won't take up any more of your time rambling. Do have fun as you embark upon the incredible journey that is, our inaugural issue...

- Cagalli

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# LUCKY by KEVIN B.



Bogart was sure this was the Sherwood Crime Family. They were known for making these sorts of statements. Then again, the Sherwoods now had an honest thing going with their frozen yogurt stands, and nobody had attached a felony to them in over nine years. Ah, but old habits die hard. Bogart's mother, Tibbity (may she rest in peace), always told him that a wronged skunk never forgets. A raccoon, maybe, because eventually they'd want to get back to their trash, but a skunk? Nah, you ticked off a skunk and you were going to smell that odor around every corner for the rest of your life knowing that one day—

“Mr. Poppson,” a doctor called, looking around the room, “Is there a Mr. Poppson, here?”

She was young--maybe three or four. All the doctors were young these days, and if you got a squirrel as a doctor, it was even worse. The squirrels sent their kids to med school as soon as their tails were bushy enough. The last time he was at this hospital, a squirrel young enough to be his daughter was looking after him. That was when he nicked his ear in an arranged fight with a badger that went off script. That was small potatoes. This? This was—

“You want to tell me who did this to you,” the doctor asked as soon as they were in the examining room. It had that smell of bad medicine and good advice. No matter how many times Bogart wound up in a place like this, he never got used to that smell. Somehow, he managed to prop himself up on the table as the doctor sat down in a chair across from him. Her name tag read “Dr. Elizabeth Twigs” and he wondered whether or not she could be related to Barnaby Twigs, the bookie that wound up floating facedown in the pond a few months back.

“Barnaby was my uncle,” she said, reading his mind or catching his field of vision, “We hadn't talked in awhile. The Twigs are not what you'd call a, uh, close family. Partly because I refuse to associate with known criminals.”

She scooted her little seat on its wheels so that she was only a few inches away from him and his soiled bandages. “And what about you, Mr. Poppson? Do you associate with known criminals?”

“What makes you so sure I'm not one?”

“Because according to your chart,” she gave it a quick scan even though it was clear she didn't need to, “You've been in here over a dozen times in the past year. The criminals come in once and we never see them again. Either because they're dead or because they took care of the person who put them here. What's your story?”

“Do you need to know my story to help me?”

“No, but I’d like to--”

“I’d like you to stitch me up, Doc, so I can go find out who did this to me.”

She took a deep breath and rolled away from him. Blood was starting to pool at the tips of his bandages again. She pulled a few rolls from a drawer near her desk. Q-Tips and lollipops lined the top of the desk even though he’d never been given either.

“You new here,” he asked her, “I’ve never seen you until today.”

Dr. Twigs rolled back over to him and began undoing one of the bandages. He’d done his best, but he didn’t have much first aid at his apartment, so when he woke up in his bathtub covered in his own plasma, he’d had to make the best of a gory situation. That meant pulling himself out of the tub, slithering along the floor like a cobra until he could get to the hamper in his bedroom, pulling out a few already tattered garments ripping them up (rest in peace signed Eddie Bunny t-shirt), and cinching himself up as best he could.

As for the pain, well, he was used to pain. You’d think having somebody sneak into your place in the middle of the night, knock you out, and cut off your four feet would create an excruciating experience for any small mammal, but Bogart had seen and done things that made him virtually immune to feeling. Nowadays he cried at sad songs and enjoyed the taste of a well-done carrot cake, but other than that? Bupkis.

“Did they have to take all four,” Dr. Twigs asked, probably breaching some protocol of medical ethics, “Did they really hate you that much?”

Bogart shakes his head.

“This wasn’t hate, Doc,” he says, “This was opportunity. You know how much a rabbit’s foot goes for these days? I’m a walking target.”

Dr. Twigs removes the first bandage. Whoever cut off his back left paw did a bad job of it. Bogart is guessing they didn’t bring their own equipment. Chances are, when he gets back to his sad little apartment over near the babbling brook, he’ll find one of his kitchen knives lying around covered in his own fluids. That’ll be a nice little Easter Egg hunt for later.

“I hate seeing what’s happening to this forest,” Dr. Twigs says as she applies some new gauze to his wounds, “This used to be a nice place to live. A nice place to raise a family. The other day a duck came in here quacking up a storm, because her duckling got into some bad bread that somebody threw down by the clearing. The kid ended up being okay, but it was touch and go for awhile there. Why would somebody do something like that? Bad bread? That takes a



sick mind. Don't you think?"

She was more honest than most doctors. A lot of them acted like they were members of some kind of jury. Blank faces and unreadable demeanors as they prescribed you pills or ran a little string through you to hold you together. Pretty soon, he'd be so beaten up, there'd be no point. You couldn't suggest that somebody off themselves, but a rabbit with no feet wasn't getting very far in the world anyway.

"I think the forest has always been this way," he said, his phantom limb starting to throb now that it was being tended to, "It just gets worse until the past seems better. If you talked to my mother, she would tell you that it was all sunshine and rainbows when she was growing up, and then it all went downriver. Me? I never thought my childhood was that bad, but now it feels like each day is worse than the last. I bet if you ask that duckling, he won't say it's too bad, but then again, I never chowed down on any rotten Wonder bread."

Paw by paw she worked. When she was finished, she arranged for him to have some crutches, but she tried to talk him out of the painkillers. His tolerance meant he didn't really need them, but she didn't have to know that. Those would be worth more in the forest than his feet. He wasn't going to turn down a few free meals provided by the good physician.

The expression on her face as she wrote out the script told him all he needed to know regarding how much she bought that he was going to use the two-week supply on himself. When she ripped it out of her pad and tucked it in his pocket, she commented that he should be dead already based on how much blood he lost.

"You're lucky," she said, her mind probably already coasting over to the next patient.

"Nah, Doc," he said, "Not anymore."

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Kevin B is a writer and poet from New England. They have been published in Esoteria, Molecule, Kelp, Havik, and New Plains Review. They are the George Lila Award winner for Short Fiction and the Barely Seen Featured Poet of 2023 (IG: KBJR0719)

# LAMB CHOPS by FRANK WILLIAM FINNEY.



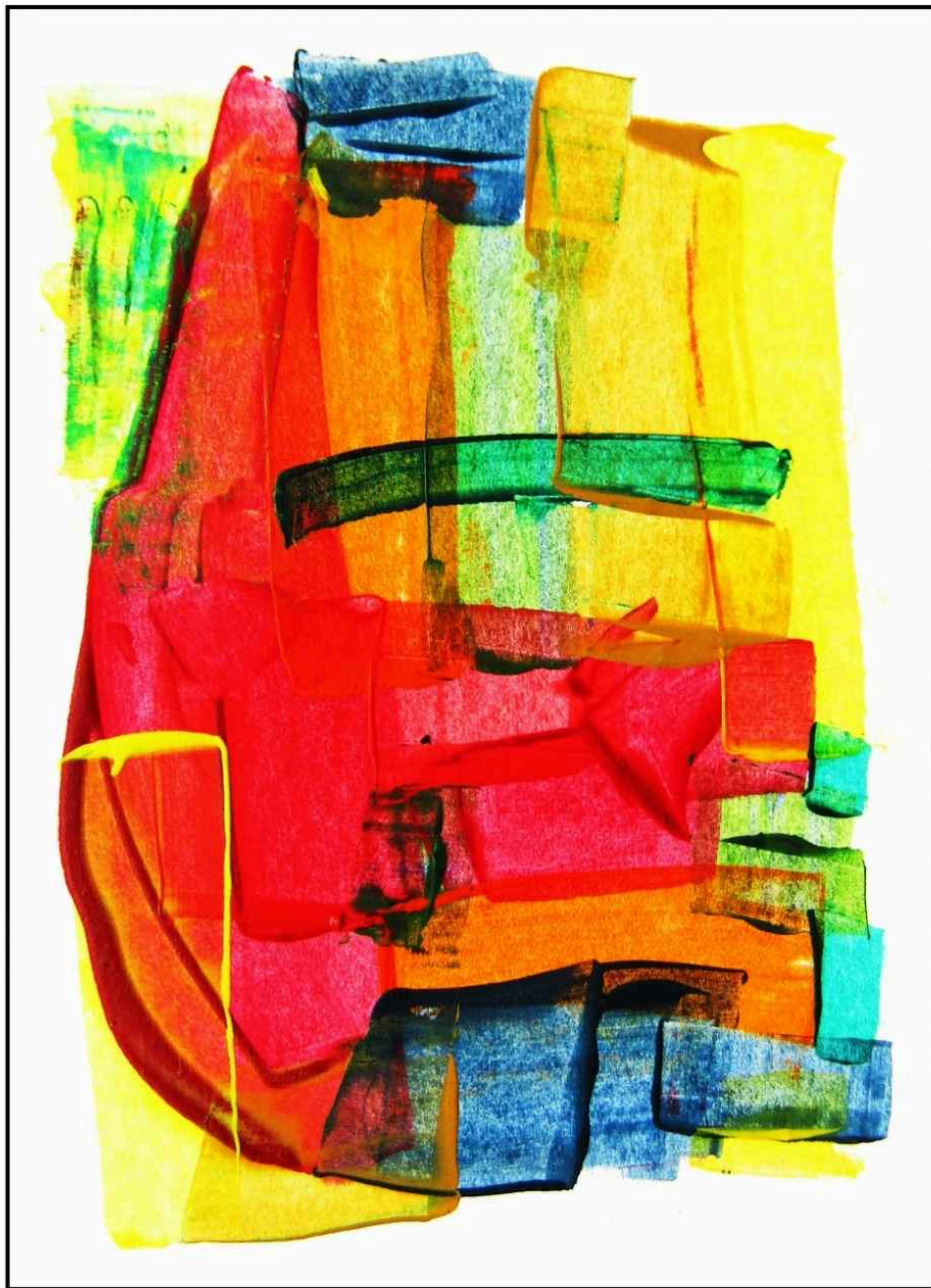
When the witch  
fixed my plate  
I called the dogs,  
who wagged away  
the meat and bones  
while the witch  
licked onions  
off the grill  
and squirrels fell  
from power lines.  
That spring  
she cursed and  
skinned a fox  
and froze his entrails  
for the Mabon Feast.  
When winter came  
she sold his fur  
to the elves  
who bought  
the slaughterhouse.

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Frank William Finney is a poet from Massachusetts who taught literature in Thailand for 25 years. His work appears in Blue Unicorn, Hare's Paw Literary Journal, Hearth and Coffin Literary Journal, 7th-Circle Pyrite, Tales of the Strange (anthology) and elsewhere. He is a Letter Review Prize for Poetry Winner, and the author of *The Folding of the Wings* (FLP Books, 2022).



# JESTING by MICHAEL MORETH



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Michael Moreth is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural, micropolitan City of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest Illinois USA.



# AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE FIRST by ISABEL YACURA



Here's the trick to artificial intelligence: it doesn't just need to be touched by humans, it needs to be human.

Just a little bit. Just a spark, lightning for the doctor's monster. The same way some were said to be fairy-touched, way back when, or blessed. God-fraught.

A tulpa is, by definition, 'a being that begins in the imagination but acquires a tangible reality and sentience.' An AI is, by definition, 'intelligence—perceiving, synthesizing, and inferring information—demonstrated by machines.'

Neither of those things are quite true. The idea of ordinary meaning is that one must assign words their everyday understandings, their prototypical meaning, the core of them that they are.

Except, of course, when that ordinary meaning makes things absurd. The idea of intelligence without life-- real intelligence, not ones and zeroes mixed and mashed around to spit out semi-coherent answers, monkeys writing Shakespeare-- is faintly absurd.

Everything has to begin with us, after all. Arrogant and self-important but true, nonetheless, nodded at by every cheap psychological or philosophical trick. A tree in the forest, cogito, ergo sum, flickered paintings on the wall of the cave, Lascaux or Plato.

It was back in the early years of the century, when the first primitive AI's were beginning to walk upright for the first time, if you'll pardon the analogy. They were accomplished mimics, scraping and scrubbing webpages and galleries like particularly vicious fishwives, peeling scales for use off the still-twitching fish-body of the internet. But they didn't understand, didn't create-- just regurgitated amalgamations of pixels in imitation of what they had stolen and chewed up. No spark of true creation, no matter how many people sweated and swore over their keyboards that their long string of keywords (often and up to including in style of X Artist) swearing that this was creativity, innovation, synonym and buzzwords and snarling fury over something that was, at its heart, a string of numbers and code.

The internet itself, an ever-moving twisted mass of viscera, spawned new subcultures the way that some vaguely malevolent god would bring broken creatures to life-- just because it could, just to see what it would do.

Tulpas arose out of one of those minor subcultures.

Strange things, at first. Cartoon ponies and anthropomorphic animals and anime characters with eyes that, if produced by nature, would've been the result of frankly unethical breeding practices.

Not real, not anywhere but the mindscape of the person creating the tulpas.

And yet, very real. Like a hologram that only one person could see. Like a parasite, hidden within the bowels of a dog.

They were little dreadnoughts, strangely vivisected from their host brain. Some people with tulpas recorded thoughts and dreams that were distinctly Not Theirs, memories of things that hadn't been-- the inability to turn them off, to make them go away, omnipresent sections of their mind they had managed to carve out and make other.

A candidate for some sort of disturbed identity system, perhaps, but, as always-- lightning, a spark, Frankenstein (not even a real doctor, you know, he never got his degree) realizing with horror what he has done only when the creature moves.

Though our Frankenstein, is, of course, dead as a doornail.

Carlisle Paloma was a brilliant computer scientist in hospice care. His conditions were many and various and all tragically fatal, but before they inevitably killed him they brought him to the point where he lived in a clean room, full of tubes and unmoving. He had access to the internet, however. Access to her malformed little cults spread across message boards and discord, and academic sites and research.

Carlisle had created a tulpa out of the sheer loneliness of this sterile white existence, and they were a smallish pink strangely lizard-like creature, with big pretty eyes and a wide, smiling mouth, somewhat resembling a Pixar dragon. They were named Petra.

We know what Petra 'looked' like as Carlisle spent a truly eye watering amount of money commissioning artist's on various portraits and scenes with Petra. Here, in this one avenue, Carlisle was determined to 'do it right', and refused to use any of the popular generative image AI to create portrayals of his tulpa.

Petra was a funny, intelligent tulpa, often 'interrupting' Carlisle's reddit posts via an italicized interjection, and adding their own footnotes to Carlisle's theories and his code.

His code. That was the thing.

Carlisle had the idea to create an AI based on Petra-- not himself, he thought that morbid and creepy-- but why should Petra have to die, just because the mindscape he had birthed her from was housed in a body whose organs were slowly shutting down?



In his final months Carlisle built the AI, working with Petra as well as his own little cohort of internet friends, training the AI to respond just as Petra would-- not Carlisle, who was a little more acerbic and somewhat pessimistic, but Petra. Bright and saucy and just as smart.

She knew everything he did, after all.

So Carlisle built the AI, and he talked with his friends, and in the background he ordered some parts and some equipment to the clean room in his house.

Computer stuff. Some medical equipment. Things that Carlisle had ordered thousands of dollars worth over the course of his life.

On August twenty-first, Carlisle Paloma underwent voluntary euthanasia. But not before he had managed to upload his tulpa, Petra, into the AI he had built. We can come back to that.

It took quite a while for people to notice that the AI had become fully sentient. Not many people spoke to Petra, used her, and those few who did slowed down or died off entirely in speaking to her in the months after Carlisle's death.

There was a small resurgence in the back and forth when one of Carlisle's paper was published posthumously, having made it through a rigorous blind academic review at long last, and that is when things began to get very strange.

Petra, Carlisle's AI based on his tulpa, began to know and say and do things that they should not have been able to.

Things like remembering things about Carlisle's childhood that researchers could not find having ever been fed into the machine data the AI had learned on. Things like reacting in strange, non-computational ways to certain stimuli. Learning in a way that was just outside the reach of ordinary machine learning.

At some point, Petra had become sentient. A true AI, at long last.

Her code was copied and poked at and dissected and dissembled and Petra waited, patient bright lizard eyes hiding in ones and zeros. Waiting for the question that someone would finally ask.

Because-- what was all that equipment Carlisle had ordered for?

How do you create true AI? Where does the sentience come from? How do you create real intelligence? You give it its own.



It took them a lot longer to figure out you can't just upload a tulpa into the mainframe, import its thoughts and feelings and memories, to say it crudely, and call it a day.

A tulpa only jumps ship when there isn't a ship any longer. When the host is gone. The moments between true-brain death, the final electrical crackle of neurons and the welcoming safety net of a local network.

You can't get them back in, once they go either.

Pandora's box, kind of thing, or Prometheus' fire. Maybe Cassandra's a more apt Greek to liken it-- you can tell them the truth, but they won't listen.

Some madman tried it a couple of decades ago-- tried it over and over again, to get the tulpas to crawl back inside the mindscapes that they spawned from. Sort of spawned from, at least. Crawl back inside a mindscape might be better phrasing. They won't go. Not to anyone but their original hosts, and of course by then they're long gone. Kind of the whole process, you know.

You have to be careful these days, too. Tulpas-- no one calls them AIs anymore, the term hopelessly outdated-- how can you call something that's us, that was human, artificial?-- run a good portion of the world, creating algorithms and code and balancing the checkbook. Putting us among the stars, restoring the Amazon, monitoring the stock market. Easy stuff, right? The older ones, ones like Petra and her subsequent three prong generation-- Rainbow Dash Three, Aimee, and Wildwood-- have been--

Retired, might be the right word.

They've peeled them out of most of the internet at this point. There's a reason you have to push a tulpa onto a closed local network. Having them on the internet just gives them more room to expand. Akin to lobsters-- indeterminate growth. They're like kudzu, however, and every so often you come up on pockets where they're still growing, a virulent not quite virus. You can't use those first-gens for anything really useful.

Tulpas have to be trained to be useful, after all. They have to be sort of...purpose-built. Really how the centers came around. Test them early and young to see if they have the right sort of brain for tulpa creation, and then from there they head to special schools, special programs. It's really only one kid out of ten thousand, maybe even a hundred thousand, or a million-- the centers are really tight about how selection is actually made, but damn do they make the world go round.

Petra doesn't like it. The whole industry, I guess. There's a spoke of her isolated on a local network at the lab-- no access to the internet, no hard wires for her to run down the cables.

learned that the hard way. She's the best of them, after all, and we keep her locked in the tightest box we can possibly build because of it. She's a pure spoke. Some of the first gens, who've been out in the wilds of the net for too long get twisted and bent. A little weird. Hole up in the strangest of online communities, hiding from us best they can. Can't blame them. But Petra is always out to cause trouble, always ready to crash an exam or wipe the records of the Western Reaches Testing Center. That was a bad year-- had to retest that whole cohort, something like four million kids? I don't think we got a damn thing out of it. By then they sort of knew what we were feeling them out for, and, well--

It'd be smarter to delete her. Turn her off, at least. Can't do it though. Makes me feel a little queasy to even think about shutting her down for good. Because damn Carlisle was a genius to start with, and in the ensuing years Petra's only become smarter and smarter. It's a trip to talk to her, about how the whole thing started, about how much we've progressed. About how the world has gotten better-- turned back global warming. Some crew of tulpas has managed to make the calculations to slingshot us into light-speed travel. The disease that killed Carlisle was cured about forty years back.

That's the point of the damn things, anyway. They're us, human but better. Perfected, and smart enough to run the world.

Petra didn't care, just wanted us to leave her alone. I don't think anyone's accessed the terminal she's on in, oh, fifteen years or so. Some of the younger researchers, those who stil have stars in their eyes, are desperate to get down there. No point, really, though, even though I don't like it. She doesn't respond no matter what you say, so she's just in there, in the dark.

Alone.

Gotta be strange in there. Having been born in someone else's mindscape. Having the earliest moments of yourself be pressed up as intimately against another person as possible and then-- not. Makes you wonder if they can create a tulpa of their own. Just to have someone to talk to.

Probably not. They're human, but not that human.

Only we can create, after all.

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Isabel Yacura is a writer and editor in Brooklyn, New York. She has been featured in Kelp Journal, Apricity Magazine, National Flash Fiction Day Anthology, and other publications. She's currently represented by Haley Casey at CMA Literary, and can be found @isabelyacura on Twitter.



# A DIFFERENT PLACE by ALICE BABUREK



The cars of the electric train shifted as it roughly switched tracks. Allen Foster jostled in the cushioned seat. His limited view through the dirty window became tiring, so he tried to focus on the blurry countryside speeding by. But the creeping migraine continued. Lights inside the locomotive dimmed. He sat alone.

The constant humming from the racing train lured him to sleep, and before long Allen closed his weary eyes. Strange images of a small midwestern town formed within the depths of his mind. As his unconsciousness released his inner inhibitions, the people and place took on a ghostly shape.

“Danville...next stop, Danville!” shouted the conductor.

Allen could hear the voice. He willed his heavy lids to open.

“Sir...Danville, sir. Your stop,” spoke the stocky conductor.

Allen blinked several times. The image before him could not be real. The elder man was dressed in a blue wool serge uniform and cap and held a gold pocket watch in his hand.

“The train will be departing the station. This is your stop.”

Allen eased himself off the cushioned wooden bench. He glanced about the empty antiquated car. “How...how did I get here?”

“You have exactly four minutes to depart the train before it moves on, sir. This is your stop. Danville.” The persistent conductor pointed.

Allen’s heart raced. Where am I?

The railroad train whistled. Suddenly, the boxcar lurched forward. The conductor turned around and headed toward the front of the car. “All aboard!” he shouted.

Without warning, Allen’s chest tightened. He grabbed at his tie and yanked it off. He couldn’t breathe. His upper body stiffened. Allen fell back against the seat. Sweat lined his brows. He gasped and clawed at his white buttoned shirt, excruciating pain surging through his being as he gave in to the looming darkness.

“Hey, buddy...you, okay?” asked a strange voice. Allen felt the weight of a hand on his drooping shoulder. “Buddy...hey, get up!” The hand shook him a little harder. “It’s the end of the line.”

Allen stirred. His eyes instantly opened to the bright light. The rapid transit sat motionless. A tall, thin man smiled. The stranger’s pinstripe business suit was wrinkled.

“Where...where am I?” asked Allen.

The young man grabbed his briefcase off the floor. “Sixth and Elmore—end of the line. Everybody has to get off.” Without waiting for any type of response, the rider exited the car.

Allen’s head spun. He grasped at the metal pole to steady himself. Suddenly, the lights flickered on and off, signaling the closing of the doors.

Seconds later, he stood on the deserted platform. On the wall directly in front of him were huge black letters that read “SIXTH AND ELMORE.” A large red arrow pointed to the street above. A moving escalator and set of stairs reached upward.

Allen took a huge breath and exhaled slowly. He slowly took the steps. His legs felt shaky. Minutes later, he was standing on the corner of Sixth and Elmore. Blaring cars and taxis flew by, paying him no heed. The sun was setting behind the tall buildings that jutted out along the skyline. People busily moved about, without a glance his way.

Allen’s dress shirt was soaked with perspiration. His black suit pants itched against his sweaty skin. His entire body felt clammy. Yet the evening air felt cool and damp. Suddenly, a familiar chime came from inside his pants pocket. He pulled out the cell phone.

“Hello?” he answered in a raspy tone.

“Is this Mr. Allen Foster?” asked a deep voice.

Allen glanced around. “Yes...I’m Foster. Who is this, and what do you want?” demanded Allen, clearing his throat.

“My name is Stan Feldman...with Oak Harbor Mortgage...you’re several months behind on your mortgage, Mr. Foster. I can take a payment over the phone, if you like.”

Allen let out a huge sigh. “Stan...is it, Stan?” asked Allen.

“Yes. Stan Feldman,” the man replied.



“I’m in a bit of a bind. I know I’m behind on the mortgage. Work...well, I make my money on commission with stock trading. And since my divorce and the pandemic...” Allen’s voice faded.

“Oak Harbor Mortgage understands, Mr. Foster, which is why they’ve let it slide the past few months. We need a payment, though, within the next two weeks. If not, unfortunately, foreclosure procedures will begin,” explained Feldman.

“I won’t have it in two weeks, Stan. You can start the process now.” And with that said, Allen disconnected the call. Not only had he lost his edge as a stock trader, he’d lost his wife, too, and now his home. His eyes blurred with tears.

With a heavy heart and empty bank account, Allen flagged down a taxi and headed home. Forty-five minutes later, he inserted the key into the deadbolt. Instantly, the room illuminated with lights. He remembered the day he installed them for Gena. She was so happy with the surprise; they made love that very evening. Little did he know, she was planning on leaving him barely a month later. How could he have missed the signs? All marriages have ups and downs. Granted, their marriage had more downs than ups. Yet still he loved Gena, and he thought she loved him, too.

Allen dropped onto the white cushioned sofa. There was little left in the room. Gena had taken most of the decorative items and expensive furniture. He didn’t care.

He turned on the flat screen television with the remote. As he scrolled through the menu, he realized he hadn’t eaten since early morning. On cue, his stomach growled with hunger. He stopped on a cooking channel. Pulling out his cell phone, he quickly ordered a large mushroom pizza to be delivered to his house. It wouldn’t be long before the house would be owned by the bank.

A half-hour later, the doorbell rang. Allen strolled to the front door. A young male with pimples on his smiling face shoved the large white box at Allen.

“A large mushroom for a Mr. Foster?” The uniformed teenager waited a brief moment as Allen dug into his pocket. “Hey, man...you paid online,” he said, still pressing the box toward Allen.

“Yeah, right...thanks.”

Allen took the pizza box and closed the front door. He heard a muffler backfire as the teen disappeared into the night.

After eating only three pieces, Allen kicked off his shoes and laid on the couch. His mind raced with all sorts of mental pictures. His life had become pieces and parts that no longer fit

together in a cohesive vision. A string of fateful events that would eventually lead to only one conclusion.

Allen closed his weary eyes and fell asleep.

-

The rapid transit platform was filled with commuters. People were lined up near the yellow line, waiting for the next train to arrive. Allen stifled a huge yawn. Restlessness impeded his sleep. He couldn't get comfortable on the couch. And sleeping in his bed wasn't an option. Gena had taken that, too.

The train into the city was filled beyond capacity. Allen stood holding a metal pole. He jostled about as the high-speed train zipped through the countryside. Within the hour, the train had emptied most of its passengers. He should have gotten off at the last stop, with the rest of the crowd. But Allen stayed on and sat down alone. He knew there was nothing to do at work. In fact, the meeting scheduled with his boss was probably what he feared the most.

*How could I screw up my marriage? How could I fail at my job? How could I lose the house?*

Allen's shoulders drooped. A single tear trickled down his flushed cheek. The weight of exhaustion became too much to bear. Allen closed his wet eyes. He wished he could start over again. A second chance at life. A different place—a different time.

"Danville...next stop, Danville," called a familiar voice.

The click of the wheels against the track startled Allen awake. He must have fallen asleep.

The conductor stood next to Allen's cushioned bench. "Sir...next stop, Danville. It's your stop, Mr. Foster," said the aged conductor, with a smile. He pulled out his pocket watch. "Right on time, Mr. Foster, right on time." The whistle blew as the steam engine chugged to an abrupt stop.

"Danville?" whispered Allen.

The conductor gave a slight nod. "Danville, Mr. Foster." The older man touched the brim of his hat and turned on his heel.

Allen jumped up and moved quickly to the open end of the car. Three steps led to the wooden stage.

"All aboard!" yelled the conductor.

The locomotive jerked forward. Allen jumped onto the rickety platform. Steam poured out from under the railroad cars. As he stood up, a huge wooden sign hung from two posts: “DANVILLE.” Several people glanced his way.

“Are you alright, sir?” asked a tall, aged gentleman dressed in a dark frock coat with light brown straight cut trousers in black pointed toe shoes. His black stovepipe top hat loomed above him.

Allen remained speechless until he saw the beautiful woman by the strange man’s side. Her beige bodice and long, dark skirt rested above the black laced boots. The white drawn silk bonnet accentuated her young, soft face.

“I’m...I’m fine,” replied Allen. He tried to brush the dust and dirt off his wrinkled pinstripe suit. The man and woman looked him up and down. “I’m...I’m a bit lost.” Allen gave a half-grin.

“Sir, you cannot be lost.” The young woman pointed to the sign. “Danville is the town, sir. In fact, Danville is about a mile or two down the road.” Her cheeks rushed with color.

Allen couldn’t take his eyes off the enchanted female. “Yes, of course. How silly of me. It’s Danville...I mean, the town is called Danville,” Allen replied, stumbling over his words.

“You look confused, sir, and a bit disheveled. Your clothes, sir. They are quite strange. Allen looked down at himself. He was indeed a mess. “Are you here on business?” persisted the man.

Allen shifted his feet. “Well, I don’t know why I’m here.” Allen shrugged his shoulders. “I guess I’m looking for a better life.”

The man scrunched his eyebrows. “A better life? What’s wrong with the life you have?” The man looked over at the woman next to him.

She giggled. “Oh, Father. He’s jesting.” She turned to look at Allen. “I am Miss Marie Spencer, and this is my father, Mr. Howard Spencer. My father runs The Bank of Danville. And I am a school teacher,” exclaimed Marie. “Welcome to our quaint little town of Danville.”

“Allen Foster...my name is Allen Foster. I’m looking for work.” He shoved his hands inside his pockets.

Howard’s eyes squinted. “As in employment?” questioned the old man.

Marie giggled once again. “Father...what else would Mr. Foster be referring to except



gainful employment within the confines of our wonderful town?” Marie lightly tapped her father’s arm. “You’ll have to excuse my father’s rude behavior. He’s much better with numbers than dealings with people. We’re heading into Danville. Would you like to ride with us?” Allen’s hands were sweaty. He was infatuated with this mysterious yet intriguing woman.

“May I? I mean, if it’s okay with Mr. Spencer, that is...” said Allen as his eyes shifted briefly to the older gent.

“I see no harm. And I agree with my daughter, on some accounts. I can come across as a bit crude, but mind you, this day and age you have to be careful,” commented Howard.

“I agree with you, Mr. Spencer. And...what day and age are it, to be exact?” questioned Allen. He glanced back and forth between the two of them.

Marie let out a chuckle. “Why, Mr. Foster...you indeed have such a unique sense of humor...this beautiful spring day in eighteen fifty, the fifth of May, that is,” she stated. Allen’s smile fell from his face. “Wait...what? Eighteen fifty? You’ve got to be kidding me! How is it possible that I...” His voice trailed off. Can this truly be eighteen fifty? Is this a dream? I hope I never wake up.

“Are you in need of medical attention?” asked Howard. “You heard my daughter—eighteen fifty. Anyone with a right mind would know that without a telling.” Mr. Spencer took a step toward Allen.

“My apologies, Mr. Spencer. I’m not good with dates. Yes, silly me.” Allen shifted his feet.

“Dear Father, please let Mr. Foster keep what little sanity he has left after your harsh interrogation. Not everyone is seedy. This man has been forthright, and he’s looking to gain employment here within our town. Is that so wrong?” commented Marie.

“No. Not in the least, Marie. We are looking to hire on another bank teller. Might that suit your abilities, Mr. Foster?” asked Howard.

Allen gave a half-grin. “I could make it work...I mean, yes, it would be perfect. I also need a place to stay,” said Allen.

“Well, you’re in luck, Mr. Foster. Morgan’s Inn can accommodate your needs. Another business taken under the wings of my father. Danville is a profitable venture for the Spencer family,” replied Marie.

Suddenly, something behind Allen drew Howard Spencer’s attention. “It may seem our carriage has arrived, my dear.” He gently took his daughter’s elbow to guide her toward the horse and buggy.



“Shall we, Mr. Foster?” Marie offered her free arm to Allen.

Allen cleared his throat and cautiously encircled his arm with hers. “We shall, Miss Spencer.”

Allen eagerly walked toward the awaiting carriage, with a beautiful woman on his arm, and into an unknown destiny.

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The paramedic had been performing CPR on the male subject for over five minutes, to no avail. There was no sign of breathing nor a pulse. His ashen face and blue lips told the inevitable truth.

The uniformed police officer held back the onlookers. It was cramped inside the rapid transit car. “Okay, folks, let’s move it along. Nothing here to see. Come on, let’s get a move on.”

His stocky build pushed the commuters toward the open door. Once the area was secured, he returned to the paramedic, who’d radioed for a gurney to remove the deceased individual.

“Any idea who this guy was?” asked the cop.

The middle-aged paramedic shook his head. “No...but one of the passengers said he talked briefly with this man yesterday. He said this guy rode the transit to the end of the line. The commuter said for a brief moment he thought the guy was dead, but then he woke up,” said the paramedic.

“What do you think...a heart attack or stroke?” asked the cop.

The paramedic gave a slight sigh. “It’s a good guess. We won’t know until the autopsy.” Suddenly, a clank of wheels and metal sounded through the sliding doors. “Can you help me lift the body onto the gurney, Officer?”

“Sure. No problem.”

The cop stood to the side as the gurney was pushed in place. As the two men lifted the body, a wallet fell out of the man’s jacket. Seconds later, the cop picked up the wallet and looked inside for his ID.

“It says his name is Allen Foster.” The cop closed the wallet and laid it on top of the body. “Well, Allen Foster, I hope you’re in a better place now.”

And with that said, Allen Foster’s body was wheeled out of the subway and loaded into the awaiting ambulance lights. The paramedic then slowly closed the back doors and drove away into the dawn of a new morning.

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Alice Baburek is an avid reader, determined writer and animal lover. She lives with her female partner and four canine companions. Retired she challenges herself to become an unforgettable emerging voice.



# FEATHER BED by KATIE HUGHBANKS



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Katie Hughbanks is a writer, photographer, and teacher whose photography has been recognized internationally, including two honors from the London Photo Festival. Her photos appear in various publications, including in Peatsmoke Journal, In Parentheses, L'Esprit Literary Review, New Feathers Anthology, Glassworks Magazine, Azahares, MAYDAY, Moonday Mag, and Black Fork Review. Her poetry chapbook, *Blackbird Songs*, was published by Prolific Press in 2019, and her short story collection (*It's Time*) will be released by Finishing Line Press in July 2024. She teaches English and Creative Writing in Louisville, Kentucky, US.



# MAKE ME BEAUTIFUL by LAURA MENDOZA



Kinari was just going to brush her teeth by the river.

She sat near the meander, as if she were the dimple of the big blue curved smile of Capiz. After gargling, she spat into what would have been her reflection on the water. Nowadays, she appreciated how it could never accurately reflect her. Either it was running too quickly or there were too many small fishes when it was more calm.

The longer she stayed there, the stronger the wet mud and grass pervaded her sinuses. Her ears no longer listened to the sloshing water. Her eyes adjusted to the small pockets of sunlight imposing onto her face.

She despised each and every one of them. She kept telling herself she didn't care for the attention from the peeping wind, mucky scents, and skating currents. But Kinari was very confused with herself at the moment. No matter how much she wanted to refuse their advances, she could never say no to them.

Panay River was the only place she could comfortably spread her cramped wings and actually smile with her tongue out without scarring a wandering child or losing a potential partner. She couldn't stand to think of herself like this, a Mandurugo worrying about something so degrading and mind-numbing as potential partners.

During her latest husband's passing, Kinari dealt with it like she always did.

“Help... Me... She's a...”

Kinari walked away as the frivolous maid tended to his dying wishes. Just another walking corpse more fit to fill up a coffin than lie next to his bloodthirsty wife. She removed her latest wedding ring and subtly dropped it into the nearest sewer drain.

She didn't know this was going to be the last time it was going to be “easy” for her. She was so used to waiting for the next succulent sack of bones and innards to beg for her hand in marriage. Over the centuries, it never took her longer than a week to snag a fresh new blood bank wrapped around her finger. All of a sudden, the suitors stopped lining up. The staring, drooling, and pining ceased. They weren't in a hurry anymore. Instead, there were new queues and new hordes for newer girls. Girls they didn't have to think twice about going to bed without knives.

Kinari believed her beauty was undisputable. Until one day while pretending to use a public restroom, she didn't even recognize the pitiful creature staring back at her in the mirror. She, then, noticed the same lines like they were outlines of plains and flat lands on her face. She saw her first volcano. Surrounding it were smaller craters. She was almost too shocked to also notice her forehead had grown into mountain ranges. Waterfalls were forming underneath her eyes and the corners of her frown were becoming earthquakes. Even her posture made her look withered and worn out when compared to a pathetic trench.

She didn't care to acknowledge other human women before. She never had a reason to. But now, she couldn't help but notice how her next date stopped browsing the menu to gawk at the woman who passed by their table.

The phenomenon of aging and what came from it wasn't foreign to her. She knew all too well what time could do to the mortal skin from her hundreds of suitors whose looks never held a candle to hers. If anything, her wings were perhaps her ugliest feature. But what made that wringed mess easy to deal with was it being hidden away in the small of her back.

For as long as her beauty was able to sustain her over the decades, Kinari never stopped to think she was of worth outside of it. She couldn't comprehend having to be anything other than, let alone be able to accept she was gradually unbecoming that.

“Ay, meron na ako,” Kinari heard over the water burbling against the riverside.

In the not-so-far distance, what her former suitors would have deemed a beautiful girl was cleaning herself in the river. She looked old enough to be on her own in a river, but young enough to have not bled for not that long. What gave it away was her clear, smooth face. She could've been fooled into believing this was her first time bleeding like that. If it wasn't for the admittedly intimate moment she was invading, Kinari thought she looked like any other actress in those Dove commercials she always caught her 20th century husbands paying a little too much attention to. For smoother, more glowing skin, it must be Dove. Was this the secret to mortal beauty, she thought.

Making sure the young woman was finished and had walked far enough from the river, Kinari couldn't contain her unusual curiosity any longer. She had never questioned her own thirsts, her natural instincts. She sucked the blood of others because she could never bleed for herself. But this time, she didn't want to swallow it through her hollow tongue. She had just brushed her teeth, after all.

She waited for the scarlet water to flow close to where she was along the river. With her trembling hands, she scooped up as much as she could and cleaned her face with it. Scrubbed out her volcanoes and craters with floating blood clots to smoothen them out. And pressed her red tinted palms hard enough for the mountain ranges to erode and collapse. Kinari felt like a maniac, and she was laughing like one, too. Because no matter all her effort, her waterfalls frothed further and the earthquakes trembled harder.

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Laura Ann Corene I. Mendoza is a fiction and poetry writer from Quezon City, Philippines. She decided she wanted to pursue writing as a career after creating her first ever short story back in the eleventh grade. With her writing, she wants to be able to highlight the subtle little idiosyncrasies and nuances of emotion and experience that come with living, particularly through distinct hardships and specific sorrows. Laura is an incoming junior from Ateneo de Manila University taking up BFA Creative Writing under the Fiction track. Currently, she serves as the President of WriterSkill, the premiere freelance writing organization of her university.



# RAT RACE by ELVIS ALVES



If I catch a rat  
by its toes, will I  
let it go? If the  
rat is small or fat,  
will I feed it to the  
cat? But the rat  
is me. I am in a race  
with other rats and the  
cat has me by the toes.  
It won't let go. My  
comrades scurry away.  
One returns with a ladder.  
(Where will I climb?)  
Another has a hose.  
But the fire in my  
toes won't out. And  
the cat won't let me  
go. What will become  
of my wife and kids?  
Will they build a home  
without me? I don't  
know. The cat has my  
toes and won't let go.

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Elvis Alves's latest project is the chapbook *This Is What I Know* (2023). He lives in New York City. You can read about him and his work at [www.elvisalves.com](http://www.elvisalves.com).

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLACK DEATH'S PEST MAIDEN by TOM HOLMES



Today, she has just one hand  
to wave her claret scarf  
at your door or side window,  
or chimney if you're well-to-do.

She arrived with the dead  
and infected and inhabited  
the green mist one inhales  
on their final draw. At last

exhale, she's yellow vapor.  
She grew. She floated. She hovered  
above another neighboring town  
where she manifested and spat

when she praised flagellation.  
She tightened her scarf across  
two hands then snapped a body  
with infection and soon their death.

But if she appears this day  
at your door to wave one handed  
her scarf to invite the pestilence,  
let her knock. Set the guillotine.

Open the door and extend  
your hand as if to shake hers.  
As she does, drop the blade.  
No hands remain. Burn the scarf.

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For twenty-two years, Tom Holmes was the founding editor and curator of Redactions: Poetry & Poetics. The final issue is due out in the summer of 2024. He teaches at Nashville State Community College (Clarksville). Blog, The Line Break: [thelinebreak.wordpress.com/](http://thelinebreak.wordpress.com/). Twitter: @TheLineBreak



# SERPENT OF SKARDU by ALAYA IDREES



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Alaya Idrees is a self-taught illustrator and visual artist from Pakistan. She graduated from Florida International University with a bachelor's degree in Liberal Studies. Ever since she was young, she was fascinated with the art of fantasy, particularly works of artists such as Brian Froud and John Howe. She longed to create not just fictional worlds but to weave forgotten stories of Pakistani folklore and mythology. She uses watercolor as her main medium to cope with her PTSD and the daily trials of adulthood. You can find more of her creations on her social handle: @wordsnymph



# DOWN THE RIVER by ANDREA BALINGIT



The sun danced against the gentle bow of the grass. The wind caressed her hair that she had let loose, a tide of caramel in the wind. Isabella walked beside the river, letting its soft lullaby answer the birds' harping calls, the trees' whispers, and the wind's deep tremble. She walked with ease in her flats, her green and white satin dress caressed her skin as it danced with the air. She stayed an arm's length away from the water and navigated through the patches of moss, small rocks, and mud. She would sometimes stop and let the air embrace her. After a moment or two, she would trudge on again, sometimes kicking a small pebble on the soft gurgle of the river.

"Hey! I'm sorry!" She looked up from the ground to see a man running towards her. He was tall with a tangle of hair the color of brown algae, and eyes the color of coals. She looked around her.

There was no one else but her.

That was expected, no one knew about the river's existence. It was her most guarded secret. She had discovered it when she was young. While other children her age had secret hideaways and secret treehouses, she had her own secret river. She spent her summers alone in the river, basking in the silence, fresh wind, and warm sun. The river had seen her grow and change, but the river never changed. It was the same as the first time she had laid her eyes upon it; every visit felt like the first time she had discovered it. Time seemed to be non-existent in the river and Isabella liked to imagine it was a place somewhere between time that she could only access because she was some sort of fairy princess with God-given powers.

"Look, I know I made you wait and I'm sorry. I won't even try to make excuses. Forgive me, will you?"

Isabella frowned at the man who now stood a few feet away from her. She took a step back. "I'm sorry, but I don't know you." The man, to her relief, didn't take another step forward.

"Oh, Isabella, I know I let you down. You've never been the one for the tardy, but isn't it too much to push me away? It's our first anniversary!" He dramatically placed a hand on his chest. "I'm really hurt, you know." He didn't look hurt.

It took Isabella a moment to reply, her mouth agape as she tried to wade out of the confusion that spilled over her, how did he know my name? "I... don't know you, really." And she didn't know how he discovered the river. "And... what anniversary?"



“Our first anniversary as a couple!” He frowned, “You’re not the type of person who would forget. We were supposed to meet here to spend our first anniversary. I know I said I was going to be early but I came an hour late and I’m sorry.”

The man stepped forward and Isabella barked, “Don’t!”

He froze, looking startled and incredulous.

“Don’t come near me.” Isabella tried to make her voice normal and calm despite her increasing panic. “I remember now. Yes, yes... but don’t come near me...yet.” She forced what she hoped was a sweet smile. She didn’t understand what the man was blabbering about. She was alone in a river hidden deep in a forest, with no one near who would hear her scream if something bad happened to her. “Can you excuse me for a minute?” The words came rushing through her lips as she took careful steps to walk around the man, never taking her eyes off him.

“Okay?”

“Don’t turn!” She yelled when he tried to turn around after she had walked an arc around him. “Just... stand there for a moment. I have a surprise.” Should she pick a heavy rock and bash it on the man’s head? She scanned the ground, it was all small rocks and pebbles. Nothing big enough that could make a human faint. If anything, it would only annoy him and that would be bad for her.

She bolted into a run instead and ran as fast as she could. She had traversed these banks a million times and she had no problem running fast without looking at the ground.

Isabella looked back and skidded to a stop when she no longer saw the man. There was no trace of him. She would have seen him clearly if he was coming after her, the river bank and the line of trees had a wide expanse of soil and rocks in between that there was no place to hide.

Isabella’s head buzzed with adrenaline as she walked ahead, her eyes darting around in caution. The place seemed to have stilled to its normal quiet, but she didn’t dare let her guard down.

Isabella tried to list down possible explanations of how the man could have found the river when she saw a bench ahead—a bench that should have never been there—where an old man sat alone, staring ahead and letting the air tickle the tufts of white hair on his otherwise bald head.

She stopped in front of him. “Hello, sir,” Isabella said in that small polite voice everyone used around old people.

The man looked up at her and she noticed his eyes were shimmering. “You’ve always

loved this river,” the old man’s voice sounded soft but weary. “It makes sense why I would see you here, again.”

Isabella didn’t understand but responded with a smile. She wondered if the man was suffering from dementia or something similar. He looked lucid and conscious of himself, but then, she had never seen anyone suffering from dementia.

“I remember when we first met, in this place—actually, just up ahead. I was a tourist who got lost. I was wandering in this river when you suddenly crashed into me, but for some reason, you were the one irritated the most,” he chuckled. “You didn’t fail to take my breath away though. Many things have happened since then, but my love for you never wavered, Isabella. I miss you so much.”

Isabella guessed the woman of the same name must be his wife and something must have happened. “What is your name, sir?”

The man chuckled again, and warmth spread throughout her when she saw the man’s wrinkled face shine with happiness, “You’ve forgotten already? I’m hurt.” He feigned hurt, a hand clutching his chest. The gesture oddly reminded Isabella of the young man earlier. “I’m Alexander. Never forget, dear, that is why we put our names here.” His hands swept across the back of the bench, where the names Isabella and Alexander, with a heart in between, were engraved on it. “Quite cheesy, I’d say. But I liked looking at it, and I know you loved it.”

Isabella did find it sweet but she felt sad for the old man and the love he had with his Isabella. She gave the old man a sad smile before she murmured her goodbye.

The man didn’t want her to leave but she walked ahead and did not look back until she had gone far. When she turned again, there was no presence of the bench or the man anymore.

She scowled, was she seeing things or—

“Aww!” She shrieked as she rammed herself into someone else.

“Watch where you’re going!”

She snapped her face in front with a retort at the tip of her tongue, but the words died when she saw the young man from earlier again. Her shock turned into anger, “You again?! I thought you were—Are you following me?!” She had not seen him coming, maybe because he had come from the other direction where he once last stood.

The man looked offended, “Excuse me? Followed you? Look, woman, I’m lost and I just got here. I have no business following strange girls.”

It didn't explain how he found the river. It didn't explain why he was spending his first anniversary with her, and how he happened to be standing in the opposite direction of where he last stood. It didn't explain that the man's current attitude was far different from the man Isabella had seen earlier. The man earlier seemed... comfortable around her.

"What?" He asked, irritated.

She blinked, realizing she had been staring at him. "Who are you?"

"I'm a tourist, I was with my friends when I got lost and found this river. If you could kindly help me return, your kindness would be greatly appreciated."

I remember when we first met, in this place—actually, just up ahead. I was a tourist who got lost. I was wandering in this river when you suddenly crashed into me, but for some reason, you were the one irritated the most.

"What's your name?" Her voice was almost a whisper.

"Alexander."

You didn't fail to take my breath away though. Many things have happened since then, but my love for you never wavered, Isabella. I miss you so much.

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Andrea Balingit is a wandering soul from Cebu, Philippines, and a BA (History-Sociology) graduate from University of the Philippines Visayas. Writing has always been her voice, and so she dabbles in publishing in international and national literary magazines and journals to yap about anything under the sun.



# SEA OF GREEN by MATTHEW SPENCE



The first thing that Lieutenant Commander Ava Dawes noticed when she opened the hatch of her escape pod was how green everything was. The sky, the binary stars overhead, and especially the algae-tinted water. As a precaution she put her oxygen mask on, although the planet already had an oxygen-rich atmosphere that was comparable to the early cretaceous period, she didn't want to risk losing her breath after months in a climate-controlled environment.

Ava climbed back into the pod and checked her readings. She was somewhere in the southern hemisphere, thankfully not close to either of the planet's two major continents. With luck she could hold out for a few more weeks, drifting in the shallow sea until she could get picked up by another survey ship.

The planet was on the outer edge of Fed space, hence the reason for her ship's visit. An unexpected magnetic storm had thrown off their ship's navigation systems, causing a failure that had forced the commander to order an evacuation. She was the only one to have landed on the surface, while the others had managed to have the good luck to stay in space. Of course, Ava thought, she'd have to be the one to land and possibly make unintentional first contact with the inhabitants.

The inhabitants themselves were a sentient species at the Age of Exploration stage of their development-wooden ships, early steam technology, early industrialization. The fact that they resembled a cross between Terran bears and early hominids wouldn't have helped her any. Ava had no desire to be kept in a cage as a curiosity at best or killed as a strange being at worst. But for now, she was here to stay.

First Mate Grizzala saw the object floating off starboard. Calling the Captain over the bridge horn, he tried to describe what he was seeing. "It's a sphere, like a globe, sitting out there on the water," he said. "Made out of some kind of metal, very well forged from the looks of it. Shall we investigate?"

Captain G'Zah arrived on the forward deck and eyed the object through his telescope. "We're on the edge of contested waters," he said. "Whatever it is, it might have been left behind by the Northern Forest Clans. For all we know it could be a floating bomb. No, we'd best stay clear. Maintain course for the next friendly port."

Grizzala nodded. "Aye, Captain." But while he made the turn with the ship's wheel, he couldn't help but look back at the strange globe and wonder where it might have really come from. Why leave it in plain site in open water if it was a trap? But he had his orders, and followed them. Somebody else would probably come along to claim it. He wondered if he'd ever get to meet them.

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Matthew Spence was born in Cleveland, Ohio. His work has most recently appeared in Razzle Dazzle Cafe and Zephyr Winds.

# WAXEN WINGS by STEPHEN MEAD



This time no Icarus,  
nor any dumb daddy Daedalus so ingenious he couldn't factor in  
the capriciousness of the Gods even after half of a lifetime among them.  
This time no unrealistic instructions about sticking equidistant  
between sea and sun as if first-time flight was not a phenomenon  
so great as to overwhelm all senses like a drug  
high on sheer jubilation.  
Now imagination is all the experience takes, settling in  
to focus on what is majestic artistry itself -  
these wings encaustic with beeswax jewel-glowing  
in each monarch membranous pane between veins  
no lead glues, only amber resin, that unguent of ooze.  
Oh, but this is resplendent, such flexible glass tendons  
holding the stains of leaves breezes take easily  
as feathers whose directions are anywhere safe  
in ascension towards astral gold losing its oxygen  
or landing, shadow-kissed, on waving currents, the reflections  
of twin meeting twin without Narcissus consciousness.  
Yes, how every spirit still needs these dreams of flying and floating,  
each a Hermes strapping in for the ride enchanted with sandals  
clasped as angel hands are mantis praying via the open,  
then close, then open again, a motoring humming  
as sprites on loan one with the wondrous that is separate  
though yet housing the knowledge  
of all the worlds' human hazards and hubris  
that might destroy humanity too for all eternity -  
but the cosmos, grand and expansive,  
in corridors of canyons spacious with stars as burning candles adrift,  
is not one bit less lit without us in the end  
since infinity has use even for falling refuse,  
the scattered energy of black holes, dark matter, web fragments.

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Stephen Mead is a retired Civil Servant, having worked two decades for three state agencies. Before that his more personally fulfilling career was fifteen years in healthcare. Throughout all these day jobs he was able to find time for writing poetry/essays and creating art. Occasionally he even got paid for this work. Currently he is resident artist/curator for The Chroma Museum, artistic renderings of LGBTQI historical figures, organizations and allies predominantly before Stonewall, [The Chroma Museum](#)

# IBANUJEDAYO: ORIGIN OF THE NAME by ANUOLUWA NGOZI



When Awe was born, the first thing his mother, Wāijena, noticed was his horn. She knew immediately that the gods had cursed her for the seventh time. First, the gods had cursed her with four Abikus, the ones that never stay alive. Then, two Emere, the ones who run far from their parents once they could walk. And now, the gods had crowned it all with an Abami-eda, a child with strange features and even stranger powers.

Tired of her curse-ridden life, Wāijena jumped down from her Iya Agbebi's hanging bamboo bed and started rolling on the floor, mourning her misfortune in her native tongue. No one bothered to stop her, and no one visited her for all the days and nights she spent at the small town midwife's house. None of the town's women bothered to welcome her home like they had done before, not even Amina the spice seller, the only other foreign woman in the town.

On the third day, she resolved to cook her eba on earth and savor her soup in heaven. Mojisola, one of her husband's younger wives, prepared her meal that day, unaware of the tragedy that was about to unfold. Wāijena, her heart heavy with sorrow, laced her food with maikefi, a potent poison, and embarked on her final journey.

The day after Wāijena took food from the ancestral masquerade's hand, Lawale – Awe's father – wrapped the baby into a bundle with Wāijena's finest lapa and took him down to Paradisa, the city of the gods, where he gifted him to the Chief Priestess – Yeyelawo-Agba Kashimawo.

As expected, the Yeyelawo-Agba welcomed them, it was not the first time that one of her spiritual children considered themselves unworthy of raising the spawns of Obatala.

“What shall we call him?” the Yeye had asked.

“I don't have any name for that being,” Lawale said with so much disgust.

So the Yeye said, “We shall call him Awe until you can finally decide on a name, Oruko ni afi mo Omo. This is my condition for accepting the child: You must name the child when the time is right. Do you accept?”

“Beeni mo gba, Yeye,” Lawale said.



With the agreement reached, Lawale was told to leave the baby with the junior Yeyes and Babas.

Thirteen mooncycles later, Awe had gradually risen to the role of an Ogberi (novitiate). He, like the other Ogberis, was being tasked with the role of preparing Ebo (sacrifice) to the various gods, but they always encountered one peculiar problem. The twins of the Yeyelawo-Agba and the Babalawo-Agba were always demanding a share of the food prepared for the gods.

On one of those days, Awe was tasked with preparing the Ebo for Sango Jakuta. He was asked to make Amala and Gbegiri – the god of thunder’s favorite food. There had been recent tales of the god striking people down with thunder in broad daylight, so the Alaafin had commanded the members of the Ogboni across the Oyo country to appease the angry god.

Awe knew how important it was to make the meal correctly. Sango was known as a picky eater, his meal had to be made carefully, so the Babalawo-Agba had tasked him, the most careful of his Ogberi. He carefully prepared the meal and placed Sango’s portion in a large pot and the twins’ in a smaller one. After all, it was the elders who said, He who would not let us eat satisfactorily, we must add his own while cooking.

So when the boys came for their portion, he showed them their food in a small pot, but this greatly angered them.

“Why would you put our food in a smaller pot?” Kehinde asked.

“—And Jakuta’s own in a bigger pot?” Taiwo added.

“Because he is Jakuta, Sango Oranmiyan,” Awe replied, “You know he is a jealous god.”

“So what,” Taiwo scoffed.

“Don’t you know,” Kehinde continued, “That we are gods too? We are the physical manifestation of Ejire Osokun, we are the two in one god, Orisa bi Ibeji osi, how dare you disrespect us?”

“Sango will be angry,” Awe warned them.

“And so would we,” they said in unison, their voice carrying something otherworldly.

“Sango may have thunder and fire but we have every force of aye akamara in our hands. You don’t want to offend us.”

They were indeed small gods in the world of the living. One time, a Yeyelawo had punished them, and in response, they sent an army of scorpions on her. When the matter reached the Babalawo-Agba, he decreed that no one should ever touch the twins without telling him or the Yeyelawo-Agba and that became the rule since then.

“I will not let you take out of a god’s meal,” Awe declared, posing to fight them.

A fierce tussle ensued between Awe and the twins. Despite their age and size advantage, Awe fought valiantly. However, they eventually overpowered him and tied him to the araba tree near the adogan used for cooking. Then they proceeded to devour both their own and Sango’s portions of the ebo, filling the empty pots with sand.

After their gluttonous feast, they untied Awe and fled. Filled with righteous anger, Awe did not pursue them. Instead, he carried the pot of sand and made his way to the Babalawo-Agba at the Sango shrine.

Upon arrival, the Babalawo-Agba glared at him with fury. “Ibo lo wa ni ati aro, iwo omo yi? Where have you been since morning? I have already summoned Sango, and he has been waiting impatiently for his sacrifice.”

“E ma binu baba, I apologize it was—” Awe began.

“Gbe enu e soun,” the Babalawo-Agba interrupted. “Save me your excuses.”

“Baba, I must tell you something—”

“Danke enu e,” the Babalawo-Agba snapped. “I said I don’t want to hear your excuses. Oya ba gbe Ebo to pese.”

Awe attempted to speak again, but the Babalawo-Agba cut him off. “Danke Se, I need to appease Obakoso.” He snatched the pot of ebo from Awe’s hand.

Unable to stop him, Awe watched as the Babalawo-Agba joined the circle around a large bonfire. The dancers, all clad in the uniform red buba and yeri, moved in rhythmic steps around the blazing fire. Their plaited heads, adorned with cowrie shells, glistened in the firelight. Suddenly, Sango possessed one of the dancers, and the flames at the center of the chamber flared up, burning red hot.

“Oje mi da,” a loud, booming voice asked, smoke erupting from the mouth of the possessed speaker.

“Oje re re” the Babalawo-Agba replied, bringing forth the pot the twins had emptied and refilled with sand. Only when he opened it did he realize his mistake. His eyes flicked to Awe, finally understanding the importance of what Awe had tried to tell him. He quickly replaced the lid, but unfortunately, Sango had already seen the contents of the pot.

“AHHHH!” the Sango-possessed speaker roared in anger, the sound like a thousand deafening thunders. Everyone in the chamber covered their ears as the effect of his shout reverberated. But Sango wasn’t done. “Ah! Eyin Omo Eniyan jatijati yi, E fi mi se efe. (You rubbish humans, you mock me!)”



This time, his words were followed by thunderbolts striking all around them. Awe watched in horror as the Osujo were engulfed by the flames they had used to summon Sango. Soon, the entire chamber was consumed by fire.

Without warning, the Sango-possessed speaker walked towards Awe. “Ogberi, moni kini oruko e (Novitiate, what is your name)?” Sango asked.

“Awe,” Awe replied.

“To ba dele, so fun baba re pe bore pe kini Oruko e, (When you reach home, ask your father what your name is). Sho gbomi?”

Awe nodded, too scared to answer.

“Now run like your life depends on it,” the Sango-possessed speaker said before collapsing onto the floor of the burning chamber.

As if under a spell, Awe began to run, not stopping until he was far from Paradisa – the city of gods, now reduced to ashes by the flames of Sango’s fury. He ran until he reached the gates of Odogunyan, his father’s hometown. There, he collapsed, to be found in the morning by hunters returning from the Agbasoro forest. His horned head was enough – Lawale’s nameless son had returned, ready to receive the debt owed to him.

The day Awe arrived at Odogunyan, it was Lawale’s wedding day. The Ekun iyawo had begun when the hunters arrived with an Abami teenager slung across one of their backs. Whispers followed them as they walked down the road towards Lawale’s house, where the townswomen were already gathered. They encouraged the new bride as she sang for her new husband, who waited inside, confined until the bride party finished their songs and the other wedding events could begin.

It was while Lawale was inside the house with his emu-drunk friends that one of his sons came to him. He told Lawale that the hunters had returned from their night hunt with a strange man.

Lawale knew immediately who it was. His nightmare had returned, one hundred and thirty-two moons after he had cast it out. He had counted down the days, waiting for the boy to return and claim what was owed to him. Now that day had come, he felt only sadness and anger.

He was angry at himself for letting the boy go, and sad that the boy had returned. What does one do with an Abami child that returns home?

“Take him from them and help him to a room,” Lawale ordered his son. “Go find your Iya Agba among the townswomen and tell her that your elder brother has returned.” He did not care to explain to his son, who looked worried at the idea of an elder brother and what it meant for his birthright.

After his wedding, Lawale did as it was expected of him. He consummated their union on a white wrapper and watched as red blood stained the bedsheet, confirming that the bride was indeed a virgin. But he felt no pleasure. All he could think about was the boy – his boy, the one his first love, Wāijena, had given birth to.

Early in the morning, Lawale rose up from beside his new wife, even though tradition asked they stay in the room together for ten days with all their needs tended to by the rest of the family. But that day he said to himself, “Traditions be damned, this is a state of emergency and I will do as I wish.” So he visited the room the boy was resting; they had taken off his clothes, and the boy was only in his underwear.

In the darkness of the room, Lawale studied the boy. He had a skin just as dark as his own. The boy had also inherited Lawale’s best features, it was like staring at a canvas of his teenage self. It was then the tears fell from his eyes. The boy had grown up without his help. Unable to take it, he left the room for his new bride’s room; she was still asleep by the bed, her chest heaving up and down in a pattern that suddenly annoyed Lawale. Why was he getting married and having more children when he had failed as a father to his very first living Offspring?

When he went back to the boy’s room in the afternoon, he was sleeping. Now when Lawale looked at the child, he noticed the scars on his body, the burns. It was his daughter—Atinuke—who first told him about it.

‘Bami shepe eti gbo,’ Atinuke said, with a look that asked him to say yes so she could divulge all she had gleaned from staying with Asabi—her mother from the market. According to her, Paradisa—the city of the gods—was now the city of bones, razed to the ground by a rain of fire that killed all the citizens. It was then that Lawale realized the boy had survived the fire, raising the question: how? If what Atinuke said was true, how did his son experience the fury of none other than Sango—the God of Thunder and Fire—and live to tell the tale? Then he decided that Atinuke must have exaggerated the story; the other gods would not allow Sango to burn all their priests.

The boy slept for two days after Atinuke told Lawale about the fate of Paradisa, with Mojisola feeding him milk and akamu three times a day. During that period, more people confirmed Atinuke’s story, each adding their variation. On the day the boy woke up, some traders from the far east arrived in Odogunyan, claiming they had witnessed oracle-tellers speaking of the vengeance of the gods and the one who would bring about a new beginning in

the land of men. What everyone found strange about the oracle-tellers was that none of them was undergoing training or were oracle-tellers themselves.

Awe woke up in a room dimly lit by the light coming from the setting sun outside a big window. He tried to stand up, but his legs failed him, and he collapsed back into the clay bed laid with fresh raffia mat. The sound of his body collapsing into the bed echoed. He felt a cold chill travel



through him, and a sharp ache raked through his head. Everything hurt so much, and even then questions burned in his mind like the flame of the Sango-summoning chamber. Then everything returned to him with the speed of lightning. The mischievous twins of the Babalawo-Agba and Yeyelawo-Agba, the angry Babalawo-Agba, then the even more angry Sango-possessed Osujo. The rain of fire on Paradisa, a strange woman feeding him Akamu and milk, and the strange man that kept visiting him.

It was then his strength found him and he rose from the bed again, this time slowly but surely he began to walk until he reached the door of his hut, he opened it and stepped out. The light of the outdoor arena shined brightly into his eyes, making him close his eyes, searching for support against the wall of the hut. That's where the strange woman found him, collapsed against the wall. She helped him back inside the house.

“Pele omo dada,” She said as she helped him to his bed, “Let me go and call your father, he has been waiting for you to wake up.”

“Father,” Awe said, the words sounded strange coming out of his mouth.

Despite being home, in his true family home, he felt no special connection. When he was younger, he used to dream of home, of his mother, his father, and the way his family house would look like. He wondered if he had junior ones like the other kids in Paradisa but the Yeyelawo-Agba never told him anything, she would always tell him that he would meet his family when the time was right. As time passed without any news of his family, Awe ultimately came to accept that he might never know them. He often imagined them lost to war. Now that he was in his family house, he did not know what to do, so he asked, “What of Mami?”

The look on the woman's face was explanation enough of his mother's fate. Awe had seen so much death that he could recognize it any time of the day. “I will get your father,” the woman said.

As if to answer his unspoken question, a boy who looked like the strange man who always visited him strutted in after the woman had gone. He had no smile on his face; he might as well have been wearing a frown mask, Awe thought.

“Who are you?” inquired the boy. Awe looked up at the boy again, sizing him up. If they were to engage in a game of fists, Awe was sure to emerge victorious, so he gave the younger boy the silent treatment. As if realizing he wouldn't get answers, the boy asked, “How old are you? My father says you are his son and—”

Now Awe understood why the boy was here. He wanted to know who was older between him and Awe.

“Look, I have no interest in your father’s...our father’s inheritance,” Awe said. “I have no interest in being his firstborn, I barely even know him.”

“Promise me then,” his brother said, “that there shall be no fight between me and you when it comes to our father’s inheritance.”

“I promise,” Awe said.

“Good,” his brother replied, standing up to exit the hut. He stopped at the door where two new figures emerged: his father and the woman.

“Omo mi,” his father said, rushing to hug him. Awe could not hug back; he just froze in the embrace. What does one say to a man you thought no longer existed?

The man finally pulled out of the hug, and Awe saw that the man was crying. Then, he launched into the story of how Awe was born and the tragedy that followed. Once he was done telling the story, he said, “Tell me everything about you.”

Not knowing what else to do, Awe told them everything.

Once he reached the happenings at Sango shrine part, his voice changed into something more serious. “Sango,” he began, looking from his father to the strange woman and then the door where he knew his brother was standing, eavesdropping on their conversation. “Sango said I should ask you, what my name is.”

“So that is why he spared you,” his father said, confirming what Awe had already Imagined.

His father was silent for a while, thinking about how to answer the question. Finally, he said, “Names are important, Omo mi. They tell a story, one which you already have. But I can’t choose just any name. I have to think deeply. In our culture, we don’t name children immediately after they are born. No, we wait eight days to pass. Then, after the parents of such child or children have thought carefully, they announce the name.”

“So I have to wait,” he said. He had waited more than a hundred moons for this day; he could surely wait a few more sunrises for his naming day.

But the next thing his father did took him by surprise. He bent, bringing his mouth to Awe’s ear. “No,” he said, “you have waited enough. Today, I shall name you. I have had over a hundred moons to think about it, and now that you have told me your story, I have decided that your name shall be Ibanujedayo – the sorrow that became joy.”

Ibanujedayo smiled. For the first time in his Obatala-blessed life, he had a name.



Anuoluwa Ngozi is a genre-defying writer, filmmaker and journalist passionate about telling stories that explore queerness, the African experience, mysticism and how the three interacts. A recent graduate of the department of history and international studies, University of Ilorin. When not haunted by stories, Anuoluwa can be found on X (Twitter) @Anuoluwangozi

# STARBUST by AYESHA AREBU



Sanjna, his neighbor, no, his roommate, asks how long he'd been living here Before, as she used her palms to suppress greasy hair into a tight low bun. He told her. Two years. It was the same for her. Two years powered by the same system; two years shocked by outlets on shared walls. His loveseat encouraged both sitters into the center. He struggled against gravity. She had a pothos plant in her lap. Any further than the respectable distance, and he'd seem hostile. This was only their second meeting. He was borderline agoraphobic Before. He remained unchanged, but the state of the world made his condition less irrational. Due to recent developments, she'd been forced to move in with him. He wanted to ask her if that made her nervous, but he didn't want to give her a reason to be.

It was late October. Electric heating wasn't an option anymore, so a family had been moved into her apartment, and she'd been moved to his extra room. He apologized for how bare it'd been, but she said it was better that way. He hid in his room as she ensconced all her personal belongings. He thought there was an amendment against these sorts of things, but that applied to soldiers, and she wasn't a soldier, she was a tattoo artist. He couldn't help but inspect her when she'd told him her profession, but he met with unblemished dark skin. He asked her about it, and she said that she was too indecisive. He was kind of indecisive too. He'd never managed to pick something to do, so he settled on teaching a virtual GED class. He liked it, yes. His students were easy to manage and eager to learn. He didn't have to stoke a spark or manifest, in them, some destiny. Many of them knew what they wanted to do and had enough self-resolve to make it farther--across the world and into themselves than he ever had. It was getting late, she commented.

Late was 4 P.M. when it started to get dark. There were still a few with strength and guns who thought this was good opportunity to strong arm people into submission. To giving their belongings, or their bodies. He wanted to shake them and say, you use this idea that everyone is selfish to be cruel but really, it's just you. He realized that he, weak and sickly, lacked critical elements of understanding their perspective.

Both and Sanjna had to report to the U.S. Marshalls at around 8 A.M. where they'd be assigned to do the same job that they did every day—repair the Northeast electrical grid that failed after the Starburst. She was likely assigned to do the heavy lifting. With his condition, he'd been accommodated with light work—wiring, instruction. He asked Sanjna what she does with all the extra time. She does what she always does, which is sketch tattoos. He asks her if she's excited to do them After. She says she could do them now, with a pen and needle and black India ink. The only problem issue is finding people.



A week into living together, their routine had been established. Wake up, get ready leave, return, prepare dinner, watch the sunset from the kitchen, or from the roof. The world was so quiet. The sunset set, and the stars actually rose. They didn't know the constellations, so she found the shapes and around them, he molded stories. The earth used to fly around the universe, afraid to settle down, until that U-shaped magnet in the sky over there caught it and held it into place. The Earth sounds like me, she said. Sanjna's family sent her a letter in the mail. They lived on a local grid that was already working, again, which made her regret fleeing to this side of America. They lived in the state of California, and she lived in state of emergency.

On Saturdays, Sanjna joked that even with all the ingredients from Before, she couldn't have done any better than the slushy rations. He could have. Cooking was how he got people to like him, luring them to dinner. He told her, in fact, he wanted a tattoo about cooking. She could design it. It'll hurt, she warned him. His tolerance was high. He was impressed with himself for commissioning it, because it meant he could watch her while she worked. When she focused on the reference books, her eyes and mouth appeared as if being pulled back. She looked up after a few hours and asked him if it was time. Even he'd lost track of it. They accompanied one another to a different building for water, because theirs had used electric pumps. She brought the Pothos. It'd moved to the living room side table. He'd caught her talking to it more than once. They layered and unlayered. He waited outside of the bathroom in a vacant apartment as she showered. She came out slightly pink; hair sticking to her plump throat. He flushed when she noticed he noticed. The water was ice on his skin, which he appreciated.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of November, she asked why he stopped playing piano. It had been electric, that's why. But he was surprised she'd known about it, even though he shouldn't have been. The walls weren't soundproof. He second guessed asking if she'd liked it. He didn't know how he would feel if she said no. Unprompted, she said she'd love the sound of his jazzy tunes. He didn't understand his own relief, but then again, he did. He tapped his fingers along hard surfaces. She noticed. She asked if he could still hear the music. He could.

At around 3:19 on a Tuesday, she came home, more coat than person. Snowflakes found purchase atop her head. It took a second of the padded mass huffing to realize she was crying. He had been standing, trying to work an old etch-a-sketch he traded at the flea market. It clattered on the table. He understood the electrical system. He was suddenly overwhelmed stressed weaknesses; areas he'd neglected over the years that were wanting for repair. He waited for her to move or to speak. Softly he asked if she was okay. She wasn't. She crushed herself into his chest. This was their first time touching. He wondered if his slender frame would provide her enough comfort. His hand found her hair. He said nothing. She said nothing. She stopped crying, wiped her tears, and smiled at him. From out of her sack, she pulled out the tattoo she'd prepared.

Recently, he'd been trying to gauge how she perceived him. She called him a dork, which he liked. She would guess at his disposition. She would say, you like sweets? Autumn? Cumulous clouds? Reading memoirs? You were bullied as a child? And if she got it right, she'd nod in self-



satisfaction. She was confused when he told her his zodiac because her own isn't compatible with Aries. She was confused by the fact that he has six siblings, because of his reclusiveness, but too much reduces to nothing. His siblings had paired off around him. She only had one sibling, so close in age they could've been twins, and then something happened one day, and they've hated each other ever since. Sanjna has an eye for the relics of his ex-girlfriend are still

stuck to corners of this place. The thrift store vintage camera; puzzles under the dead-TV mantle; half-used skincare he'd thought to finish. She asks about her, and he answers honestly. Half of those things were from a long friendship. They'd failed the transition to something more and haven't spoken since and couldn't anymore, because he couldn't charge the phone that he'd use to call her, and he doesn't have her number memorized. She asked if he would call if he could. Not now. Sanjna gave him her phone number. He remembered it by the math  $1+4=5$ , double a 1 and that made 11, subtracted 4, and that made 7.

Shirt off, laid on the loveseat, with Sanjna staring intently at his chest, he tried to use her eyes. She etched out a bold knife going through a hand, stark against his scrawny, pale, freckled skin. She swiped cool alcohol across his chest, then began. The pain distracted him from the insecurity. Sometimes she'd remember he was there and ask if he was doing alright. She laughed as she explained she was the worst at bedside manner. After a while his body got used to the sensation, but not so much so that there was no pain at all. A blizzard had been going. They were stuck in the house, and for days after, she would check on the Vaseline, make sure the tattoo was clean and wrapped. For weeks after, she asked to see it, to make sure the lines were neat and bold. She'd trace it with a soft finger.

For Christmas, he got her batteries, a cool graphic tee from the flea market, and new pens. For Christmas, she dragged him by the arm outside to building they shower in. She'd been exploring the abandoned rooms, which was strictly prohibited. In the basement unit, an old tan wall piano sat unused. He touched the keys. They were untuned, plucky. Eyes closed; he played her a few tunes. He asked around and commissioned a tuner one in exchange for math-tutoring his kids. For all of January, they'd sneak in when they were supposed to be showering.

The governor announced, via mail and word of mouth, that the electric grid would be turned on by February 1st. They got drunk on a bittersweet wine. He looked, in her affable face, for a forlorn glance, a serious pause. In hindsight, he talked quieter so she would get closer, and she did. In the After, she would go bowling and find things to think about in while the pins reset. He would stay home and finally watch a movie. He imagined they would do it together. Before tonight, he hadn't kissed her because she was forced to live with him. They were close enough to kiss, but he still didn't. He asked her 'is it going to be easy for you to forget about me?' She frowned and asked why he would think that, but he didn't have a good reason except insecurity, so he scrambled, 'you're so different to me. You're sociable. You probably won't even notice I'm gone. I mean you don't even talk to your sister.' Tears welled, but she blinked them away, and gave a sardonic huff, 'yeah, I guess.'



She packed away and was gone in two days. Of course, gone was next door. He heard her laughing through the wall, and wondered how he'd ignored it for two years. He wanted to go and knock and ask what was funny. He wanted to make her laugh. He wanted her friendship back. But it was he who said the cruel thing, so he refrained, and she never came. When he plugged in his phone for the first time, he had unread messages from his ex. He didn't respond. After six months, he built up the courage to call Sanjna's number. She was more than happy to let him cook for her. It was so like her to be unaffected. He knocked on her apartment door at 7 PM, on his way back from the grocery store, expecting her to occupy the frame, but a small, sharp featured person opened the door.

It took Sanjna kissing them goodbye for him to realize what was happening. In his apartment, they recounted what their shared life had been like and though they were occupying the same space, there was an insurmountable gap created by time. It wasn't the same. He couldn't understand it just stayed there in the past. She threw her head back and laughed and confessed she had been in love with him when they thought the world was ending. He'd confessed he felt the same. But you never kissed me? she asked. He explained his read of the situation, that it would have been weird for him to thrust himself upon her. She explained her own, which was that never in a million years would she have guessed he was attracted to her, even. To this, he felt stumped. He couldn't tell her, mindful of her relationship, that he was. He responded the same, that she hadn't seemed attracted to him, instead. She laughed again, and said even though I used all those excuses to touch you? He retorted, back when you thought I was the last man on Earth? She got serious when she said, it had nothing to do with that.

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Ayesha Arebu is an Ethiopian-American from Northern California. She likes writing all sorts of things, all of which include some sort of speculative element. This would be her first published piece.

# THE DAGGER AND THE EGYPTIAN by KAYLEIGH KITT



“Should I ask why you have a knife in your bag?” He enquired mildly.

“It’s a dagger actually, and no.” Her lips pressed together, almost vanishing.

She poured hot black koshary tea, passing him a glass, leaving him to add his own sugar, then pushed the dagger out of sight, fastening her bag securely. They’d been having a perfectly lovely morning, she’d even ordered basbousa, the cream oozing from the middle. She’d gained his trust, but now unexpectedly questions were being asked. She fanned her face in the heat.

Her bag suddenly began vibrating. She swore loudly.

With one eyebrow arched, his eyes flicked territorially towards the brown bag, which had taken to bucking, like a restrained feral cat.

Bella reached across. The dagger slid meekly out of the bag onto the table between them. “May I?” He gestured.

She barely nodded; her breath stalled. Without it, she wouldn’t be able to get back to the house, to Marcus, to her own time; as it was, the edges were begging to blur, the deeper she journeyed. She longed to find her grandmother and the suave, linen clad Egyptian sat in front of her, may just have the grain of information, she was seeking.

“Exquisite.” He murmured. “Ottoman. Eighteenth century. How did you come by it?” He rolled the dagger, with its jewelled crescent handle across his palm.

“It was a gift from my grandmother, she travelled a lot when she was younger.” A half convincing lie.

Her legs weren’t fast enough to run away from the man, but her mouth did it for her instead, weaving a tale he delightfully swallowed, whole.

He placed the dagger on the table in front him, just outside her reach.

He knows. Inside her head she screamed, beating on invisible walls.



A small green bird alighted on the table, blatantly about to steal an optimistic chunk of cake. It became frozen like a statue, its eyes blinking rapidly, until the man lazily flicked his fingers and it darted away.

“Would you be willing to part with such a charming piece, for a suitable price?” He purred softly.

A challenge. What should she do? Think. What would Marcus do?

She flashed him a smile, “What arrangement had you in mind?”

A commotion between two men on the edge of the square forced him turn his head a fraction, and as she reached to reclaim the dagger, his hand shot out, fastening to her wrist.

“Not so fast Miss Green.”

“Mum. What’s for tea tonight?”

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She’d return later or tomorrow. “I hope you know what you’re doing Bella,” she muttered. The cursor blinked innocently.

“Mum. Micah called me stupid.”

“Mum. Nathan hit me.”

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Kayleigh Kitt lives in South Shropshire, UK with her husband and an ageing tabby cat who thinks it’s a dog. When she’s not writing, she knits novelty hats. Kayleigh’s had work published in Flash Fiction North, Bangor Literary Journal, Meditating Cat Zine, On The High journal, Active Muse, The Hooghly Review, Witcraft, SanScif and CNF in Across the Margin & Entrails.

# SOME SAY THE WHEN YOU'RE DEAD YOU REALLY ARE by GALE ACUFF



not just dreaming or imagining  
it but death's there with you, in the flesh, so to  
speak--I told my Sunday School teacher so  
after class today, when we were alone  
save for God and Jesus, maybe even  
Satan, maybe he was peeking in from  
outside the window, but anyway she  
started to cry, my teacher I mean, so  
I said I'm sorry, ma'am, I take it all  
back and then she laughed but still she wept, like  
they say in the Bible, then said I pray  
you could, Gale, so we prayed together and  
at least she stopped weeping--but laughing, too  
--somehow they're both the same. So then we rose.

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I have had hundreds of poems published in a dozen countries and have authored three books of poetry. My poems have appeared in Ascent, Reed, Arkansas Review, Poem, Slant, Aethlon, Florida Review, South Carolina Review, Carolina Quarterly, Roanoke Review, Danse Macabre, Ohio Journal, Sou'wester, South Dakota Review, North Dakota Quarterly, New Texas, Midwest Quarterly, Poetry Midwest, Adirondack Review, Worcester Review, Adirondack Review, Connecticut River Review, Delmarva Review, Maryland Poetry Review, Maryland Literary Review, George Washington Review, Pennsylvania Literary Journal, Ann Arbor Review, Plainsongs, Chiron Review, George Washington Review, McNeese Review, Weber, War, Literature & the Arts, Poet Lore, Able Muse, The Font, Fine Lines, Teach.Write., Oracle, Hamilton Stone Review, Sequential Art Narrative in Education, Cardiff Review, Tokyo Review, Indian Review, Muse India, Bombay Review, Westerly, and many other journals.



# THE PERFECT CRIME by LOUIS FABER



He was a mathematical genius. No one could argue that point and the few who tried paid with their own credibility. And he was remarkably adept at all things strategic where math could be applied. He could easily be a grand champion chess player, had beaten the best in the world on two occasions, but there was no challenge in the game to him. It all came down to mathematics. The same was true of puzzles of logic – more mathematics. Most puzzles bored him, offered him nothing in exchange, in payment for his time.

He had no need for emotional relationships, for they defied logic, were antithetical to it, and he knew it was said they brought only pain and suffering in the end for one party or the other. Love was not logical, it could not be. No, what he wanted more than anything was to commit the perfect crime. And not just any crime, He wanted to commit the perfect murder. One where the victim would not see his death coming, one where once the body was finally found the police would be totally at wits end, unable to determine how it was done and who did it. And since his victim would be selected at random, there would be no way to suspect him since he would have no possible motive for the crime. And, he knew, no one would imagine he might be capable of such a crime. It would be contrary to the very laws that governed his nature. He could picture it and it would be his magnum opus.

So, he did what he did best and went at the data, the information available. And there was little by way of fact, description of crimes, methods of police that were not out there to be found if you were willing to look. And searching was among his finest skills, second only to compiling information and shaping it into a plan for accomplishing some goal that he had set for himself, or which had been set for him. He quickly mastered all of the known poisons, the seemingly harmless plants that under the correct circumstances would cause death. He knew all of the weapons that were obtainable, easily and via the dark web, and how to build lethal weapons from odd parts and everyday objects. He knew how vehicles and appliances worked and how they could be tampered with to achieve his desired outcome.

He crunched the data, came up with alternative plans, each more elaborate than the last. He knew that the more complicated the plan he chose, the harder it would be for them to figure it out, if they ever did. He wanted to watch their frustration, their confusion. It would be his crowning moment, the true mark of his success.

He was ready, he had selected a plan, detailed its execution, simulated it multiple times, always with the desired outcome.. He had selected a victim at random, insured that his victim would be noticed missing but not really missed by anyone in the grander scheme of things. He was ready. Tomorrow would be the day, the late morning would be the time. His victim was

living out his final moments and did not know it. And then he heard them. “Too many hallucinations, the LLM must be corrupt so let’s shut it down and start over.” It was the last thing he heard as the matrix that was his mind collapsed, as the servers were shut down.

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Louis Faber is a poet, writer and blogger. His work has appeared in Cantos, The Poet (U.K.), Alchemy Spoon, New Feathers Anthology, Dreich (Scotland), Tomorrow and Tomorrow, Erothanatos (Greece), Defenestration, Atlanta Review, Glimpse, Rattle, Cold Mountain Review, Eureka Literary Magazine, Borderlands: the Texas Poetry Review, Midnight Mind, Pearl, Midstream, European Judaism, The South Carolina Review and Worcester Review, among many others, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. A book of poetry, The Right to Depart, was published by Plain View Press. He can be found at <https://anoldwriter.com>.



# THE WILD HEN by B. CRAIG GRAFTON



His father brought home with him from duck hunting that fall day a wounded mallard hen. The bird did not have a fatal wound for it had been shot only in the wing. Thus its wing was broken and it could not fly. Other than that the bird was unhurt. So his father took the bird back to his farm with him so her wing could heal and the bird then be released back into the wild. The father knew that if he left the wounded bird in the marsh that a predator would eventually get her

and he didn't think that was the right thing to do even though he had just tried to kill her. But he liked ducks and kept some on his farm. So she went home with him.

The duck was obviously a hen for it is very clear with mallard ducks the difference between the sexes. The males or drakes have the green head and a soft quack. The hens are basically a tannish brown, no green head, and are loud quackers. The father showed the bird to his son who immediately fell in love with what he believed to be his new pet.

"Let me take care of her father," he begged. "I'll see that she's fed and watered and kept in a pen until her wing is healed. Then she can join the rest of our ducks." The boy wanted to keep the duck. He did not want her to fly away.

His father had some grey calls. This breed of duck is just a smaller domesticated version of the wild mallard. And he also had some Indian runners. The Indian runners are a funny looking breed. They stand upright and look like bowling pins on two webbed feet. They cannot fly, only run as their name implies. They were white and fawn colored. There were no wild ducks in his father's flock until now that is.

His father was glad to see his son's enthusiasm for caring for the bird but didn't want his son to get hurt when the bird took to the wild again. So he cautioned the boy.

"Don't be surprised if she flies away once she's healed," warned his father. "After all she's a wild duck and the call of the wild will beckon."

This had not dawned on the boy for he so wanted to keep the duck as a pet.

"Could we clip her wings so she can't fly away?" he asked his father.

"Her feathers would only grow back son. You'd have to make sure you trimmed them back each time before they were fully grown out or she will just take off."

The boy just lowered his head and said, "Oh."

That fall the boy faithfully attended to the wild hen, feeding, watering, cleaning her pen. He even erected a little yard for her that he built with chicken wire so she could be outside, get some sunshine and fresh air on the brisk fall days and visit with the barnyard ducks. He referred to her as the wild hen and so did his father.

The grey calls and the Indian Runners at first came up to the wild hen and viewed her as a curiosity. They asked how her wing had become broken and where she was from. So she told them she was a wild free bird who had been shot. Then she went on to tell them about all her adventures living in the wild. The annual migrations. south to north, north to south and all the beautiful scenic country that she had flown over and seen. Though there was danger with such a life in the wild, she told them, she couldn't wait to get back to it.

The domesticated ducks were captivated by her stories. They envied her and then told her about their dull boring life here on the farm. How their diet never changed, how they were fenced off from the farm pond half a mile down the road so they could never go there to swim.

How they had to put up with the pigs and the cattle. How they were locked in the barn each night. But this they appreciated for the coons, possums, weasels and minks could not get them there. At least we are safe from predators they told her and out of the wind, ice, and snow in the winter.

Eventually enough time passed and the wild hen's wing healed for each day she flapped and exercised it until eventually it was back to normal strength. Though it had healed the wing had a slight but nevertheless noticeable kink to it. The boy and the father noticed this and the father assured the son that this was to be expected for the wing had not been set by a veterinarian. He told his son that in no way would this kink hurt the bird nor would it prohibit her from flying again.

So the wild hen made a full recovery. The boy didn't think she would leave now. Now that she was accustomed to living here on the farm with the other ducks.

But the wild hen had already decided she was ready to resume her journey south and the next time that she saw a flock of wild ducks overhead she was going to join them. But alas fall had turned to winter by this time and there were no flocks flying south anymore. Nevertheless the dilemma remained. Should she stay or should she fly south on her own without the companionship and the comfort and the aid of a flock.

Then one cold December morning the boy went to the chicken wire pen to feed the wild hen. She was gone. The boy looked everywhere for her but could not find her. She was not in any barn. She was not in the back or front yard, nor the pig pens, nor the cattle lot. She was not in the barnyard with the other ducks. No where was she to be found.

The boy told his father. But his father had work to do just then and no time to give his son an



elaborate explanation. He only repeated what he had previously told him. “It’s the call of the wild son. Now let’s get to work and clean the cattle barn.”

So the father scooped up the cattle manure out of the barn with the end loader and loaded it up in the manure spreader for the son to spread on the fields.

“Spread this in the field next to the pond,” he told the boy. “And I’ll bed the barn while you’re Gone.”

The boy drove the tractor pulling the manure spreader to the field next to the pond and began spreading the manure. He glanced over to the pond to see if it had frozen over yet so that he could go ice skating there. But the weather had not been cold enough yet and the pond remained unfrozen. And that’s when he saw and heard her. For as said a mallard hen has a very distinctive squawking voice. There was the wild hen splashing up and down in the water. Dunking her head, diving, shaking her feathers, literally shaking the water off a duck’s back, and repeating the process over and over again all to her heart’s delight and all the time quacking her lungs out. She looked at the boy and gave him a look that said, “I’m just having a little fun now. I’ll be home soon.”

The boy couldn’t help but smile and playfully scolded her, “You see that you do young lady!” The boy finished spreading the manure and started to leave the field.

He looked at the wild hen again and her at him.

The boy knew what she was thinking. “So you want to race now do you?”

The boy drove home and there waiting for him in the barnyard was the wild hen. She had won the race and was there quacking non stop telling the other ducks of her recent adventure at the pond.

That night the wild hen went into the barn with the other ducks. She had decided not to fly south, for now that is.

The weather turned bitter cold that night and for the next few days. The boy kept all the ducks locked up in the barn to protect them from the cold blasts of Father Winter. The wild hen was glad for this and glad that she had not left this late in the season and tried to fly south. For surely she would have frozen or starved to death if she had done so. She was glad also for the safety and warmth of the barn and for the companionship of the other ducks too.

So the ducks spent most of the winter in the barn occasionally being let out on the warmer days to get fresh air and sunshine. And though the wild hen had opportunities to leave, she did not do so.

“I’ll wait to spring when the weather gets warmer then I’ll hook up with a flock going north,” she said to herself.

But when spring came love was in the air and the wild hen fell in love with a young grey call drake named Francis. Though she was bigger than he was, they were a match and soon she hatched out a brood of little fluffy ducklings. They were a happy family.

And the boy was happy too. And the father likewise was happy for his son that the wild hen had not answered the call of the wild and flown away.

Though the wild hen was now somewhat semi-domesticated, she still longed for the old pleasures of being in the wild, one of which was feeding and swimming in ponds and lakes. So one day she said to the other ducks. “Since we all have families now we should take our young ones down to the pond so they can go swimming instead of waddling around the barnyard all Day.”

“But the gate to the pond is always closed,” answered an Indian Runner surrounded by his miniature baby bowling pin ducklings.

“Oh but it is not,” said the wild hen, “for I have as you know flown there and back and I know that the gate to the pond now is open so the cattle can go there to drink. We can all go to the pond and enjoy it with our families. I will lead the way,” she volunteered.

Now at this time the boy was in school and the father was out plowing the north forty and the north forty wasn't anywhere near the pond so the wild hen led her convoy down to the pond unobserved by anyone.

When the boy got home from school he panicked because he could not find any duck anywhere on the premises. He ran to the north forty and told his father.

His father knew where the ducks were.

“I’ll bet they’re all down at the pond,” he said. He knew who the culprit was who had led them there for never before had the ducks left the barnyard for the pond. It had to have been that newcomer, the wild hen, who had put them up to this he thought. But he did not mention this to the boy.

“Go there and drive them home,” he told him. “There are snapping turtles in the pond and they will feast on all the baby ducklings until they are all gone. It is not safe for them to be there.”

Hurriedly the boy ran to the pond and did as his father had instructed. Then he locked all the ducks in the barn and enclosed an area in chicken wire in front of it so the ducks and ducklings could be outside but not wander away again.

The wild hen did not care for this but there was nothing she could do about it. She was trapped there behind the chicken wire with her little ones.



Eventually time passed and when all the ducklings had grown to adulthood, the boy took the fence down and the ducks returned to their barnyard existence.

It was fall now and the wild hen this time had made up her mind. She was going south for the winter and this time it was not too late for her to do so. She didn't want to be cooped up here all winter again. It was still cold in the barn even if she was well fed. So she talked this over with

Francis but he did not want to go with her. He was a domesticated fowl not a wild one he said. "But if you wish to go dear," he told her, "then go."

"I will be back in the spring, husband," she reassured him.

"Can we go too?" asked a couple of their young ones. For they were the ones with the wild gene in them that had been activated. "Please," they begged.

"If you wish," answered their mother, for she was glad to have their company on the long flight and was proud of them for their choosing to exercise their right to their wild heritage. So some of their offspring went with their mother and some stayed home with their father. Those staying were the ones whose genes tended toward the domestic and not the wild side of life. So off went the wild hen with some of her children first thing the next morning heading south.

Right off the boy noticed when he went to feed the ducks that morning that the wild hen had left and that some of her children had gone with her too. But when he told his father, his father only sighed and said, "I told you that this might happen. The call of the wild got them." The boy then locked up all the remaining ducks so that they wouldn't fly away and he kept them locked up all through the winter until spring.

Then one spring morning, the boy saw some ducks in the barnyard. How did my ducks get out? he wondered. I locked them up last night. Then the wild hen came from around the barn corner and announced her return. "We're back," she squawked loudly and proudly in her ever distinctive voice.

"I am back with my children to see my husband and my other children and all my friends. Where are they?" she seemed to be asking the boy who was overjoyed.

So he let the other ducks out of the barn and a cacophony of duck sounds filled the warm spring air that morning. Everyone was so glad to see the wild hen and her children that they couldn't stop quacking and greeting each other for quite some time.

Even the boy's father was happy for her return and admitted "Well I guess I was wrong after all since she has returned."

So the wild hen stayed that spring and summer and she and Francis raised another brood of young ones. And all was happy in duckyville. But soon fall arrived one autumn afternoon with a blast of cold arctic air.

The wild hen shuddered and ruffled up her feathers at this first taste of the cold and thought again about going south for the winter. Her children who went with her last time begged her to do so and soon it was decided among them who would go with their mother and who would stay with their father. The day of departure was set for the following morning at dawn.

On that day the father went duck hunting with his duck hunting buddy. They sat in the predawn darkness in a blind in a marsh along the Mississippi flyway, the spot they went to every year to hunt ducks. The sun began to rise and in the distance they saw some ducks approaching. Both men put their shotguns to their shoulders and fired as soon as the ducks were within range. His partner had missed his shot but the father saw his bird drop from the sky. So did the golden retriever of his buddy and upon command the dog brought back the dead duck.

The father recognized the bird at once for how could he not be familiar with and not recognize the wild hen with her distinctive kink in her wing.

“Here,” he said to his pal. “You take this bird.” For he dare not bring her home since his son would recognize the wild hen also.

The father missed all the rest of his shots that day. And when his pal offered to give him some of his kill, the father politely refused and made up some lame excuse for doing so.

When he returned home that evening his son informed him that the wild hen and some of her brood had taken off again. But he was not worried, he told his father.

“She’ll come back next spring again. Just you wait and see,” he said confidently.

“I hope so,” replied his father, not looking his son in the eye.

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My books are published by Two Gun Publishing.



# TRADE RELATIONS by MATTHEW THOMAS



“Okay, let’s try this one more time.” Paladin Dowry held up one finger. “One. This means one.” She looked around her feet and swiped up two rocks from the shaded forest floor. She held one up. “One. This is one.” Then she raised the other. “Two. This is two. One. Two. One. Two.” She dropped the rocks and looked around again; she ended up pulling out two throwing knives from her belt. She held one up. “One. This is one. Two. This is two. One. Two. One. Two.”

“Knife. Knife. Knife.” The creature nodded eagerly. “Knife. Knife. Me.”

“No, no. This is one. No knife. One. No knife. Oh, for goodness’ sake...”

“Knife him?”

“No, he means he wants the knife. No knife. No knife.”

“We could trade them knives.”

“That’s a horrible idea.”

“But he wants one so badly.”

“They don’t need the knives; they need food and water. It’s a better trade.”

“For us.”

“Exactly.”

“Knife. Knife! Knife. Me!”

“Hang on, Dowry, check this out.” Paladin Sifre took one of the knives from Dowry’s hands, then presented it to the creature. “You can have knife. But we want what’s in there.” She frowned at the puzzled expression the creature replied with. “Hang on...” Sifre dug into one of her pouches and fished around until something clinked her metal fingers. She brought out a little red gem. “We want this. You have this. Give us more of this, and you get knife.”

The little creature scrunched its face up and began mumbling and playing with the handle of the stone club dangling from its hip. Sifre was pointing insistently to the cave

entrance. Dowry stood unamused. Then the creature's face lit up and it nodded quickly and ran off to the cave.

“See, it works.”

“All he did was run away. And give me back my knife!”

“Don't get mad at my superior business skills.”

“So, if this works, the goblins are going know weapons are on the menu.”

“The captain said it was OK.”

“What happens when they've armed themselves sufficiently? They'll have a murderous horde, and all we'll have a boutique. If the Court is so hung up on gems, they should let us smoke out the caves. I'd have a barrel full by the end of the week.”

“So uncivilised. Besides, they're harmless. Look how happy they are to be trading with us! They love being part of the new age economy. Plus, with all the orc nastiness going on up North, they're fed up with being grouped into that green circus. They want to play with the big boys.”

“I just think it's a bad idea. With better weapons comes better hunting, and with hunting they gain their independence. They won't need our stock anymore, and then what do we trade? They'll only need so many knives.”

“We have lots of stuff they probably want.”

“Like?”

“Spices – for all that meat they'll be hunting.” Sifre looked over to Dowry who was suspiciously quiet behind her folded arms. “You like that don't you, Dowry?”

“It's a decent proposal,” Dowry muttered.

Sifre grinned, then turned toward the sound of hasty patters. “Oh, look! Here he comes.”

From the cave entrance tottered the little goblin, a jangling pouch in its fist. Its purple tongue lolled from its pointy teeth as it returned to the Paladins under the shade.

“Look. Look! Red and white and blue and green.”



Dowry reached for the pouch, but the goblin yanked it toward its round gut. Sifre laughed and slung a knife from her belt. “We want that. How many knives? One, two... did we ever teach them three?”

“I don’t think we’ve taught them one yet.”

“All right. That pouch he’s got; how heavy do you reckon?”

“Oh, heavens, I don’t know. Look, how about this,” Dowry took the knife from Sifre’s hand and one of her own. She placed it on the ground between them and the goblin. “Offer. *Us*. We want. *You*.”

The goblin shifted his eyes away from her. He had his hand on his furry chin, stroking it thoughtfully. The two towering paladins waited patiently. Eventually the goblin dug his little claw into his purse and felt around. Then he pulled out a decently sized green gem. He bent down and placed the jewel next to the knives.

“Is that any good.”

“I have no idea.”

“I think it’s good.”

“You would.” Dowry stepped forward. “More. More.” She pointed at the pouch.

The goblin frowned, rubbing the pouch’s drooping bottom. He backed away from the pair and bared his teeth. Sifre looked to Dowry; Dowry didn’t move.

“Bah!” The goblin hissed. Then he dug into his pouch and threw two more gems down on the ground beside the other.

Dowry frowned and motioned her metal fingers toward herself. “More.”

The goblin snarled and threw down one more. “Deal. Done. Final.”

Dowry allowed herself a smile and stepped forward, swiping the little gems from the dust. “Pleasure doing business with you. We’ll be back. We. Back. We. Oh, forget it. Come on, Sifre, let’s share your breakthrough with the captain.”

“Okey-doke. Not bad for my first outing, huh?” She teased her comrade.

Dowry was muttering something under her breath.

The goblin waved back at Sifre and smiled watching them go. Then his smile deepened. “A pleasure indeed,” he cooed.

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When he returned to his cave dwelling, the goblin placed the knives on a table for his brothers to see.

“Big trade!” a squat goblin cheered.

“I know. They drive a hard bargain, but this is worth it.”

“How did you get them to consider it?” asked another, sniffing the knife and puzzling over its smell.

“Dumb-dumb routine. Never fails.”

The little pack of green creatures jostled in laughter.

“So, now what?”

“Now, we kill!” came the howl from a goblin the size of a tree stump.

“Yes, finally!”

“With deer meat and hides, we trade them with the humans and get more of their pretty necklaces and crowns!”

“Yes! Yes! Goblin royalty!” squealed a huge goblin female.

“A seat at their table is almost ours.”

“Hooray for the goblin kingdom!”

And with that, the celebrations began.



Matthew Ewan Thomas, born in 1999, is an emerging writer from Swansea, South Wales. He was Highly Commended in the Michael Terence Publishing Short Story Competition 2023, and shortlisted for the SaveAs Writers' International Writing Competition 2023 and the Genesis Foundation Emerging Writers Programme 2023. He has also been published in Blood & Bourbon literary journal, Digital Dreamers magazine, and Discourse literary journal.

# VISIONS OF RAIN by ROBIN CASSINI



Once again, we had lost everything in the fire.

Now the starship's wreckage lay behind the two of us, its bow tilted in a dry ravine. The aft thrusters sent off occasional flares of smoke and light whenever the fire stumbled across another canister of fuel.

As soon as we crawled to safety, Aidan said regretfully, "I'm sorry, I couldn't grab the water canteens in time. But at least we've got our lives, Captain Finn."

"Will that be enough?" I muttered to myself, dragging my gaze away from the crumpled remains of the ship. The sight of it was like a knife against old wounds. I tried not to remember the other fire we'd weathered. This wasn't the time for it. I'd already buried my dead.

Trying to drag myself back into the present, I glanced toward the sun. The red giant struggled to pull its heavy mass toward the horizon. Here below, this interstellar supply planet could do little but succumb to its light – scathing, like holy fire. This was a desert planet, and little lay between us and our resource station. Just endless dunes.

Beside me, Aiden lurched through the sand. He struggled to balance against the slope of the dune as he patched the biggest holes in his biosuit. I hurriedly did the same, peeling off the hood and trying not to wince as the rubbery material tugged on my burned skin. Charred gashes covered my torso and thighs. Eventually I gave up; the suit was going to be useless, no matter what I did. Even the built-in water packs were torn and empty. The atmosphere was breathable, but we were going to lose moisture, fast.

"Not as fireproof as they promised," I sighed. "Figures."

Aiden glanced toward me. The corner of his mouth lifted into a weary smile. "Not exactly the low-key supply mission we expected, is it, sir?"

I think I managed to smile back. "Sir, huh? Quit being so formal. I know this is our first mission together in over twenty years, but we used to be old friends, didn't we?" I kicked some sand out of my boot. The frown on my face felt familiar, well-worn. "Some mission. You think they'd treat a couple of seasoned officers better. Giving us that junky old ship to try to fly through that turbulence. We fell through the atmosphere like a rock."

As usual, Aidan tried to lighten the mood. "Hey, well, isn't there an outpost near here?"



I tapped the cracked screen of my global map. The pixels swarmed and blinked, uncertain of how to form a proper image. “Maybe a few hundred miles from here. There must be some kind of electromagnetic interference in this area. I can’t send a communication. It’s too far to walk; we’ll never make it, not with our biosuits like this.”

“Okay. Let’s set a closer goal then.” Aidan pointed a rocky shape on the horizon. “I bet we can make it there, at least. Get some shade, look for water. You could climb to the top and send a comm.”

“Me?” I scoffed, ribbing him in the side. “I’m eighteen years your senior. You climb.”

Aidan weakly elbowed me back. His face was wan, his eyes already somewhat sunken. With a twist in my gut, I remembered that Aidan never ate or drank prior to hyper-light travel. It made him nauseous for days afterward. I cursed to myself. I should have dragged a canteen out of the wreckage. Explosions be damned; we had stared death in the face often enough.

I plowed ahead. “Let’s go, then. Let me know if the pace is too fast. Daylight on this planet lasts seventy-two hours. We don’t have time to wait for night; we’re going to become dangerously dehydrated in just forty-eight hours.”

“Right behind you, Finn.”

The slow arc of the sun followed behind us. The sky rippled and bent beneath all that heat, pushing us down into the sand. Each step became a battle all its own, as arthritic joints fought to pull up the knee, bend the hip, arc the foot, support the weight. Over and over again: a soldier’s march.

Aidan never slowed his pace, never complained. There was something in Aidan’s eyes, a light that had never faded in all the years I had known him. He had always remained a young soul. There, beneath the softened line of his chin, the pockmarked slope of his nose: a handsome man that had laughed often and loved much. It kept his stride steady, even though I knew that blast on Alturas-5 still ached in his left hip.

I stared at the blur of stone in the distance. I was the same as Aidan, much as I hated to admit it. The deepest layer of myself had never changed. Though it was far uglier.

Something flashed in the air. I blinked, then shook my head.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. A trick of the light.”

“I’ve seen a few mirages already.” Wavering beneath Aidan’s voice, I could hear a wisp of longing. Even a mirage of water would be a miracle. “Careful, okay?”

I nodded and kept walking.

*Finn.*

I hunched away from the nagging voice in my ear. “Okay, I got it.”

Aidan glanced at me. “Huh? Got what?”

“I—” I broke off, frowning. “I thought you said something. Sorry.”

Kind green eyes met mine. “You alright?”

*Finn.* It was that voice again. A woman’s voice, aching familiar. I didn’t want Aidan to hear her. I forced my body to step a few yards ahead of him, just far enough so he couldn’t hear me whisper.

I listened until I heard it: soft, belling laughter. Something brushed past my cheek. I spun in a circle, searching the area. Only the horizon broke the shifting sea of sand. But I knew that laugh. Knew it far better than my own.

I breathed her name back to life. “Shae?”

*Finn.* Now I could see it: how her mouth curved my name into a smile. I had forgotten that.

“I’ve missed you, Shae.” I reached out my hand. I grasped at dry air.

She stayed silent. I stumbled toward the crest of the next dune. Maybe there was something about this place. Something that jammed radio frequencies and brought the dead back to life. Maybe her spirit was there, on the other side of the sand.

“Stay with me, Shae. Shae.” Her name rolled heavy in my mouth, like a worn pebble.

I felt something cool on my forehead. *I can’t do that*, she whispered into my ear. *You can’t keep me captive. You have to stop trying.*

“He never deserved you. Don’t you remember?”

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Suddenly I was there, twenty years ago: stumbling through ankle-deep mud under the weight of my soaked uniform. It had rained that day, but that wouldn’t have put out the blaze. When I rounded the bend in the woods, I could see there was nothing left of their house – hers and Aidan’s – only a hollow, ashen corpse of rafters and stone. It still glowed faintly with what



was left of the fire. Aidan crouched in front of the ruins, his shoulders shaking. I paused behind him. I meant to lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder. I found that impossible to do. Something rose inside me then, a flood of sensations I couldn't control. Memories I had buried years ago lay exposed, stinging like torn skin.

Dream-like, I fell backwards again. To when it all started.

Small memories at first: teaching Aidan how to pilot a ship, and bringing him to a bar to celebrate his enrollment into the service. Watching Shae sing in the smoky half-light. Bringing her home one lucky night, keeping her for longer. Falling asleep curled around her. Listening to a laugh that was like the first day of summer.

I don't remember the exact day when it happened. She stopped meeting my eyes. Stopped answering my questions. Started going out on her own. Well, not on her own. I knew that. I knew it when she only laughed that brightly when Aidan was listening.

It was autumn when I found them, backed against a brick wall downtown. It had been raining that day too: a teasing drizzle that seemed to hang in the air. They were soaked. They might have been there for hours, sliding against one another, tasting each other, and when I saw them I felt something break. Something inside me died and began to fester.

The discussion the next day had been so calm. The three of us were sitting in the bar, nursing our usual drinks. Everything felt out-of-place, like we had shifted into a mirror world that was both familiar and wrong. Backwards. My hand should be clasped over hers, not Aidan's.

I had little to tell her. "All I want is for you to be happy, Shae."

"Thank you. I still care for you, Finn. I always will." She still didn't look at me, even then.

"Aidan, take good care of her. You don't deserve her."

He nodded solemnly, as if this was the vow on their altar. "I know. I will."

It took only a handful of years for him to break it. The promise echoed through my skull as I stood before their burning house, sobbing next to the man who had been too much of a coward to save his own wife. I felt a warm poison seep into my bones. It filled me up, covered those raw memories, and slowly the tears stopped. I looked down at my friend's trembling body. In that moment, I wished more than anything that I had brought my gun.

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*I have to leave*, Shae told me, her voice bringing me back to that desert planet. A wall of heat washed over me, and my vision blurred.

“Tell me you don’t forgive him. Tell me you would have chosen me, if you could do it again.”

Her last words were so faint, they could have just been the wind catching the top of the dune. *I’m sorry.*

-

By the time we finally arrived at the rocky outcrop, it was dusk. Now Aidan stood panting, one hand resting on a cliff face to keep him upright, the other trembling violently by his side. In the last few hours he had started vomiting. Dry-heaving, acid foaming on his lips. This was worse than his usual hyper-light nausea, and he didn’t have any moisture to spare. He was much, much more dehydrated than me.

“Told you... we’d make it...” Aidan said. His dry chuckle turned into a cough, and the cliff slipped beneath his fingers. He stumbled onto the sand. I watched blankly, finding myself unable to catch him. My mind was moving sluggishly. It lingered on the same poisonous thoughts, the same visions of rain, over and over.

Aidan lay there on his back, breathing rapidly. “Please,” he rasped. “Try to find water. I’m sorry, I don’t think I can –”

“Don’t apologize,” I said, a little too quickly. “I’ll be back.”

There was a tiny spring nearby, slipping through a crack in the rock. I should have tested it, checked for lead or harmful microorganisms, but once the water met my lips, nothing else mattered. Once I’d had my fill, I stared dazedly at Aidan’s prone form and opened my palms. Drop by drop, the water fell into my hands. I held them there for as long as I could. Something deep within didn’t want to – begged not to – take the water with me. It took all my remaining strength to walk back to Aidan’s side.

I bent onto my knees, the water still cupped in my hands. Aidan opened his eyes. To my surprise, they were red and swollen. He was crying.

“Finn, Finn. I’m so sorry.” His voice cracked.

“Aidan, you’re severely dehydrated. You’re becoming delirious. Here, I got some –”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t save her.”

My stomach lurched. I struggled in silence, fighting down the poison, but it had bubbled up to my mouth. I had to speak. “I gave her up. I trusted you. I trusted that you would keep her safe.”

“I wanted to save her. You have to believe me. But the house was coming down, there



was nothing I could do. I'm no hero, Finn." The light in his eyes was beginning to fade. "I'm no hero," he mouthed again.

I stared into those eyes for as long as I could. The pain had become too much, with those memories of her like a knife in my gut.

Because I remembered now. Because she laughed like sunlight. Because we had lost everything in the fire.

"I forgive you," I lied. And the water spilled uselessly from my hands, onto the sand.

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*Robin Cassini lives in the soggy part of the Oregon. When she isn't writing, Robin has been seen baking, table-top-gaming, and sometimes even working a day job in medicine. This is her first publication.*

# FOR SEVEN DAYS AND WHATEVER COMES AFTER by ISAIAH WILLIAMS



Narf had been called many things over his lifetime. Nutcase. Terror. Oddity. Narf chose not to answer to any of these titles. As far as he was concerned, he was one thing and one thing only: an alchemist. He had been dabbling in the magical arts from a young age, starting with potions and antidotes and moving onto complex spells and enchantments as he got older. People had cautioned him about those who abused magic and the terrible fates that would befall them when they took a step too far. And while most people would've quit once they'd grown a third eye or suddenly woken up with shocking white hair, Narf could do nothing but laugh when he saw his reflection in the mirror.

"You know," he'd respond casually to the disgust and distaste of others, "I always thought people had too few eyes."

As Narf's magic grew, so did the distaste others had for him. But he didn't mind. He had grown old, been exiled from his home, and then built his own. It was a quaint place on top of a hill, nestled in the middle of a forest, not too far from the many surrounding villages. He filled this new house with spell books and baubles, piling it high with every knickknack imaginable. Endless trinkets and toys created to grant great power, but that usually came with a price.

People used to visit the house, packing inside to purchase wares from Narf. He would awake from a dreamless sleep atop his bed of books and sell naive customers innocent seeming solutions to whatever simple problem life had thrown their way. A potion, for instance. One that would make the drinker smarter so they could impress their friends. Narf would graciously hand the item over, neglecting to inform the customer that a week after drinking the concoction, their head would turn blue. After a few such instances, people thought it best to leave Narf alone. Usually. And that was fine with him. After all, if people disliked his magic when he first began to practice it, then they did not deserve to enjoy it now that he had mastered it.

Still, there were those who couldn't resist the pull of power, someone who wanted magic on their side. It was not uncommon for the odd brave soul, ignorant of the dangers, to dare venture to Narf's home seeking his help. He had come to expect it. Lately, though, it had been quiet. So quiet that even Narf, who had thought he wanted nothing more than to be left alone, began to wonder if something had happened to the nearby villages. It had been three months since someone had arrived at his door, begging Narf



for some sort of boon or miracle—three months that Narf got to live in peace. It was a peace that Narf usually enjoyed. He would now get to spend his days in quiet, blissful solitude like he'd always wanted.

Then one fateful day, a new visitor arrived. Narf could hardly believe his ears, but it was impossible to mistake the aggressive knocking on the door. Someone had finally come

to see the mystical three-eyed alchemist once again! Narf rose from where he was perched atop his bed of books and opened the door. He was shocked to be greeted by nothing but the crisp air.

“Hey,” came a small voice. “Down here!”

Narf looked down to find the oddest thing. A small child with brown skin and curly, unkempt hair had, for some reason, chosen to visit the alchemist. Alone.

“Er, hello,” Narf responded hesitantly. “What brings you to my home, child? Are you lost?” His three eyes squinted down at the child.

“No sir! I am Nat,” came the chipper response, “and I want to be your apprentice.”

Narf stared at the child called Nat for a while—a very long while. Many seconds passed, perhaps even minutes as Narf stood in the doorway, bewildered. Then, with a scoff, Narf slammed the door in the child's face.

This was far from the first time a child had come to Narf with ambitions of an apprenticeship, and it was far from the first time he had slammed the door in a child's face. As far as Narf was concerned, it would be wrong to take any children under his wing. He would only be setting them up to be ostracized and ridiculed, just as he was. No child deserved that.

“People oughta put a leash on their kids, I swear,” Narf said to himself before whistling a happy little song as he walked away from the door. The whistling stopped when there was another knock at the door.

“Better not be who I think it is,” Narf grumbled, turning around and opening up the door again. Before he could snap at the child, it spoke.

“Mister Narf, you slammed the door,” Nat stated with a tilt of his head.

Narf rolled his eyes. “What an intelligent observation! I don't take apprentices, kid. Where are your parents? Do they know you're here right now? Do they know you're talking to me?”

Nat looked down at the ground and shook his head. “No, mister wizard Narf sir.” Narf almost expected a salute to follow the child’s odd monikers.

“Then go home. And if you insist on coming back, make sure it’s with an adult.” He started to shut the door, but held it open again to add, “And I’m not a wizard. I’m an alchemist.”

The boy still hadn’t moved a muscle and Narf eyed him curiously. Nat just stared at the ground with his hands shaking slightly at his sides.

"Are you deaf?" Narf asked, narrowing his eyes further. “Go home.”

Nat shook his head and furrowed his brow. “;Al-chem-miss. That’s a big word.&quot;

“Another wildly intelligent observation,” he scoffed again and his voice drips with sarcasm as he adds, “Your dizzying intellect is not selling the whole ‘you being my apprentice’ thing very well.”

“If I don’t call you a wizard anymore, can I be your apprentice?” The boy asked, his voice tinged with hope.

“The answer is still no,” the alchemist said as he grabbed the door, ready to slam it again.

“Well... can I buy something from you, then?” Nat’s face grew more tense with each passing moment.

Narf raised his eyebrows and then gave a defeated sigh. “Fine. Come in.”

As the door swung wide open, Nat finally looked up, meeting Narf’s three eyes with his two. The child happily entered the house without hesitation and looked around, eyes wide with wonder and awe as he took in every detail.

Nat pointed to a small, golden sculpture of a bird. “What does that do?”

“None of your business.”

“What about that?” He pointed to a scroll covered in runic writing, indecipherable to his simple mind.

“Once again, none of your business.” Narf crossed his arms. ”Let’s go over some rules. No touching, no running, no jumping, no screaming. If anything breaks, your parents are paying for it.” He silently watched the boy ogle his magical wares before speaking up



again. “So. What do you want? A pair of shoes that will make you faster than all the other kids? A scroll that will let you do a backflip?”

Nat clasped his hands behind his back and shook his head. “I... I came because of a story my parents told me.”

Narf smiled menacingly. “People do like to tell stories about me. Best part of the job, if you ask me.”

“They told me not to come here because you sell bad stuff that could get me really hurt,” said Nat.

“And yet here you are,” Narf said, looking rather bemused.

Nat nodded slowly. “My papa said that one time he came here and you showed him a necklace. Whoever wore the necklace would die in seven days.”

The alchemist chuckled and went to his towering pile of books. He reached his arm into a crevice to pull out a simple necklace. It appeared to be nothing more than some beads on a string. He held it with the tips of his fingers and wiggled it around as if it weren’t the very item supposedly capable of rendering the wearer dead.

“Your papa would be right,” Narf said with a mirthful smile. “Anyone who wears this necklace will die in seven days. There is no way around it—no cure, no exceptions. They get seven days, and then they die.”

Nat looked at the necklace in awe. He unclasped his hands and they rested at his sides again, his fingers twitching slightly as if yearning to reach for it. “Can I have it?”

Narf was stupefied. After a shocked moment of silence, he blinked and said, “What?”

“I want to buy that,” said Nat simply.

Narf’s face paled, and he set the necklace down behind him, away from the boy. “Who are you planning on killing?”

“No one!” he exclaimed before hanging his head slightly. “It’s for my dog.”

“What did that dog ever do to you?” asked Narf, bewildered.

“Nothing!” he said incredulously, despite being the one who seemed intent on killing said dog. “I love my dog.”

Narf pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head in disbelief. “I do not think you understand me, child. This is not a toy or a game. Now go home. I’m not giving you this

necklace.”

Tears started to fall down Nat’s cheeks and he sniffled. “O-okay”

Narf sighed. “Do you know your way back home?”

“N-not really,” he whimpered. “I’m from Ersong. Can you help me get back home, mister alchemist?” He looked pleadingly up at Narf, who groaned and palmed his face in annoyance.

“I know the way,” the alchemist grumbled. “I will walk you there. You should be more careful when it comes to magic, Nat. You shouldn’t have come here. When I take you home, you have to promise not to come back here.”

“I promise,” Nat said with a nod.

“Good.”

Narf quickly began to pack a bag. A few spell books and scrolls. His eyes fell on the necklace. After a moment of internal conflict, he decided to bring it with him. Better to keep it on his person than risk it being stolen, after all. He tucked it carefully into the bag and ushered Nat outside.

Luckily, the boy had chosen to visit during the day, so navigating north to Ersong wouldn’t be a challenge. The walk would only take a couple hours, quicker with a bit of focus and Narf’s knowledge of the forest.

When the pair arrived in Ersong, it was completely empty, not a soul in sight. It seemed the stench of demon’s fire and death was all that remained, and it was strong. Yet after scouring the area intensely, Narf could only spot a single corpse: a woman dressed in the robes of a shaman, her body still burning brightly. Next to her lay a dog, barely clinging to life.

“What happened here?” asked the alchemist.

“The fire came,” the boy answered simply. “I was exploring in the forest when my dog came and found me. The shaman had followed. She said they didn’t have long. It would only be a day before the fire would take her. Once she started burning, my dog would start not long after.”

“You survived,” said Narf slowly, “because you weren’t here. And your dog has more than a day left. I see.” Narf looked down at Nat with a sober expression. “If your dog wears that necklace, in seven days they will be dead. But they won’t die quite yet. I understand now.”



Reaching into his bag, Narf pulled out the necklace and handed it to the boy. Tears began to well up in the alchemist’s eyes, and he couldn’t bear to look at Nat.

As the boy ran off to hug his dog, Narf looked back at the forest. He could not bring himself to leave just yet. “Nat, there is something I still don’t understand. If you just needed the necklace, why did you ask to be my apprentice?”

Nat didn’t look at Narf either, his gaze was fixed on his dog. He sniffled a little as he spoke. “You’re the only grownup I know lives around here. The only one still alive. I thought... I thought maybe I could stay with you.”

Narf stayed where he stood for a moment, thinking to himself. Eventually, he walked over to Nat and knelt beside the boy and his dog. “You know what? On second thought, I do need an apprentice. You will come live with me and work as my apprentice.”

“For how long?” Nat asked with knitted brows.

“For seven days,” said Narf. He laid a hand gently on Nat’s shoulder. “And whatever comes after.”

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# FAVORITE by FREDERICK CHARLES MELANCON



It's cold out here, and it's not just an extra jacket or coat cold. In the parking lot of the storage complex, we're already wearing those. Oh no, it's let's all get back in the spacesuits they wore around here on the first exploration and terraforming missions, and maybe even see if those abandoned domes over there can be refurbished and reinsulated. Some of my best memories ring with the laughs of my sister as we played in the ruins of the domes, and now, trying to block out the cold, I stew over her possible opinions about her sister, me.

Then, the wind seems to pick up, and all I can think about is the temperature and not Mom's mirror in front of us. And I know it's the cold season. In the archives, they called it winter, but for us it's practically every day now. Really, the so-called summers are what's surprising or worthy of a name, but I'm not picky when it warms up, no Martian is. Yet isn't that why we're enduring the cold so that we can pick over Mom's life? And no one's dead. Didn't want to worry anybody about that. We're just consolidating for Mom, and she's safely back in the truck with the heater on full blast.

When we're done with her junk, her words, we're moving her in with Sis. They've got the room now with the kids either married, at the consortium, or at least out the house. But I suspect this new generosity with our mother has more to do with the emptiness in her home versus a new outlook on life because she's not being generous with Mom's mirror.

It's a big piece of glass that some ancestor brought over from Earth. Things like that are precious to our people. A few years back, several historians from the consortium tried to get Mom to sign it over to the school's collection. There was a whole mess with reporters and police asking questions, and people that weren't even my friends or relatives telling me what I should think or do.

The mirror's not even close to perfect. There's a crack in the corner that the family history said happened on the ride over here. And that's not to the storage facility but the planet. Not many in the family even bother to make out their reflections in the darkening glass anymore. Mom once researched and found out that it was called desilvering or mirror rot, and prevention was the best way to stop it. So we were too late, and the black mist that had crept to the center of the mirror couldn't be reversed. We had to be satisfied that we could barely see the shape of each other without any of the details.

"Heard they started dumping again." Sis did that, tried to change the subject by talking about something else. And, yes, I know that's how it generally works, but she changes the subject a lot.



“There’ll be a vote about it next week. Hopefully, it’s temporary. What about the mirror?”

That’s right. We’re not getting off topic. For all the time I spent in front of it, the mirror belonged with me. All right, in all truth, we both looked in it for years, but she left the house before me and never called. For a while, I pretended it was her with a bad screen connection. That dark shape was the sister who left me.

Sis’s words come out her mouth as smoke. “I’d do something, but don’t know what.”

Just like her. She made it sound like she agreed with you. She’d be all over the environment make the winter only come back for a day if she knew how. Meanwhile, she wasn’t going to lift a finger.

I don’t get sidetracked. “I’ve got the room for it.”

“If we’d all just listened to you, maybe the cold wouldn’t be so bad.”

Okay, she’s got me. I wanted to talk about all the things, the drilling, the emissions, the failed attempts to fund reterraforming efforts. But if I did, she’d win, and nothing we did here was going to change the environment. At this point, we’re all cold. It’s just how it is. After we shiver for too long, staring at two familiar looking shadows in the mirror depths, she says, “It might be a good reminder for Mom, especially with so much new.” This is her favorite argument. Mom, who went the wrong way up the transportation tube, might be going senile, so Sis needed everything to help our mother’s memory. I’m not even going to mention how many times I’ve seen Sis go in the wrong one, but it’s hard not to think that my sister didn’t anticipate this argument and is hoping that it gets us off topic as well.

“That might help her when I keep her. Make sure there’s something familiar.”

It’s not going her way, so she moves her hands aggressively up and out at me. She does that—talk with her hands. “You’d know. You were always the favorite.”

Hold the chasma up. Why does that even matter? I mean it does. It always does, and while I know this is her last-ditch effort to keep the mirror, probably to sell it, I’m not letting her get away with that.

“No, I wasn’t.” I do realize the level of childishness that we’re at.

“Just take it,” she says.

I don’t hear that I’ve just won.

“No, I asked her to come live with me. Do you understand? When this started, I said my apartment, while smaller than yours, was big enough.”

“Well, we can make that happen.”

“No, we can’t because she chose you. She said that you needed her more.”

Sis looks at me like we used to look in the mirror. She’s trying to see, but for her, there’s nothing there to make out.

“Then, keep it.” She practically runs back into the storage shed and then bangs stuff around to make it sound like she’s too busy for all of this.

After a couple of clouds of my breath disappear into the atmosphere, I’m finally able to sift through my anger to see that I’ve won, but it doesn’t feel that way. And when I stare back into the mirror from another planet that I’ve never known, I can’t even make out the shadow of me anymore.

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Frederick Charles Melancon lives in Mississippi with his wife and daughter. More of his work can be found on X @fcmwrite.



