

Wilder Things Magazine is a semesterly publication dedicated to uplifting speculative literature in academic settings. It centers itself around combating elitism in academic literary canon and publishes intercollegiate work from around the world.

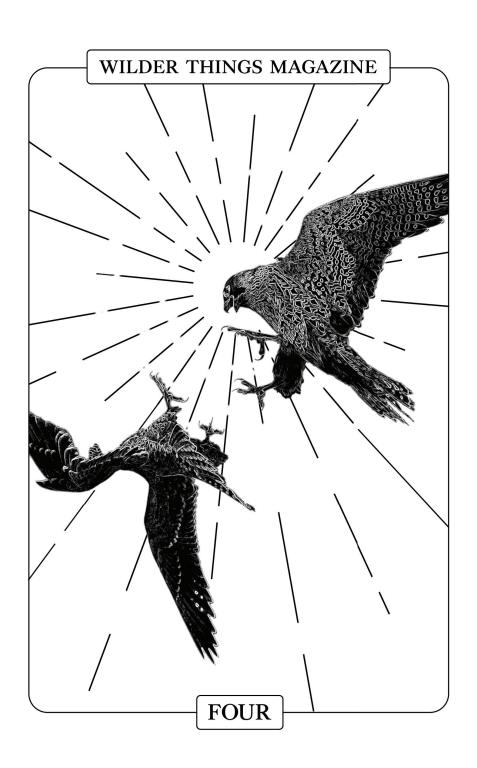
All pieces were subject to a fair, anonymous reading process. Every staff member was given ample time and space to speak on each piece. Measures were taken to address elitism within our literary tastes, and pieces were curated not on academic craft standards or the concept of "merit," but on their subject, message, and overall ability to remind us why we love storytelling in the first place. The works in this magazine are not reflective of the University of Iowa's views.

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### Letter From the Staff

Dear Reader,

As I'm sure you already know, the world is full of magic. The magic of the perfect fall day. The magic of having friends who understand you. The magic of somehow, someway, everything always working out in the end.

This semester, the *Wilder Things* staff was struck by a different kind of magic: the magic of community. We were touched when we truly understood just how much the community fiercely fought for us, for our mission, for our publication.

The realization came slowly, and then all at once. Our first two print volumes went completely out of print, all in the hands of readers. We responded to numerous emails of interest from the student body. The biggest hint of all: receiving 155 submissions from undergraduates across the world. It was such an honor to be trusted with so many writers' work. Our only regret is that we cannot publish them all. This is the magic of everything falling into place: we are meant to be here, and we are here to stay.

All of this to say: Thank you. To our sponsors in the Magid Center and the University of Iowa Student Government, to our staff members, to our readers and to our contributors, to everyone who has ever said to us "We love what you do!": Thank you. We are obsessed with the work *you* do, which allows us to create the best publication in the world. This is the exact same kind of magic as when you realize your friends understand exactly who you are. Thank you for understanding and championing us.

And that magic of the perfect fall day? When the leaves are the most gorgeous shades of red and gold, a constellation of colors? When you understand why Anne of Green Gables said she was so glad to live in a world where there are Octobers? When the crisp air lifts your hair just so, and the entire world seems at your fingertips? That is exactly the kind of magic we hope you will find between the pages of Volume 4.

With Love, The Wilder Things Staff

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## **Falling for Icarus**

Sydney Smithgall University of Iowa mythos

CW: death

If the Sun hadn't made a deal to become mortal, Icarus would not have died. This is a fact, an unchangeable truth as cemented in time as my regret for not stopping them before it all started. The celestial begged the Gods for a chance to walk among mortals, and their wish was granted under conditions—only at night could they descend from the Heavens, and only for four months.

The maze, the minotaur, and all those elements of the myth you know? It was all there, though the beast was more of a family pet from what I could tell. As for the maze, it didn't seem to bother Icarus and his father too much, for both preferred to live undisturbed save for the familiar clamor of their workshop. Even the villagers on the outskirts—the ones who farmed their fields right up to the base of the tower—heard very little from the two living in the clouds.

Daedalus, the head of the small family, had been diligently working on an invention to allow human flight for over ten years by the time this deal was struck. I often watched him through the tower window far earlier than that, bent over a worktable by candlelight. Every once in a while a young boy with curly hair would wander in, mimicking his father's motions with supplies easier to manipulate with such tiny hands. The flickering light cast shadows upon the walls, as if they were giants in a forge built for multitudes. Inevitably even the far-flung fantasy of a child's imagination could not hold young Icarus' interest, and the boy would abandon his tinkering in favor of stargazing. There was something hauntingly beautiful about those particular creations, the first lying

quietly like an angel's discarded exoskeleton next to cardboard wings, dwarfing the child-sized contraption with its metal-framed limbs.

It was an older version of this curious child that met the Sun on their first mortal day, the latter appearing on the windowsill backlit by the moon. Wide-eyed, they were unused to their human form, put off balance by clumsy limbs and a lack of fine motor skills. The Sun refused to step foot away from the window lest they part with their line of sight to the Heavens, even as they relished the cool night breeze and taunting candlelight tugging playfully at their senses.

Icarus was intrigued by the person appearing night after night at the tower ledge, entranced by the halo of their wispy, blonde hair. The boy told his new friend of the constellations, and the Sun listened happily, not once interrupting to reveal that they knew each of the star formations far more intimately than could any mortal gaze. The pair traded stories through the night, stifling their laughs when old Daedalus shifted in the other room. Yet every morning before dawn, Icarus grew too tired to keep his eyes open any longer. When he awoke, the room was always empty once again.

The days seemed long but not unbearable, for the promise of company each evening brought a rosy glow to the daylight hours noticed even by the people of the town below. Crops prospered, the weather remained fair, and more young couples married that season than the small village had ever seen in years prior. Thoughts of the Sun consumed Icarus as the two grew closer, thoughts of their head resting gently on his shoulder as had been happening more and more frequently throughout the warm weeks.

I watched their love flourish through the summer, always conscious of the silent clock counting down to the end. Limits make our actions sweeter as we soak in each moment to last us a lifetime, but to be blindsided by such a constraint—to be Icarus—was to experience cruelty indeed. Did this mortal form leave them without a heart?

"This is my last night, Icarus," the Sun finally said, the glow of their hair emitting a soft light in the darkness of the room. The winds grew cooler as the leaves burst into color, yet the usually welcome autumn heralded only whispers of heartbreak.

"Must you leave?"

"I must. My time here, my time with *you*, has been more than a blessing. Know that each day I look down at Earth, I find the greatest beauty in the humanity you have touched, the places you indent soil with gentle footsteps. I am never far."

The two held each other until morning. Both were silent; neither sleeping, neither speaking, each reminding the other that they were not alone. Not yet. If only we could hold onto the things we love long enough to keep them from changing. It was this thought that went through Icarus' mind as the sky began to lighten and the sensation of warmth began to fade.

"I love you," the shimmering air seemed to whisper. I love you. I love you.

Icarus wept then, screamed, begged the Gods to allow him one more night. To him, his life had ended at that moment, and he swore to lock himself away from a world that could not be anything but worthless without those familiar warm hands and gentle laughter. The Sun waited day after day to see Icarus through the window, to apologize for heartbreak with a ray of comforting light, only to give in to overcast skies when he did not appear for weeks on end.

As the Sun and Icarus fled inside themselves, the village below the tower fell into darkness as well. His fall had emitted a bone-chilling cold through the heart of every person, extinguishing the hearths of every home. Lamps would not light, candles would not burn, and nights brought only moonlight to dream by. They were dark dreams indeed, and it pained me to watch such imbalance with so little power to correct it. Within a month, not a soul remained, choosing to take their chances with the wilderness in hopes of finding shelter before snowfall.

The bitter winds battered the town incessantly as the days grew shorter, slipping through cracks in the window frames to torment any creature daring to brave the winter. Still, I stayed where I had always been, observing the tower each night and the occasional day when I could.

"You must let go of your love, Icarus," his father pleaded. "They are gone, and so too is everyone else driven away by shadow."

The old man leaned heavily on his cane, looking defeated by the dark circles under his eyes. Icarus saw him as if for the first time in months, saw his frailty. If there was anything left of the poor boy's heart, seeing his hand in the declining health of his father shattered what remained.

Icarus turned away to lean out the tower window, noting the still darkness that had replaced the bustling life of the distant town below. Had his grief blinded him so thoroughly? His father crumbling, his people fleeing, bringing him closer and closer to the complete loneliness he so deeply feared. He stepped back into the room, gaze catching upon a pair of discarded cardboard wings peeking out from a crate of leather-bound volumes.

"Father, you don't have to worry anymore," he said, gently cupped Daedalus' face between his hands. "I know how to fix it, how to fix everything."

I watched Icarus through that window for a fortnight, wanting nothing more than to beg him to rest. He did not eat, he did not sleep, and he did not once look up at the sky with the wonder that once lifted his heart toward the stars.

The Sun saw this, too, through breaks in the cloudy expanse rolling across the land. They wept, for they did not need the knowledge of the Gods to predict the bitter fruit the consequences of their love and leaving would bear.

It was just after sunrise on the seventh month of his isolation when Icarus completed what he thought to be his life's most valuable work, a pair of

magnificent wings crafted to resemble those of his father. Daedalus found him on the window ledge that morning, holding his arms up to feel the breeze through thick feathers.

"With these wings, I will retrieve fire from the Sun, along with my heart. I will return to you," Icarus said.

"And if you cannot? I beg you, reconsider. Let us do this together."

"In the event that the Gods decide I have ventured beyond my humanly means, do not mourn me, Father. If I see my love again and restore what my despair has taken from this town, I have healed all that I had broken." He stepped down briefly to embrace a stunned Daedalus, smiling. "I will have found my peace."

No plea could have bound Icarus to the Earth in that moment, and even the Heavens held their breath as the young inventor launched himself into the bright air of an early spring morning. Daedalus dug out his own wings that had collected dust since his son's affliction, struggling to secure the proper attachments to his own shaking frame. It was then that he saw the empty jar of wax on the worn table.

"My son, what have you done?" he whispered, followed by a prayer to whoever may have been watching the day's events unfold. "Forgive him."

The second figure launched into the sky, shadowing the first barely visible from the ground. Icarus flew straight toward the Sun now high above the horizon, speaking words of reconciliation lost to all but him and his lover. With wind in his hair and wings, Icarus laughed for the first time since summer had passed.

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, or even my distant vantage point, but I could have sworn that fiery fingertips brushed those of Icarus at the peak of his arc, slipping away as the wax holding each feather in place dripped down his arms and torso. The boy's wings wrapped around him as he began to plummet, feathers torn away by wind as he gained speed. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of Icarus' face—his eyes toward the Sun, and a soft smile curling his lips.

Daedalus could do nothing but watch his son plunge toward the undulating waves below, knowing it was hopeless to expect sunlight to love hard enough to become manifest once again. Each burning feather traced smoky trails against the cloudless sky as they followed Icarus' descent, floating across the shore and reigniting empty hearths where before the village had housed only phantom dust and distant memory. Daedalus wished the world would burn under the weight of those feathers, that he could blame someone as thoroughly as he could wreck his own flawless invention upon landing.

Though the weather was marked by clouds and mourning skies for many weeks thereafter, the glow of the rekindled village burned bright as families began trickling back into their homes alongside the spring snow descending from the mountains. I watched them and their fire-lit shadows stretch across

the melting ice as they moved by moonlight, wasting no hours in their attempt to rebuild.

By the time the flowers bloomed, the people had chosen a new truth, replacing young love with young arrogance. *His father warned him*, they whispered, shaking their heads as they gazed up at the abandoned tower. *Hubris*.

I couldn't blame them. After all, it is much easier to accept young arrogance than to live with the heartbreak left behind by a fool's gamble at love. Even so, I wanted so desperately to correct them, to curse the Sun and explain what had really happened, to show them that I was the only one who had not given up on Icarus.

Was I coward to not strike my own deal then? To find a way to reach the townspeople and defend the events that brought a cold winter to a close? Maybe. I have been granted but one message to send to you, one chance to set things straight.

So Icarus, and my dear readers, I pray that you are not afraid of flying too close to the sun lest it prevent you from trying at all. Not all wings are built of wax. But remember the warning we have heard from flaming feathers as well—when our love will consume those beyond us, well into the homes and hearts of others, perhaps we must learn to love them from a distance.

Then again, what do I know? I am only and always resigned to my position far above your myths, only and always the light not brave enough to leave the sky. I am the Moon, the lesser twin, the one who watched their sibling play with the heart of a mortal who deserved far greater than the legacy granted to him.

I am nothing to him, but for my Icarus, I remember everything.

# Eating a Tomato and Thinking of You

Julia Rudlaff
Michigan State University
romance

because what's more summer, lover than vine curled around fence bearing crowned fruit orange and full-bodied juice flush with skin that bursts between my teeth tasting of ripe beginnings plucked from the garden of our own making

## Sugar

Alyssa Kattan John Hopkins University romance

There must be a candy factory behind those eyes, making the sweetness in your head

it turns my bones to honey as we tumble into bed

roll me in your sugar, i'll dissolve on your tongue

blue raspberry iris your magic keeps me young

## Cartoon Special

Abby Budd Michigan State University magical realism

CW: swearing and implied child neglect

Kids suck. They really do. I really don't care if it makes me look bad by saying that, it's true. They cry, they're incredibly loud 90 percent of the time, and they look gross. I guess that's the one part of my job that I like, I can't smell them through the screen. Out of all the hundreds of thousands of kids I entertain, I have never ever been subjected to the stench of three-day-old spaghetti stuck to their shirt or whatever strange substance is massaged into their hair from any one of them. Humans may think it's cute how they play with food or scream at the big purple cat on TV that tells them valuable life lessons, but I think it's aggravating. I'm actually more of a mauve color, but not that it matters to anyone other than me.

It's almost that magical time again where kids from all over turn on their regularly scheduled TV program featuring me, the big purple cat who cracks jokes and teaches kids important life lessons. *Yay*. One of those kids doesn't know it's their lucky day, because every day when my show airs, one person gets to turn on their favorite show and watch their favorite character from their own home, not knowing that the character is watching them right back, waiting for their validation.

I'm magical I guess. I'm like Santa Claus, except I do parents' jobs for them. Instead of presents or Easter eggs, a kid appears on the screen in front of me and I decide what that kid needs to hear. Mostly, kids need to learn how to shut up and listen to their parents. It's been a while since I've seen a kid that I can teach anything worthwhile to. The kids that need a slight confidence

boost or reassurance that they themselves are worth it, or even ones who need a laugh, rarely come to see me anymore. I guess it's a good thing that fewer kids have to resort to a cartoon character for someone to cheer them up, but it makes me wonder if what I do is of any value at all. What I do know is whatever kid appears in front of me on my screen needs a lesson the most that day. I don't know why that is or how I came to be, all I know is that I have a purpose, one that I'm slowly forgetting.

It's showtime once again. I sit and wait for my program to start, thinking of what kind of kid I'll be seeing today. Yesterday had been a bit overwhelming. A whole family was watching me. A mom and a dad willing their kid to watch the screen, to look at me. Little did they know I was willing the kid to look at me too. They didn't, they were too distracted. It's times like this when I question myself. Am I not interesting? Am I ugly? I'm not the most conventional-looking creature but I wouldn't say I'm appalling. Do they just not care? What is the point of doing this if they don't care?

The beginning credits start to roll. This is when I first see the viewer of the day. Are they sad? Happy? Do they need some good old words of wisdom? Or do they need a lesson on discipline or hygiene again? In the 20 seconds it takes for the credits to roll, I see the kid, I perceive them, then I appear on their screen, and I start spewing whatever rhetoric I can come up with on the spot. It's not hard, it's what I was created for, so why does it feel like a chore nowadays?

The lucky viewer appears on the screen in front of me. And... it's a baby. Not even a toddler, a baby, one that appears to be a couple of months old, laying in a car seat, sat in front of their TV. It's strange, I will admit. The kids are usually older, as they can actually understand what I'm saying or at least comprehend there is a big-ass purple cat on the screen. Nope, it was a very small baby left alone in front of the TV. I may not like some kids, but I'm not heartless, so the image made me really upset. Big eyes stared at me, ones that seemed incredibly sad. There was something about their eyes, like the soul behind them has already lived a hundred lives that were filled with sorrow.

Why is this kid alone? I get that parents need a break from kids, God knows I need one too, but why did they leave their baby alone in front of a TV? Times like this are when I wish I could just jump through the TV to comfort the kid myself and I can't, so I just do what I do best. I crack some jokes and make silly faces. I do everything in my power to make the baby smile, or even reduce the tortured look in their eyes, but nothing works. They just sit there and stare at me with those sad eyes the entire time and by the end of the show, I'm utterly defeated.

I've seen many sad people in my lifetime, but something about this one was different, it's almost like they're dreading what's to come. It looks like this little baby has seen what life can do to you, like they had a glimpse into a future filled with struggle and hardship, and they're sad they can't do anything about it.

It hurts me to say goodbye to this kid knowing I didn't do much to ease the pain in their eyes, but somehow I know they'll be back. I look at the kid one more time and notice the pink blanket draped over them, embroidered in it was a name, *Emma*.

Well, Emma, I hope to see you again.

In the last few seconds of air time, I look into the eyes of whoever is watching and say my trademark ending line, "So long. Be great today."

The next time I see Emma, she is a little older. The only reason I know it's her is because of her eyes, which remain unchanged. However this time, the room behind her is covered in pink balloons, party streamers, accompanied by a glitter cone hat strapped to her head.

So it's her birthday.

I look around some more to try to gauge how old she's turning, *maybe a banner or balloon will tell me*. It was only then that I noticed how messy the room is. Despite all the decorations, which I realize are an attempt to brighten up this relatively gloomy room, the atmosphere does not seem happy or festive at all. It's cluttered, clothes all over, shoes scattered, it's just a mess. And in the center of it, a sad little girl, who just now appears to be playing with an unlit candle, in the shape of a 2.

Welp, happy 2nd birthday, here goes nothing.

As the opening credits come to an end, I pump myself up and try to gather what I could do to cheer this little pessimist up. I settle for regurgitating some subtle happy birthday messages I've used for other kids. I throw in some jokes and make stupid faces.

Nothing, just sad little eyes staring at me.

Okay, so maybe just bump up the energy, add in some "you're specials," or "tomorrow will be a better day." Maybe I should sing? I really hate singing. It's a last resort, and I'm all out of options, nothing will make this damn kid smile. Time to belt.

I let it rip, singing at the top of my lungs, not too bad if I do say so myself. Once I finish I think I have it in the bag, this kid is going to crack up.

I look at her expectantly waiting to see those pearly whites... she bursts out crying.

Oh shit, didn't mean to do that.

She's sobbing, wailing almost. All I could think is I should be the one crying with just having embarrassed the hell out of myself. I guess this isn't about me though. I made this kid cry on her birthday. She was already sad, and I made it worse. This sucks, especially since my job is to cheer kids up. It's the one thing I'm good at. And if I can't do the one thing I'm supposed to be good at then what is my purpose? It's scary thinking that one day the thing that I love doing will be ripped away from me, like one day all I'll do is make people upset.

She's still crying when the show starts to wrap up, and I've never felt worse. I just hope that she comes back to watch me, so I can redeem myself, make this kid smile.

"So long. Be great today."

The next time I see Emma it's a while down the road. She's not a toddler anymore. She is still young, maybe about 7 or 8 years old. When I first saw her I was relieved, then I saw what she was wearing. Hightop sneakers that came all the way up to her knees accompanying bright blue leggings and a zebra print skirt are what first caught my attention. Then it was the even brighter blue shirt with a leopard print, each spot adorning a shimmery holographic finish.

Oh boy, someone's experimenting.

Again, I look at her face, still sporting those sad eyes, but then I realize she has tear marks down her face. I also notice that it's about midday where she lives judging by the light from the windows. She should be in school. When kids tune in during school time with tears on their faces it usually means a couple of things. One, they got hurt, two, they got sick, three, they begged to come home early after a shit day. Judging by Emma's outfit, she probably had a shit day with some shitty judgmental kids. After doing this for so long, I tend to know how kids are. They judge before they are kind.

Well, I for one think her outfit is cool. I appreciate the cat-themed shirt. It may have been shocking at first, but then I realized she was a kid, trying to express herself, and by the looks of it others didn't appreciate it. Watching her, patiently waiting for the show to start, quietly sniffling, alone again, I conjured up a plan to make her feel better.

"Wow, I have got to tell you how cool you look today."

At this Emma perks up.

"I mean, your shirt, amazing! Your shoes, oh my gosh? If they made shoes for cats, I would want them to look just like yours! All of those colors are so bright! But even then, they don't shine as bright as the light that is you, I bet they're really jealous."

The sniffling stops.

"Remember kids, you can wear what you want, and be who you want to be. It only matters to you, nobody else. If you think you look amazing, then you do. If someone tries to tell you otherwise, know that they're wrong. And if you don't quite believe that, then know that *I* think you look cool."

I really hope she got what I was saying. I never know if they fully understand. What I do know is that kids will express themselves, and sometimes they get ridiculed for it.

I look at Emma as the show is in its final moments, she still looks sad, but there is something more in her eyes this time. I can't quite decide what it is exactly, but it looks a little like appreciation. Little girls have little confidence as it is, and for some reason, everyone is just itching to destroy what's left. All it takes is one comment, one remark, to destroy someone's self-esteem completely. People may think kids are stupid, but they listen, they take things to heart, and they will remember the hateful words later in life. Some will get over it, some will not.

"So long. Be great today."

Emma has been coming to see me more often, which makes me happy. It means she's trying. She's seeking comfort and I'm glad she chooses to hang out with me rather than suffering in silence alone. She needs an escape, we all do sometimes. Humans will do everything to escape their reality, even when they are very young, so they like to borrow mine. For anyone who truly needs it, I will gladly give it to them.

I look at Emma nowadays, and she's sitting up straighter. A small feat, but a feat at that. *Hell yeah*. She's listening to me, hearing me. The sad look in her eyes has faded a little, like I'm slowly chipping away at the big concrete cloud that blocks out her sun.

"So long. Be great today."

Oh, man. I think Emma started another phase. It's been a while since I've last seen her, and I guess she's gone through some self-discovery. Today, she was entirely decked out in all black. From shoes to shirt, all-black attire, and I'm pretty sure it's summertime where she is. Not to mention the black lipstick and the extremely pigmented purple eyeshadow and eyeliner.

However, it's nothing I haven't seen before. When a kid gets older, they usually start to feel a lot more. *Emotions and stuff*, things kids don't know what to do with so they express it in any way they can, such as clothing. It's frustrating, I can tell, feeling angry, upset, most of all, alone. Kids always go through times when they feel completely alone, whether it be physically alone or alone in what they feel. Judging by the look in Emma's eyes, she feels lonely.

"Remember kids, as you grow up, you're going to change, and that's a good thing! You grow taller and your brain gets bigger. That means thinking and feeling more things. You may be very happy or sad, frustrated, angry. You could feel all of this at once, and it's scary. I won't sit here and tell you I understand. I don't. What I'll tell you is that it's okay. What you feel is normal. It's not fun, but it'll work out. It always does. You'll be okay. You're going to have to trust me on this one. I haven't lied to you before, have I?"

Emma shakes her head, it's small, but I notice it. It may be ridiculous, listening to a cartoon cat for some lame obscure advice, but sometimes it's all they have. Sometimes, all it takes is one person to care. If a cartoon cat is the only one that tells them it's okay, the only one that they feel is there for them, then what I say has value, it has an impact. It's what I was meant to do.

"So long. Be great today."

The next time I see Emma, it's a heartbreaking sight. She's in a prom dress, curled up on the floor, with black smudges of makeup around her eyes. It's that magical time of year where kids dress up in their fanciest clothes and dance the night away for the last hurrah for high school, apparently. Once again, it's not the first time I've seen a sight like this. All too often, kids get rejected or stood up on their prom night, and they resort to their favorite childhood character to cheer them up. It may seem strange, but the older people get the more they want to feel like a kid. They need the reminiscence of a time when rejection wasn't an issue, when others saw you as an innocent light, not an inconvenience. Or maybe they just need an old friend.

In any instance, I am reminded that people truly are the worst.

I look into Emma's eyes, the ones that don't quite hold that same sorrow they used to.

Now they just seem empty, like she's tired, like she doesn't even have the energy to be sad anymore.

Okay, here we go.

"They're not worth it."

Emma sits up and looks into my eyes, confusion filling hers. She doesn't say anything, but I know what she's thinking. Why did it sound like they said that directly to me?

"Yep, I meant what I said, they're not worth it. Any person who doesn't value you, doesn't care about you, who hurts you, is not worth it. You're an amazing kid, and any person who doesn't appreciate you, is not worthy of your time or your thoughts, let alone your tears. Let me be real with you, rejection is a normal part of life. It sucks. It's something you have to get used to. But let me tell you, it is not a reflection of you. Rejection doesn't make you any less brilliant, doesn't mean there's something wrong with you. In my opinion, anyone who doesn't think you're worthy of their time is wrong, and they're missing out on a really great person. If it's any comfort, I think you're great, amazing, spectacular. I hardly know you and I can see the awesome person you are. You're a fighter. And you're worth every second."

I'm familiar with rejection myself. Every day there are kids who don't listen to me, don't laugh, who don't even look at me. And it hurts. Sometimes I'm grateful I can't see everybody tuning in to my show, I'm grateful I can only see one kid looking at me through my screen. One rejection is better than a thousand. I've been ignored so many times, I've lost count, so I really appreciate the ones who care. I really appreciate Emma.

She was still looking at me with a confused and somewhat shocked face, almost like she was coming to a realization. *Are they real? Can they see me?* Her mind is working a million miles a minute, but I can see it in her eyes.

She knows.

I've never had a kid realize I was real, that I was watching them too. I thought they would be creeped out or scared. But, not Emma. She seemed... happy. I

can see it in her just now, there was a sign of happiness, like she realized this entire time she hadn't been truly alone. Someone saw her, somebody cared.

"So long, be great today."

The next time I see Emma, I know it's the last. As I gaze into her room, I see bags, lots of them. *She's leaving*. I had known this day would come, but I could never really prepare myself for it.

It looks like she is ready to go, ready to head out, leaving this life behind. I guess she wanted to say goodbye real quick. She is probably going to college. She always seemed so smart.

I've somehow forgotten they grow up. They eventually won't need me anymore. I don't know why exactly I favored Emma all these years, but it was probably because she reminded me of myself. Sad, not knowing if I had a purpose anymore, alone. But it's time for her to move on, and it's time for me to help the next Emma. The kid whose eyes hold more sorrow than anyone ever should. Thankfully that is not Emma anymore, I look into her eyes now, I don't see sadness, I see joy, contentment. I've done my part.

I start my final show with Emma, throwing out the generic, "you got this" and "be happy." After a while I know it's time for her to go. She gets up from in front of the TV with a backpack that's sporting a keychain, it was a mauve cat.

It is the kids like Emma who remind me why I do this, why I teach and entertain kids. I love making people happy. One little encouragement can go a long way, and I'm honored to be that for some kids. It is what I was meant to do.

Before she leaves, I remember what I wanted to tell her.

"Thank you."

At this, she smiles. That's all I ever needed.

"Farewell. Be great."

Oh, how great she will be.

## Say It

Jenna Mather University of Iowa romance

CW: brief mention of gun violence

Say it uncertainly/on the tag of a bouquet/with your tongue tense behind your teeth/as a prayer/too early/unrequited/as goodbye/to the foggy window of an airplane/to your mirror/like a test/because they did/dishonestly/over a dozen roses/inside your head/mouthed to their back/unheard/with your body/only when you mean it/again/quietly on a lover's cheek/like a story, all-encompassing/at the altar/a thousand times/to the child you share/as a blackout poem on legal paperwork/like an insult/with your gun pointed at their chest/through shaking lips/holding an urn/regretfully/between bars/into the darkness of a starless sky, where only you can hear it/as your last breath:

I love you.

## Don't Fear the Reaper

Charlotte Brookins
University of Iowa
mythos

In the end, it is not fear that Death brings with him when he calls upon you in the twilight of your days. He does not come bearing scythe and skull, masked in ghostly white and bloody red. He does not reach out to grasp you with long spider's fingers, cold enough to chill you to the bones he will soon drag with him into the dark.

In the end, it is not with fear that the Reaper leads you off, but with the tenderness of lover carrying lover across a threshold. It is with gentle arms that you are lifted, cradled, delivered into the night. He is not the reason why your sun is setting, but he will be the one to guide you through the darkness all the same.

In the end, you are in your bed, not in a hospital, and it has become harder to breathe. The lungs that have served you for so many years, pushed every breath through your throat, are giving out on you now, but not because they wish to. Your body does not like to fail in its task of keeping you; it does not relish in your decline any more than you do. You have thought quite a bit about what it would be like to die, knowing that at your age it was less a matter of time than a matter of its lack. By now you are no stranger to Death, having seen him claim the people around you one by one.

First it was your grandmother, shriveled and dried so much that she seemed as if she had already done hollow. You didn't know her enough to be sad, only aware that the others were and you loved them, so their mourning bled into you like ink leaking into a page until it soaked through.

When you saw Death that first time, you didn't know what to make of him. He seemed so foreign in the sterile habitat of the hospital, the black of his robes

seeping into the air around him. You waited for one of the others to take notice or cry out, but their eyes never fell on him. Only you and your grandmother were watching the spindly silhouette, cloaked in night and towering over the bed.

In the end, it was not fear that painted your grandmother's face, but relief. As she went, you heard her murmur a name you didn't recognize and reach out to take Death's hand. You wondered if she was seeing the same figure you were.

The next time, it was your older cousin, struck by a car whose driver was glancing at something on a screen instead of slamming on the breaks for a stop sign. You weren't there when she left, didn't see her broken body lying fractured on the road, but you saw him all the same at her service the next week. The liquid blackness of his cloak blended in with the same darkness donned by the crowd within the church, but you swore that you had spotted him for a moment, standing grimly just beyond the pews.

When your lover got sick, you were expecting him, and so you clung to your lover's arm like you did to your mother's when you were little and frightened. When Death arrived, your lover was already too far gone to see him, but you could, and he saw you too. He looked back at you—is it looking if he doesn't have a face?—and it was the first time you ever feared him. Your lover smiled in his dreaming state, seeing something you could not. When Death stepped closer, you squeezed your love tighter, your grip becoming viselike against the ice of their flesh, and you tightened yourself in the same way, steeling yourself for battle, but Death had no fight to give. You thought that if he had had the eyes to show pity, that is what would have been reflected in them then.

By the time you started to beg, they were both gone, Death and your lover. One had stolen the other away, but neither had had the mercy to take you with them. You wished for one of them to come back, either one of them, because no matter who it was, at least you wouldn't be alone.

In the end, your body is almost entirely broken down, becoming a brittle, crumbling thing, and both you and it know he is coming. Your eyes are closed, but you still see him, more clearly than ever, when he approaches you, leaning over your bedside. When he reaches you, your vision starts to ripple, as if someone has thrown a stone across the still water of your eyes, and you see your lover dressed in that familiar black cloak. You see the eyes that have not met yours in so achingly long, the lips that you have not known since you were last whole, the body that has held you only in your dreams, has haunted you at the edges of your mind for ages, waiting for the sun to set.

In the end, you know it is not your lover's hand you are taking, but you take it all the same, because you don't care. You know those lips are not those that belonged to your love, but they are as sweet as you remember, so it doesn't seem to matter. The body that cradles you now is not his, but it holds you all the same, carrying you with it this time, not leaving you alone.

In the end, you are with them, so it is not such a bad way for things to end.

# The Wife and Wines of His Majesty the King

Byron Ellington University of Iowa fantasy

CW: references to physical and verbal abuse, rape, and other forms of violence

The wine was good, other than when it killed me. Fine and red, how I like it. I should've suspected something was amiss; when had she ever done a single good deed for me before? My wife, that is, the woman who called herself the Queen for thirty-odd years. Traitorous bitch.

Death is different than I thought, I must admit. The Lord has not yet graced me with His presence, nor have any angels sought to guide me. I suspect I am in Purgatory for the time being, though for what I cannot imagine. Treating a murdered king to the appropriate light ought to be a priority for Him—not to doubt His mighty judgment.

Echoes, echoes, they whirl around me as time flows free...

It's dark here. Cold, with a sort of musty scent like the deepest reaches within my dressing room. My son's dressing room now, I suppose. The Crown Prince will be coronated soon, if I have counted the days correctly. But maybe it's already happened. Perhaps I have already been succeeded on the throne, all the greatest deeds of my life thrust into the oblivion of time as soon as I passed so unwillingly beneath the earth. Just another betrayal from my own blood. The Prince is not ready to rule. He is still too young, too naïve. He sees good in humanity where none exists.

Take the wretched servants, for instance; for some years now my wife has been poisoning his mind and telling him that the servants deserve some higher station than what they have already been so generously afforded. Yet what more could they possibly desire? They are housed in apartments which I

assume are quite fine. They are fed whatever the nobility leaves behind, meaning they have access to the highest quality of food in the whole nation. They are even permitted to see their families for an entire day and night each year during the holidays, time of jolly cheer for all. And none of us have ever been cruel to them. My wife and my son, they coddle the servants, don't teach them lessons, even give them whole platters of treats sometimes, but has my hand not been merciful to a more proper degree? None of the servants older than children have ever complained of pains or marks (which is more than I can say of my wife, a grown woman, whenever I would correct her ways in the method a man sometimes must), and only a few small ones have ever died. Probably the result of the quack physicians who populate my court attendancy.

There are no sundials here, no moon or stars to track...

Woe. Woe is the word that comes to mind when I consider my succession. The country shall face it, my son and his wretched mother shall cause it. All that I was, all the good I created, will be washed away. What justice is there in that?

I erected churches and bridges and dams, castles and palaces and treasuries. I conquered valleys and forests, subjugated barbarians, and led our people to greatness! What more could anyone possibly want from me? What cause could there be for this betrayal?

The hours float by, unguarded, and here I lie, forever awake...

If I could make any sound in here, wherever I am, I would sigh. Long and tired. I admit I have not been a perfect man. I know I drank a lot. Fine wine, deepest red, when the world was kind to me; beer and whiskey when I needed to lose myself. (Never that frilly, sweet, white sludge that the Queen enjoys.) I know I have spawned some illegitimates among the servants and peasantry as well, and especially with those encountered in my conquests. This should not bother me. It is a king's right to take whatever he desires. Yet sometimes I laid awake at night, haunted by visions, faces, of mothers and children I do not want and that do not want me. Eyes open in the witching hour, I would shake in fear of the blinding judgment to come, the one I await right now.

But what man can say he has never done the same? Who among mortals can claim perfection? Any who seek to judge my deeds must first judge themselves. Only the Lord may decide my truth.

Days? Weeks? How long? Still I am here, pondering, pondering, with nothing more to do...

Indeed, I was not perfect, but perhaps I was as close to it as a mortal man can be. Sin and vice are wiped away in the face of true greatness. Under my watch, our kingdom became the most powerful in all the land, the vastest, the most beloved, the most wondrous, the most pious under God.

Yet the Queen wished to destroy it all. The progress, the order, that I have fostered, the crops my sweat has watered, the monuments our people will forever enjoy and worship—all of it, gone in an instant. A single drop of poison in my

favorite chalice. The blood-red hue was appropriate indeed. Everything, my kingdom, my legacy... it all is fated for darkness now.

And here I float alone, myself obscured, waiting to be forgotten. How cruel the world is, how unjust! If only I could do something from here. Intervene, make a change. Take our fate into my own hands once more. Something my wife would never understand. Something my son will inevitably fail to do.

My mind grows numb and chill...

...It's quiet here. Cold, dark, musty. It's been longer now. I don't know how long. I cannot see the world below...

...The longer I wait, the less sure I become that I know how long it has been. Decades, centuries, millennia passing by without a single mention of my name...

...Doubts seep in. Why has He not shown Himself to me? How long have I mourned and been moored here without Him? I almost, but not quite, begin to wonder if my faith was in folly. I must hold out...

...Unless I am mistaken and not a moment has passed since my demise, surely my wife ought to have joined me here by now. Where is she? Perhaps she is in Hell below, taken there without seeing me first, as she deserved...

...I almost miss her. My son, where is he? I do not understand these feelings... Nothing. *Nothing!* 

It is all gone. Destroyed! Forgotten! I am reduced to nothing.

Alone... I am so alone here. I never knew this kind of pain before.

Nothing resolves. Nothing goes on.

I am here, and that is all.

I am nowhere, and that is all.

As the eons spin by, my exhaustion never wanes. It becomes me. It is all I know.

...I realize, one day, that I no longer recall who killed me. Was I killed? I... don't know. Tiredness, that is all I know. All I am. My name, myself, my life, my title, they all fade away.

Until everything I had is submerged in the deepest wells of oblivion.

# The American Abroad

Tony Santi University of Iowa comedy

CW: language and outdated slur

ijust think there's like a great story here, you know? Back home, they've got no idea about what life is like here. They throw all of the Middle East into like one box, it doesn't matter if you're Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi, or even Iranian. It's all the same. Most Americans don't even know Iranians aren't Arab. Most of them don't even know the difference between a Muslim and an Arab. Our education system is like so shitty over there. I think I can tell a really unique story here. I want to show them something raw and real, you know? I want to show them what it is to be Beiruti. I want to show them what it is to be a young Muslim woman in Beirut. -Now you may be thinking: 'How do you know what it is to be a Muslim woman in Beirut? You're a white American man.' and to that, I would say: Correct. I am not a Muslim woman, but I've spent a long time here. It's been like four months now, and I've had plenty of encounters with young Muslim women and I want to capture their stories. This isn't about me. I want to capture your story, Layla. Think of me, as like a window or a lens. I'm just the thing the audience looks through to see the real story. You are the real story. So what do you think? Are you interested in helping with the project? —And I know, I know we're all sick of hearing from straight cis white males. We need to boost the voices of women, BIPOC's, LGBTQ+'s, more specifically transgenders and even more specifically BIPOC transgender women. —Cisgender white men have had like ample opportunity to have their voices heard. I couldn't agree more with that sentiment. But I think my privilege can be weaponized here, you know? Also, I feel the need

to point out that I am a quarter Italian, a minority group which faced plenty of persecution within my own country around the turn of the century. Did you know that? Have you read about what life was like for Italians during the industrial revolution in America? —No? Well, that's not your fault. No one ever talks about it these days. It's all about black people and women these days, which don't get me wrong, I completely understand, and I stand in complete solidarity with the Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movements. Do you know what a wop is? Have you ever heard that word? —No? Of course you haven't? Why would you have? Well, it's just about the worst word a person can say to an Italian-American like me. It carries just about the same weight as the N word. Promise me you'll never use that word, Layla. Can you promise me you'll never call me a wop? —Thank you. I appreciate that. But we're going to make a damn good movie. You're really beautiful. Have I told you that? You're a different kind of beauty. I know we're not supposed to use the word exotic any more. But I must admit, it's the first one that comes to mind. I just love your nose. I think one of the greatest shames in Lebanon, besides like the complete economic collapse, the political corruption, and the sectarian violence, is this plastic surgery mania that the Lebanese women are suffering from. You guys have these wonderful noses, these strong profiles, noses with *character*, and for some reason, you're insistent on shaving them down, on adopting these boring little white girl button noses. I frankly find the Arab nose quite sexy. It's not so different from the Italian nose. Look at this. When I turn this way, you can see this little bump and a bit of a hook here. Do you see that? No, not really? Well, I assure you it's there. But yeah, I just think you're like really beautiful. Especially when you smile like that. Oh don't cover your smile. Please God don't cover your smile, *habibti*. You have nothing to be ashamed of. I love your smile. It's real. Everything about you is real. Your smile hasn't been artificially constructed by modern western dentistry. I love that. You see my teeth? —It's all fake. My poor parents spent thousands of dollars to give me this smile. I wish they never did. Sure, I had a crowded mouth with a set of chicklet-sized buck teeth that could've caused me future discomfort, embarrassment, and health issues, sure, but that's how I was made. That's how I was supposed to be. This perfect white evenly spaced smile is phony. Yours is *real*. Never hide your smile. Promise me you'll never cover your smile again, habibti. Promise me. Okay, good."

He reached across the table and held her hand. It was a bit clammy.

"So, when are you free this week? I was thinking we could like grab dinner and go over some ideas I have for your scenes. I've got a fantastic character for you. You're exactly what I've been looking for. Can I tell you a little bit about the character? Wonderful. You're the lead role. You're going to be a star. Your character is intended to be a representation of sexuality in the Arab Muslim woman. You're going to be a sexually liberated woman, an Arab woman *unchained*. In the West, which I know, I know, that term 'The West' is bullshit,

but you get the point. In the West, we've got this idea about what a Muslim woman is. We've got this like outline or like a stagnant unchanging construct of what a Muslim woman is. You know, she's supposed to be docile and weak, submissive, and oppressed. I want to flip that on its head because it's simply not true. You know that and I know it. So, you're gonna be raw sex. That's your character. I know, I know, that might sound intimidating. I get that. But I think you can be that. You're quite sexy. You've got these smouldering eyes. What does that mean? Oh yeah, I suppose that is pretty high-level vocabulary. Well, I don't know the exact definition. I might actually be using the word wrong. I think it means like a sexual look, you know? I do have a question for you. It's a very personal and potentially inappropriate question. Is it alright if I ask it? It's strictly for artistic purposes. Okay, I'm going to ask it quietly. -Here it goes. -Are you sure I can ask it? Alright, -have you been with a man? —Oh yes, I know you're technically with me right now. That's very cute. But I mean, I'll say this even quieter now, have you ever had sex with a man? —Oh don't get shy now, habibti. There's no need to blush. I would normally never ask a question like this. But I think it's important for me to know before we start working on your scenes, since sex is such an important component of your character. Oh wow, you haven't? -No, no, I didn't mean it like that. I'm not surprised. I know things are different over here, culturally, you know? -Me? You want to know if I've had sex? Well, I don't know if that's appropriate. I'm the director and my performance doesn't hinge on my sexuality. But I'll let you know for the sake of fairness that yes, I have had sex, many times actually. Well, not many times. I don't want you to think I'm some sort of international playboy or something. That's not me. But I have had sex, yes. I think we place too much weight on sex, too much importance. I don't think it's such a big deal, but I understand that things are different over here, culturally. But anyway, I don't think it's all that important that you haven't had sex. You will be acting after all and don't worry. I'll coach you through everything. I have a very clear image in my head of what your character is. You're perfect for this role. You're perfect in general."

He traced the ridges of her knuckles with his thumb.

#### **Oculus**

Lila Robbins
University of Iowa
horror

"All extremes of feeling are allied with madness."
—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* 

On the night of the winter formal I go to Jane's house. She is going as Cameron's date, but for the hour before he has to pick us up, I can pretend that she isn't.

Jane's mother opens the door for me. I've shot up in height this past year and Mrs. Tham, already petite, hardly reaches my sternum, but she still manages to make me feel eight years old again, standing in this doorway for the first time. Her eyes go soft as she smiles at me. "Abby, you look beautiful. Jane's in her room." Then she turns to shout down the hallway: "Janey! Abby's here!"

Jane throws her arms around my shoulders when she sees me in the entryway, already in her dress: a coral-pink color that makes her skin glow bronze, with sheer sleeves that flutter around her slender biceps like rose petals. As she pulls back she makes a choked little squeal and puts her hands on my cheeks, patting me like she's trying to get me to blush. "Abby, you look so pretty! Literally gorgeous!"

She is smiling so earnestly that I knew she means it—the thought makes my stomach bottom out like I've missed a step down the stairs—but I know that even in my dress I pale next to Jane. It took months of coaxing from my own mother, a former sophomore duchess, to even get me to come to the formal at all; I only relented when she threatened to drive me there herself. Still, the idea of tagging along with Jane and Cameron makes me want to punch a wall.

I hardly register that Jane is pulling me by the wrist until my feet nearly slip out from under me on the hardwood, and I scramble to keep up with her as she leads me down the hall. She spins me around at arm's length, beaming, and then pushes me into her bedroom. I turn to look at Jane as she smooths her floaty skirt primly and sinks into the carpet to sit cross-legged amidst an avalanche of makeup and hair products. "Holy crap. Is that all yours?"

"Some of it's Ma's." She gives me a mischievous grin and I can't help but smile back. "She went crazy at Sephora."

I sit down facing her, careful not to crush the baby-blue taffeta of my dress underneath me. "I don't know what half this stuff does."

"Me either." Jane is picking up tubes at random, unscrewing, pressing buttons, popping off lids. She rolls up a lipstick bullet and sniffs it, then makes a face. "Gross."

"Cameron's gonna hate it if you get that all over his face." I regret saying his name the second it leaves my lips; Jane's smile widens and sort of warms, and I want to hit myself. I feel myself slump as she continues amusing herself with her pile of makeup products, uncapping, unsnapping, testing colors on the back of her hand and smiling to herself all the while. Sulking, I check my phone—it's almost 7. Cameron will be here in fifteen minutes to pick us up in his stupid Prius he got for his sixteenth. What an ass, I think. A sophomore, only a year older than Jane and me, but tall and broad for his age and with a strong, stern brow and dull gray eyes that I think liken him somewhat to a redheaded Frankenstein's monster. Jane is obsessed with him. I am not.

"Mascara. Finishing touches." Jane looks up at me, batting long, dark eyelashes, and then her eyes widen like she's had an epiphany. "Abby! *Please* let me put mascara on you. You're gonna look *insane*."

"Insane?" I shake my head, swallow a laugh. "Okay. I guess. I mean, go ahead." Jane makes a little *yes* gesture with her fist, beaming, and picks a jet-black tube from her spread. Shimmying forward, she uncaps the tube and says, "Don't close your eyes. I'll tell you when to blink."

I open my eyes as wide as they will go. Like this, I have no choice but to look at Jane: biting her lower lip in concentration as she leans in, eyes dropping to pull the little brush out of its tube and raising it to my lashes, her own eyelids glowing with golden shimmer. "Blink," she murmurs. I do.

My stomach is curling up on itself, my fingertips jangling with nerves. Jane's mouth hangs slightly open and I can see the glint of tongue behind her small, straight teeth. I close my own mouth instinctively; the roof of my mouth is rough and dry.

"Blink," Jane whispers again. I do.

She puts one cool hand on my cheek and a wild thrill hits my gut—for a second, I think she might kiss me. She is so close, swiping her thumb under my eye. I swallow hard.

Jane sits back on her heels, leaving a cold spot on my cheek where her hand was. I feel stunned, like I've run into an electric fence. She surveys me for a second, appraising her handiwork, and then her face splits into a smile. "Oh my *God*, I told you. Look at your *eyes*, Abby!"

I take the hand mirror she offers and blink at my reflection: my eyelashes, left untampered with, are fine and blonde and barely visible in most light, but now they look like Jane's, sooty and impossibly long. My mouth opens and I look back up to her. "You're magic."

Her smile widens and she mimes a curtsy. "Thank you! Thank you. I know. No need to thank me."

I do anyway. "I appreciate it," I say, as sincerely as I can manage with her handprint still cooling on my cheek. She glows again, and then the doorbell rings.

Jane's smile changes again like it did when I mentioned Cameron the first time, going warm and soft around the edges like she's been waiting for this for years, and she jumps to her feet, nearly tripping over the hem of her skirt in her haste to get to the door. I hardly even have time to react before she's out of the room, leaving only a small indent in the plush carpet and a cloud of her candy-sweet special-occasion perfume high in my sinuses. For a minute I hate myself, hate Jane, hate Cameron—what did I expect, really? My cheek burns like Jane slapped me. I want—I don't know what I want. I want Jane's hand on me again. I want her head pounding like mine is now. I want Cameron's Prius crumpled against a brick wall and I want his head bashed in. Pressure is building inside my skull, hot tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. I blink, hard, not remembering the mascara, not caring either way.

When I force myself to meet them in the entryway, Jane's practically hanging off Cameron's arm as he clumsily fixes a tea-rose corsage to her slender wrist. His eyes are trained on the plunging neckline of Jane's dress. My stomach turns over.

I clear my throat and Cameron straightens, flashing a grin. I want him dead. "Let's bounce," he says.

I stay silent most of the car ride. Jane and Cameron prattle on in the front seat about her dress and his mom's job and their AP Geography class. I watch them from the backseat; Cameron keeps swerving because he turns to look at Jane instead of the potholed road ahead, and every time I catch a glimpse of his profile his right eye glints like a razor's edge. Jane is oblivious, but I *feel* his gaze every time it hits her, making the hairs prickle on the back of my neck. I know what he wants from her—what boys always want from her, have wanted from her since she turned twelve and started growing a chest—and just because he's the first one to get her on his arm doesn't mean he's any different, doesn't mean he's not going to devour her the second she lets her guard down. The hooks sink deeper with every glance—I don't know how Jane keeps smiling.

Something clunks unsettlingly as Cameron pulls clumsily into a parking

space, one of just a few left. We're a little late—got stuck at an intersection and Cameron forgot his turn signal, but now we're here. I feel sick, but I can't tell if it's from Cameron's driving or just his presence.

Jane is giggling at something Cameron's showing her—on his phone maybe. "What's up," I say, and Jane turns to look at me, eyes dark and mischievous. "Show her, Cam."

Cameron turns around in his seat and flashes a grin and then a flask. It says *EXTRA STRENGTH WHOOP-ASS*, which coming from anyone else would be funny but from Cameron just makes me want to hit him. Heat is bubbling up my throat. I force a smile. He holds eye contact with me as he drinks, then hands the flask to Jane.

The gymnasium has been converted into a sea of plastic snow and ice: iridescent shavings work their way into my strappy sandals—silver, a size too small for me, borrowed from Jane's closet—and slice into the skin between my toes as I duck to avoid taking my eye out on a row of glittering plastic icicles. Jane and Cameron are a few feet ahead of me, tipsy now, arm in arm, and I watch through my eyelashes as Cameron whispers something that makes her bark a loose, uncensored laugh—the kind of laugh I can never coax out of her. The strobe lights flash blue, silver, blue, silver. The DJ is playing Top 40. I want to go home.

I detach myself from Jane and Cameron and work my way to the snack bar instead, pushing a path through the mass of glitter and tulle and Axe body spray. They're serving cupcakes with little silvery pearls in lieu of sprinkles. I take one, but don't eat it.

I'm tall enough that from here I can pick out Jane and Cameron in the crowd—they're in the middle, doing a weird swaying dance that ends with them chest to chest. Something almost protective flares up in my chest—I feel my teeth grinding. Someone's perfume is far too strong and they're wearing far too much of it. It might be mine. Vaguely, I'm aware of the easy give of the cupcake liner as my fingers tighten around it.

Jane is whispering something to Cameron. He puts his arms around her, hands flat against the small of her back as they dance, and I feel my pulse quicken in my ears. Even here I can see the strobe reflecting in Cameron's eyes, trained on Jane like crosshairs. I feel restless, trapped, like a spring stretched too far. My hand, the one holding the cupcake, is wet—I've crushed it. I can't find it in me to care.

A new song starts: something slower, syrupier, by an ex-boyband-member from a few years ago. I try to relax. I try to breathe, but it sticks in my throat. I can't tear my eyes from Jane—she's swaying again, the thin, floaty material of her dress swishing with her. Cameron ducks his head down and it looks like he says something to her, whispering with his mouth close to her ear. Even in the flashing silver light I can see the dull red fever spots on Jane's cheeks,

a heavy, drunk flush. Cameron looks similarly affected, pushing up against her as they dance in a way that makes my own face flood with heat, but I still can't look away—there's this pressure burning behind my eyes. Not like I'm going to cry—deeper somehow, like something is writhing inside my head, aching to get out.

Someone bumps into me; I sway in place, my gaze still fixed on Jane and Cameron. I watch her laugh as if in slow motion, head thrown back in a waterfall of dark hair. His head ducks and I *know* he's looking down her dress again, I just *know*. My skin is prickling like I need to crawl out of it, hot blood beating in my temples. My destroyed cupcake, now long forgotten, falls wetly onto my sandaled foot. I hardly notice it.

I can practically smell the liquor rolling off their clothing in waves, even from here; Jane especially has gone unsteady on her feet now, mouth hanging open as she totters in Cameron's arms. They're so close. Too close, I think, as I watch Jane's eyelids flutter, as she stumbles into Cameron's chest. She doesn't see him like I do—she can't feel him tearing her apart, feel him sinking his claws deeper with every glance. No, she's *smiling* at him now, reaching up to touch his face, and I feel her hand on my own cheek again like a brand as she rises on her toes and presses her mouth to his.

It's like a shot of stimulant, ice in my veins, steepening my pulse until I feel it behind my eyes like a kick drum. I'm going to throw up. I'm going to scream. My vision has narrowed to Jane and Cameron as they part, as Cameron's face breaks into a smile and the strobes flare, lighting his pale eyes ghostly white and hungry, so hungry. I feel myself heave, feel myself push people aside—I can't think of anything but Jane, of her lip gloss on Cameron's mouth in the shape of her smile, of how she's peering right into the lion's maw and she doesn't even know it. He's going to eat her alive—he's already leaning in again. Jane. I have to get to her. Someone yelps as I step on their feet, as the sharp heel of my sandal digs into their skin. I'm reaching blindly for loose fabric, loose limbs, anything to propel me forward—and then I myself am loosed headfirst into Cameron's side like a human cannonball. The edge of my vision is black; my line of sight is narrowed to his fever-red face, lazy, laughing gray eyes. Those eyes. I think I scream, or maybe it's someone else. The scream doesn't stop as I reach blindly for him, my eyes rolling like a rabid animal's, as someone grabs a handful of my skirt and I hear it rrrrrrrrip up the center, layers of tulle and taffeta torn away from my now-bare leg, but I don't care, I don't care—someone pulls Jane away and I think, yes, thank you, I need her away from him, need her safe. I get my hands around his skull and now he's screaming, oh yes, now he screams, and there are hands on my arms but I'm kicking and I'm strong, I'm getting away, the blood beating inside my skull carries me away from their grasp. Cameron's eyes are not laughing now;

they've gone huge and I can see the veins around the edges, and he's saying Abby what the hell Abby Jesus fuck what the fuck are you doing get away from me you crazy bitch, and then I press my thumbs into his irises and he can't say anything anymore. He just screams.

When he's still, whimpering, trapped under my weight on the ground, I look up into the ring of people that have gathered. Someone is throwing up. The air smells acidic and dirty, sweaty, like a slaughterhouse. My thumbs are smeared with blood and vitreous humour. This is what matters, though: Jane is near the front, her face bleached white, her jaw slack. Safe, untouched.

Everyone else is looking at me, so the only eyes on Jane are mine.

# Abyssalism

Byron Ellington University of Iowa fantasy

Deep blue beneath the salty winds that sting your eyes while staring from atop the black and jagged rock—to pierce the sky, to sing! The churning, crashing waves, like you are fracturing, about to crumble down and fall, and flutter, ashen, dark beneath the sea, where not a soul on land can hear your call; abyssal voids—no longer shall you be. Into the trenches deep you tumble fast, so far that light could never dream to pierce. By molten vents and strangest beasts, a mast—a ship that rose and fell, now dead, once fierce. Your ash reforms a form to grasp, a hand—to pull, to push, to beach yourself—on land.

### A Lesson in Flight

Charlotte Egginton
John Hopkins University
magical realism

One of the strangest interludes in my life was the time I learned to fly. It was a hot summer, one from which I can't recall all the details but only select memories. My mother and father were in the midst of one of their bi-weekly spats, this time seeming to have more bite behind their quips. The four of us—my parents, my little brother, and me—sat at a round glass table on the patio of a restaurant. I can no longer remember how we had gotten there or what we had been doing beforehand, but I remember how I could see the faint outline of my shoes through the fogged glass. There were arches far above our heads with vines entwined throughout metal beams, forming a delicate cage.

The sky that day was a cool unanimous blue. Our walk to the restaurant had been lovely; the trees in the surrounding park formed a dappled heaven, and the cobblestone paths of Vienna clacked soundly against my flat-bottomed sneakers. I interlaced my fingers through those of my younger brother, squeezing his soft pink skin. He was still small, so small that my hand could enclose his entirely. He giggled when I pulled him along to catch up with our mother and father, and they swung him by his stubby arms between them. I wish now that I had relished the time when his fingers were shorter than mine, when there were still gaps between his baby teeth, when his face was unlined and smooth. Even now, though he is still young in my eyes, I see life beginning to weigh on him, and I wish I could bring him back to that warm summer afternoon when his arms swung by his side and his smile came so easily.

I couldn't explain—even then—what had caused the fight between my parents, but I knew it must have to do with the black cloud that had appeared above my mother's head, hungry and seething and violent. I was reaching the age where I had begun to anticipate her sudden shifts, no longer young enough to use my innocence as a shield against her anger. I had begun to create a list in my head of all the things that triggered the black cloud, to keep track of what I could and couldn't allow myself in her presence. My entire being was becoming a calculation; the way that I smiled at her, talked to her, dressed in front of her, everything designed to set her at ease and keep the cloud away. But no matter how long the list grew, I could never avoid her anger. And even when she was content, I still felt something darker in her just beneath the surface. A sharpness in her teeth, an angular corner of her eye, a pulling taught of her brow, it all threatened to shatter into hunger and fury and devour me. And yet I couldn't bring myself to move; I was powerless in her gaze, as frustrated by my inability to pull away as I was by her unwillingness to release me.

As we sat at the glass table, I watched the cloud grow above my mother's head, and though my father normally shrank from its stinging tendrils, today was one of those rare times in which he rose in stature and prepared his own attack. His rage, which he labored constantly to keep in the recesses of his mind, was pushing at the bounds of his restraint. It was plain on his face, and in his towering form. My eyes locked with my little brother's, the glints of the sun's rays reflecting in his, and I saw his legs swinging back and forth through the glass. His feet couldn't reach the ground, instead hanging suspended in space.

It was silent, a moment so poised on the precipice of destruction that I couldn't exhale for fear of breaking it. The seconds stretched to an unbearable length, pulled so taut that the sweat forming on my forehead felt unable to fall to my brow and instead stayed suspended from my hairline.

And then I stood, metal chair screeching against the stone ground; I fastened my grip around my brother's plump arm and pulled him up from the table. I didn't release him until we were far enough away that their voices wouldn't carry. And I didn't turn around, not as we walked past the sturdy trees flanking the path leading away from the restaurant, not until we reached an open cobblestone clearing. There was a bench just comfortable enough to provide a resting place for a short while, and I laid my zip up jacket over its wooden surface to keep splinters from embedding themselves in our skin.

We sat there, the two of us, neither feeling up to talking and so instead staring in heated silence. When I glanced to my side, the dulled look in his eyes made my heart thump painfully. I was angry, I realized. Angrier than I had ever been before. I wasn't yet aware of all the complexities of adulthood; in adulthood there are no villains and heroes, only people who have lived and hurt and broken each other. But because I was young, I could hate my parents with an unadulterated strength that comes only from a misunderstanding of

reality, a perception that files people into categories. Violence begets pain and fear begets anger, and children learn to see their parents as enemies, and sitting on that bench in the park beside my brother's stooped form, that's exactly what I saw. His happiness wasn't my burden to carry, but little tenyear-old me didn't understand such things. She only knew that swelling feeling of her brother's hand reaching for hers, of knowing that he felt safe by her side, and she never wanted that to leave. She didn't want him to start making lists in his head.

So I pulled my brother to his feet. He was reluctant at first, but soon gave in, biting his cheeks to keep a smile from dawning. I spun us in a circle, slowly at first but then gradually picking up the pace. I heard my brother's wild giggling and shut my eyes tight and felt the wind whipping my hair from the nape of my neck. We spun so fast that my feet no longer felt the stones pressing against their soles, and the air created a whirlwind around us.

And then I opened my eyes, and I was in the sky. The ground was fading quickly from my view, and my hands were still clasped firmly with my brother's, and I looked up into his eyes and saw terror mirroring my own. Unable to let each other go, we floated higher and higher.

The wind was dying down, and soon it stopped all together. Everything seemed to still, and the silence returned, and for a moment my fear grew so powerful that I couldn't breathe. But this time I didn't run from it. I let it fill my ears, seep into my skull, and settle around my bones, and for the first time I relished its comforting weight. I finally dared to glance below me and felt all the air in my body leave at once. It was mesmerizing, how the world looked from up above. You couldn't see any of the ugliness, any of the scars or imperfections; it was like the surface of the ocean on a windless day, no ripples, a sheet of unbroken glass.

I let go of my brother's hand, which made him cry out at first until he realized we didn't need each other's balance to float. I turned to my back and stared up at the sky, holding my fingers up against the sun to shield our eyes. The light warmed my fingers and seemed to set their outlines aglow in deep orange. I would have stayed up here forever if allowed, but already I felt a fluttering in my stomach that I knew must mean we were beginning to sink. I tried to propel myself through the air, but my limbs flapped uselessly. So my brother and I sank together, helpless against our descent, watching the ground approach until the details of the trees and the grass and the cobblestones finally came into focus. My sneakers touched stone, first the toes and then the heels, and then the gravity of the earth crashed into my body with such force that I felt a jolt in my bones as I was thrown off my feet. For a moment I just laid there, sucking in gulps of cool air, eyes closed to the world.

I felt the tapping of a small finger against my cheek, and found my brother's wandering stare on my face. We looked at each other, he and I, like the only

two souls in the world; his cheeks were flushed, and sweat had slicked his blond hair to his forehead, but his eyes were bright. Each gulp of air tingled in my throat, and I knew my eyes glowed with that same light. The cobblestones scraped my elbows as I sat up, leaving angry skid marks on my skin, but I didn't feel any pain. Though neither my brother nor I could put it into words, we both felt the enormity of it all. We knew, without having to say it aloud, that a fundamental truth had changed, that the ground beneath our feet had given way to something secret and beautiful and golden.

Eventually we also knew it was time to leave. We trekked back slowly through the pathway under the trees. When the little glass table came into view at last, my brother and I paused, both sensing but neither voicing the wall of pressure that existed just before our sweaty faces. We stayed there for a long while, hand in hand, until a swarm of clouds passed in front of the sun and sudden chill lifted the hairs on our arms and we finally crossed the threshold.

# Kenny's Mistake

Lucy Eller
Emerson College
horror

CW: gun violence, murder, and grief

You should never have brought me back.

I know why you did. Everyone can understand why you would have done it. But it was a mistake, and I think you're starting to see that.

You feel guilty because you weren't there to stop him. You were out, having a drink with your friends from work, where the only time I would've needed to cross your mind was if one of them asked about your kid sister—which they did. I know how you answered that question: "She's good, but don't let her hear you calling her a *kid*. She's sixteen, and she practically thinks that's an adult!"

Then everyone laughed and took a swig of their drinks.

You feel guilty because I was supposed to be your responsibility. Dad's car got taken out by an eighteen-wheeler—and him with it—and Mom had a nervous breakdown that landed her in a psychiatric hospital, and we had no other relatives to take us in. So you, just shy of twenty years, suddenly had to give up all forms of *fun* and break any "bad habits" (like smoking) as you became your nine-year-old sister's guardian. If I was scared, it was your job to reassure me. If I was struggling, it was your job to help me. If I was panicking, it was your job to calm me down. And it was also your job to act like it was easy, to keep me unaware of the toll everything was taking on you.

I know how hard it was. I know why you wanted to earn money, rather than rely solely on trust funds or government-granted benefits or loans from friends. I know it was hard. I knew back then that it was hard for you. That's why I didn't

tell you about Jackson at first, and that's why when I mentioned him, I told you he was "just this annoying guy at school."

You feel guilty because you think you should have asked me more questions about Jackson. You think you should have somehow seen through my downplay of him and who he was; you shouldn't have trusted me and taken me at my word. You obsessed over that, over everything I said about him, and you beat yourself up for never questioning it. Of course, that only started after Jackson was caught and arrested. Before you knew it was him, you just felt guilty because you weren't there, as if you were supposed to somehow know that while you were out with your friends on a rare night for yourself, an eighteen-year-old boy was breaking into your house and murdering your sixteen-year-old kid sister.

You couldn't escape the memory of coming home. It was around midnight, and you walked through the front door quietly, thinking I was asleep because the house was dark except for the light on the porch. You turned on the light, and saw shards of glass on the floor of the living room, no doubt from the broken window. Terror struck you, but you didn't panic yet. You called, "Madelyn?" and immediately took out your phone to report a break-in. A chill ran down your spine when you didn't hear a response as you ran for the stairs. You took them two at a time, shouting, "Madelyn! Madelyn!" and sprinted for my room. Your blood turned to ice when you saw that my door was ajar, and there were splinters of wood littering the floor around it, as if someone had shot the lock. You shoved the door open, you turned on the light, and time stopped.

The window was open, the screen crooked from someone (me) trying to shove it out of the way. The desk chair was lying on its side. The lamp that had been on my nightstand lay broken on the floor, not far from my laptop, the screen of which was shattered. And there I was, face-up on my bed, with eyes that stared but saw nothing. My hair was spread out over the pillow, and there were traces of tear tracks on my cheeks. The front of my pajamas were stained with blood from two bullet wounds, there was blood on my face from a bloody nose, and there were bruises on my neck from fingers crushing my windpipe.

Your phone dropped from your hands and you fell to your knees, unable to breathe. There was a physical pain in your chest, like your lungs were collapsing, and you scrambled for my bed. You didn't even hear yourself speaking—you were just saying the word *no*—as you staggered to my bedside. You grabbed my shoulders, you touched my face, and you sobbed, "Madelyn, Maddy, no, please, Maddy, no," before begging me to say something, to wake up, to look at you, to do anything. Then the ability to talk escaped you, and all you could do was hold me as you cried.

They thought you did it, at first, which makes sense. But enough parts of your story held up. The only gun in the house was Dad's old hunting rifle, which was gathering dust on the wall, and it didn't match the bullets from the wounds. You were out at the time that I died, and there were witnesses to confirm that. There were witnesses to confirm that you had never even so much

as joked about hurting me, and witnesses to confirm that I had never once acted like I was afraid of you, or suffering abuse from you. Then my friends told the police about Jackson. They looked into him and found other accounts confirming his "antisocial and aggressive behavior," as well as his fixation with me, and they discovered the gun that matched the bullets in his possession. And that was that. Case closed.

You were angry with him. You probably would have killed him if you had the chance, and you definitely would have if you knew you'd get away with it. You wanted to see him hurt. Maybe you felt a bit of satisfaction when he was arrested and found guilty and given a sentence, but it was swallowed by more rage because the sentence wasn't enough. But you couldn't hurt Jackson. And it didn't really matter what happened to him, did it? Whether he was rotting in a cell or walking free, I was still dead, and more than you wanted to punish Jackson, you wanted me back. I had been your responsibility, and even though it was hard, you weren't ready to give it up. You had countless nightmares about me—dreams where you saw me as I had been when you found me, only upright and conscious, moving around on my own but with that empty gaze. And in those dreams, I always looked right through you and said something like, "Where were you, Kenny? Why didn't you save me? Why did you let me die?"

You were out with your friends, Kenny. You had no way of knowing there was any danger. And you didn't let me die. Jackson didn't ask for permission, and Death never needs permission.

I know why you did it. I know why you trusted a Craigslist ad from a woman named *Cypress Lavender* who claimed to be a witch, and drove from a small fishing town in Maine to a large town—practically a city—in Virginia. Grief causes people to do crazy things. I know, and I understand why you chose to move forward with it, despite Cypress Lavender's warnings.

On some level, I appreciate that you were willing to go so far. And I can understand how you would convince yourself that everything you were doing was justified. You steal the supplies you need, because businesses can replace their stock, but nothing can replace a person's life. The old man next door could have heard some of the commotion of Jackson's break-in, and he could have called for help, but he didn't. Besides, he has no loved ones, he lives alone, so no one will miss him. So, you take him. You tap into powers humanity was not meant to know of. You tap into the darkest, most primal part of yourself. You risk upsetting the natural order of the cosmos. You remember me, you remember all of the things you want to say, and you remember all of the dreams that were ripped away from me.

You thought it would be different. You thought you would wait on the front porch, and the following day, I would appear, dressed in the clothes you left and covered in dirt and very confused, but alive. I would look at you and recognize you and say, "Kenny, what happened?"

Instead of answering, you would hug me, and I would hug you back. You would apologize first, and then you would tell me you love me. Initially, I would be afraid, but you would tell me that everything is okay, everything's been taken care of, and you'll never let anyone or anything hurt me again. There would be a lot of difficulty, but things would go back to normal. And I would believe you.

You thought it would be different. You thought the worst thing that could happen would be the ritual not working. But it did, Kenny. It worked. The ritual was successful. You were successful. And that was the worst thing that could happen.

At first, you thought you had failed, because you waited on the porch all day, but I never appeared. You walked inside, you went to your room, and your hands shook too violently to light a cigarette. So instead of relapsing, you cried. For hours, you cried. Then you heard it—a thud against the front door. After a beat of silence, it was followed by another. Then another beat of silence, followed by yet another thud. A pattern. Knocking. Loud, slow knocking. You flew to your feet, ran downstairs, and opened the door. The second you realized it was me, you said, "Madelyn!" and your voice cracked. You hugged me immediately, you said you were sorry, and you told me you love me. I said nothing. I didn't even hug you back.

You thought I was just in shock. I only needed time, and soon enough, I would be back to normal. And you tried so hard, too. When you saw that I wasn't eating, you started making soup because I would drink. When you turned on the TV for "us" to watch, you would choose something I had liked, even if you hated it. When you suggested things we could do, you suggested activities you used to resist, like painting each other's nails or weaving bracelets. But no matter what you offered, I would sit there, silently staring ahead.

I gave you hope, though. You thought maybe I needed a memory refresher, so you got a photo album we had in the house, and you showed me the pictures. You showed me one in particular—the photo from a few months ago, at the Spooktacular Fall Festival, when I won "Scream Queen;" a bigger deal in our town than Prom Queen or Homecoming Queen. The picture showed me, my face a beacon of joy, moments after my name had been announced and they had draped the sash over my shoulder, placed the crown on my head, and given me the bouquet. I used to joke that I looked like a character in an old slasher movie, because I'm blonde and the dress I wore was pink and vintage, like it was from the 1950s.

I looked at the pictures, and when I saw that photo, I lifted my hand and pointed at it, the tip of my finger on the bouquet, just below my face. You gasped and started saying, "Yeah. Yeah, Maddy, that's you. That's you."

I just stared at it.

I think it was after that that you started to seriously worry that things wouldn't go back to normal. You were worried enough that you called Cypress Lavender again, but you asked her to come here, since you didn't think it was a

good idea to move me. She agreed, and it could have been days or it could have been seconds before she swept into the living room, wearing a multi-colored maxi-skirt, a loose and flowing coat patterned with flowers, and rings on every finger. I sat on the couch, my face empty of expression.

Cypress Lavender walked up to me, her brow furrowed, and she studied me. She snapped her fingers in front of my nose. She tried asking questions ("Madelyn, are you there? Can you hear me? Do you see me?"), she tried speaking nicely ("Madelyn, I need you to say something. Say something to your brother. Can you say his name? Can you say *Kenny*?"), and she tried insulting me, which upset you.

You put a hand on her shoulder, saying, "Stop it! Don't talk to her like that!" "Back off, I know what I'm doing!" she snapped back. She took your wrist and yanked your hand off of her. She didn't mean to hurt you, I'm sure. And I don't know what I thought she was trying to do. I don't know that I even thought at all. What I do know is that I did not like the way she treated you. I saw her grab your arm, and suddenly, I was on my feet. She was taller than me by at least six inches, but she was soon cowering under me as my hands locked around her neck and I shoved her back.

Distantly, I heard your voice—"Maddy, stop! Stop it! Madelyn, let go, *let her go*! MADELYN!"—but I didn't listen to it under Cypress Lavender's choking.

You managed to pry my fingers off of her and pull me away, positioning yourself in between us, and Cypress Lavender stared at me in horror. When you turned to her, she said in a raspy voice, "That thing's not your sister. That thing's not even human."

She left before you could yell at her or ask what that meant. You looked back at me to find that I was already sitting down on the couch again. Things haven't gotten better since.

I can tell you're suffering. A part of you knows you've made a mistake in bringing me back, and that part of you knows what the right thing would be to do. But a bigger part of you lost me once and can't lose me again. That part is willing to hold onto an empty shell that doesn't eat, only reacts, and is capable of killing, because the shell has my face. You can't lose me again because I'm your responsibility, and you're supposed to let me go when I'm ready. You refuse to think that maybe I am not the one who isn't ready now. And you can't even begin to fathom the idea of being the one to set things right. It doesn't matter if you know I'm not your sister anymore, not really. I once was your sister, I still have the face of your sister, and as long as that's the case, you can't hurt me. Even though you wouldn't be hurting me. I feel no pain.

I know why you did it. I know you thought you were doing something good. You thought you were giving me a second chance. You thought you were giving back everything Jackson took from me when he shot me and beat me and strangled me, leaving me to bleed out in my room. You thought you were helping.

But just as Jackson took something from me, Kenny, so did you. Jackson took my life. He took my future. And you took away my death. You took away my past. Because of you both, I have only the present—a constant, unchanging moment, in which I have nowhere I have come from and nowhere that I'm going.

If I could, I would tell you. I would tell you that you've made a mistake, and you should never have brought me back. I would tell you that I didn't ask for you to bring me back. And I would tell you that putting me down is for the best. It's what we both need, Kenny. You need to let go, and I need to move on. I wish there was time to wait until you're ready, but sometimes, you don't get that luxury. If anyone has learned that lesson, I have.

But I think we both know, too, that it will happen someday. You don't know when, and neither do I, but there will come a day where I will find the strength to move. I will find the strength to stand and to walk. I will take Dad's rifle off of the wall, I will retrieve the emergency bullets from the cabinet, and I will go to your room, where you will be sitting by the open window, having a smoke. You haven't smoked in years. I will push the door open, and you will look over at me, and your eyes will widen in shock. You will stand, starting, "Madelyn—" but I will interrupt you. I will hold out the rifle, loaded with one bullet, and I will say the two words that make you go cold:

"Do it."

And you won't want to. Arguments will rise in you, but they will die before you speak them. Because a part of you will know that if I could find the strength to move on my own and to speak on my own, to load a single shot into that gun, then you can find the strength to fix things. You will take the rifle, and through your tears, you will focus on me and aim the trembling barrel.

You will take a breath. Your voice will break when you tell me, "I love you, Madelyn."

I know, Kenny.
"And I'm so sorry."
It's okay, Kenny.
Just do it.

#### Son of a Witch!

Amritha Selvarajaguru University of Iowa magical realism, comedy

CW: swearing and crude language

The trouble with being paid in firstborn children, Edith has found, is that it takes a very long time to be compensated for your services. Also, it's rather difficult to explain on tax forms.

But at the crux of the issue is that anything can happen between the signing of the contract and the reception of payment, and the recipient has little control over the terms of the transaction until the child is born—including, unfortunately, the benefactor's decision to essentially sublet their own firstborn child to not one, but two separate witches.

"This is ridiculous," Edith insists, setting down the thick sheaf of paper outlining the new mother's contract, "You can't just do this! We never discussed having to share the child with another witch. I would never have given you the blessing of wealth if I had known!"

Joanna, shrugging, only says, "You should've read the fine print. Technically, you agreed to this." She is terribly smug, though she tries not to appear so, her fingers linked under her chin as she sits at her work desk like a throne. The long, fiery red of her hair, made voluminous during pregnancy, smartly frames her sharp face, which is still the same as it was all those years ago when she walked right up to Edith's home and demanded money and power and success. Edith had thought it an easy bargain back then, thought Joanna was a chump. Joanna's played her like a fool.

"Fuck," she breathes, slumping back in her chair, "Remind me never to work with lawyers ever again. Squirrely bitches, the lot of you."

"Hey," Joanna protests, "In my defense, I never lied to you. It isn't my fault you weren't careful. And besides, you got the kid, right? No need to complain."

"I never agreed to share!"

"Shit, man, neither did I," chimes in the woman sitting beside Edith. When she sets down her own copy of Joanna's contract, she reveals that familiar face—dark skin, huge, heart-shaped glasses with pink-tinted lenses, the annoying little dimple that creases one rounded cheek—which is, somehow, split with a wide, amused grin. Edith can't help but to seethe. At this point, she thinks it's a Pavlovian reaction.

"Is this somehow funny to you, Portia?" she demands, "We just got swindled!" As though in defense, Portia throws her hands up by her shoulders and laughs a little sheepishly.

"Listen, I'll admit I didn't really read the contract. That's on me. And, sure, this isn't ideal, and I probably also wouldn't have granted you good health and longevity if I'd known... But this isn't too bad." To Edith, she adds, "We can make this work. What do you say? Joint custody?"

"What?! Absolutely not!"

"Come on, E, work with me here."

"Don't call me that," Edith snaps, "And this is absolutely not going to work. I can't... I can't co-parent a child! And certainly not with *you*!"

"Look," Portia sighs, pushing her glasses up the wide bridge of her nose, "I know you don't like me. And that's fair, okay? I'm not a big fan of you either—"

"Don't like you?" Edith cries, "I detest you! You're always causing trouble with your stupid nature spells! Your last one destroyed half our neighborhood, including my house! That was my family home!"

"Okay, well, that was an accident! And you cursed me with bad financial luck!" Portia counters, "I had to get a job at Wendy's because of you! I make nine dollars an hour and smell like ketchup and despair!"

"It's what you deserve!"

"Okay, ladies, ladies, come on," Joanna interrupts, before the two witches can get into fisticuffs, "I know you're not fans of one another. But please. You both technically own my child now, and I'd really appreciate it if I wasn't sending him off into a home full of screaming and fighting."

At that, Edith glances down at the sleeping baby, who has been conked out in his little baby carrier beside the desk. Joanna has swaddled him in a soft pink blanket and stuck the tiniest pacifier in human existence into his mouth. Already, the kid has a shocking amount of bright red hair on his round little head. Edith can't help but to think it's weirdly shaped, like a clove of garlic. She wonders when that'll go away.

Sighing, she relents, "Okay, okay. We can—I guess we can be civil. For the kid. But this is all temporary, okay? It's just until we figure this all out."

"Deal," Portia shrugs, and sticks out her hand for Edith to take. Her hand is warm and calloused, her fingers long and her nails short and clean despite the reputation of a nature witch. When Edith shakes it, she makes a conscious effort to squeeze uncomfortably hard.

"Deal," she bites, and wonders what the hell she's gotten herself into.

The kid's name is Arthur. At least, that's what Joanna has named him. Arthur No-Last-Name, because the new mother either didn't give him hers, or couldn't be bothered to tell them what it was, before she handed him over and rushed them out the door before her next meeting, and the last thing Edith wants to do right now is broach the topic with Portia, lest it turn into another fight. She shudders to think about what that might entail.

Already, they've argued seven times: once, over how to get Arthur's car seat in the back of Portia's car, which they ended up magicking into place; again, over who would drive, which Portia won, it being her car and Edith preferring to travel by spell; over whether they should go to Target or WalMart, which Edith won with the superior choice of Target; what kind of crib they should get; which diapers; which baby formula; and last but not least, over Edith moving in. It's been exhausting.

Living with Portia is the last thing she wants to do. She already couldn't stand living across from her, but now having to be in her house at all times? That's just a cruel, specific torture made especially to drive Edith crazy. It'll never work. They'll kill each other within the week.

But unfortunately, they have no choice, seeing as Edith's house is currently undergoing significant repairs thanks to Portia's wind-harnessing spell gone wrong. So, she resigns herself to suffer her irritating neighbor's company until the repairs are completed, so they can finally co-parent in peace.

"Edith? You hungry?" Portia calls softly from the bottom of the stairs, "I made dinner!"

Speaking of peace.

"No thanks!" Edith calls back, "I'm good."

In what feels like a split second, Portia is in the doorway of the guest bedroom, wincing at the volume. "Keep it down!" she begs in a whisper, "Arthur's just barely fallen asleep. I'll be so mad if you wake him up."

"If *I* wake him up?" Edith whisper-shouts hotly, "You're the one who started the yelling!"

"I didn't yell!"

"Yes you did! You yelled from downstairs—!"

"That wasn't even that loud!"

"Yes it was!"

"No it wasn't!"

From the baby monitor comes a thin whining sound, instantly silencing the two women. For a moment, they stand stock-still, ears straining for subsequent noise, barely breathing. Edith, who has magicked the baby monitor to give them better sound and video quality, stares intently at the little screen.

On the display, Arthur snuffles, whines, and wiggles himself back to sleep. The witches let out a long breath in unison. It's going to be a long night.

Inevitably, it is. Dinner is spent in tense, polite silence, broken only when Edith feels the need to give Portia a backhanded compliment on her cooking skills, to which Portia cheerfully calls her a bitch. Arthur wakes once. Edith feeds, burps, and changes him, and he falls back asleep against her chest like a tiny red-headed mouse. It's as disconcerting as it is endearing.

The women take turns showering, then brush their teeth side by side. In the mirror, Edith stares resolutely at her reflection, eyes fixed on her own heart-shaped face, the new acne spot on her nose, the roots of her dyed green hair that are starting to grow out silvery-blonde. She refuses to look at Portia for eyen a second.

Refuses to look at the red satin bonnet she's pulled over her long twists, which makes her face look young and sweet; refuses to take in the sleepy droop of her eyelids; absolutely refuses to even think about the fact that she's standing there in a tank and sleep shorts, long satiny legs all on display. Nope. Nope. Absolutely not.

Edith spits. Rinses her mouth. Heads to bed with a terse *goodnight*. Does not think about Portia at all and goes directly to bed and lays there, wide awake, for three hours straight.

"Fuck," Edith whispers into the cool night air, "I'm so screwed."

Edith can see the remains of her house through the guest bedroom window—her grandparents' pride and joy, passed down to their only heir, their magic baked into its foundations. It's where she had grown up, wide-eyed and studious and quietly ambitious, bursting with ideas and talent alike. Friendless, perhaps, a little odd, definitely, but ultimately happy. Successful. Fine.

And then Portia had moved in across the way three years ago. Portia with her big, charming grin and her loud music and her tampering with nature and her stupid memes in the neighborhood Witches' Association group chat. Edith can't believe that anyone under the age of sixty actually finds Facebook minion memes funny. It makes her want to rip her eyes out and boil them in a cauldron. Not to make a potion, just in general.

It doesn't help that Portia is so *nice*, either. Sure, her wayward spell ruined Edith's meticulously curated front lawn and sliced her living room in two, but she was so genuine and apologetic and helpful in the chaos and panic that followed that Edith can't help but to feel a little forgiveness, not that she'd ever admit it. It only serves to make her angrier. Who does this witch think she is, waltzing into Edith's life all kind and funny and beautiful and shit? She's ruining her life just by existing. Edith should press charges.

She's thinking about all this, fuming at the ceiling, when the baby monitor comes on. From the nursery, Arthur starts whimpering, which goes on for a few

long moments before he begins to cry. Some maternal urge deep within her makes Edith want to run to the baby and soothe him, but they had talked about this while arguing over onesies at Target—they'd agreed on alternating duties when tending to Arthur. Edith put him to bed. Portia can deal with this.

Edith rolls over and shuts her eyes. On the monitor, she can hear Portia groan and flick on the nursery light.

"Hey, buddy," she croaks, clearly still half-asleep, "Hey, hey, don't cry, it's okay, I gotcha. Come here, kiddo. Shh. Don't cry. Mommy's gotcha."

Yuck, Edith thinks, scrunching her nose. Portia had insisted that Arthur think of them as his moms. Edith is just fine with him calling her by name. *Mommy* just sounds weird.

"Come on, kiddo, please stop crying," Portia's voice murmurs over the monitor, "I'll give you so much candy when you're older if you just shut up..."

Edith can't help laughing to herself before turning down the volume and forcing herself to sleep.

An hour and a half later, Edith wakes up to the faint sound of crying. It's still the middle of the night, and the house is dark and cool, save for the slabs of fat moonlight slipping in through the blinds. It's tempting to just roll back over and go to sleep—it is Portia's turn, after all—but something compels Edith to get up and go investigate, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she pads softly towards the noise.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she groans, entering the living room. Portia's head snaps up to look at her from where she's seated on the couch, and the tense, desperate pinch between her brows relaxes.

"Oh, thank god," she breathes, "Please help. I can't get him to calm down."

"Why are you sitting tits-out in the middle of the living room?" Edith demands, frozen to her spot. To her credit, Portia doesn't seem one bit embarrassed by her partial nudity, just shrugs and holds the baby out for the other witch to take.

"I heard skin-to-skin contact is good for babies. Didn't work, though."

"No shit. He sounds like he's been at it for hours." Scooping Arthur up into her arms—and resolutely not looking at Portia's soft, dusky skin all on display—Edith cradles him close to her chest and begins humming and rocking him. "Has he been changed?"

"Yes, obviously."

"Fed?"

"Duh."

"Burped?" Portia does not respond, her face guilty. "For fuck's sake," Edith sighs.

"I didn't know!"

"How can you know about skin-to-skin contact but not burping?"

"Leave me alone," Portia groans, rubbing at her eyes. Scoffing, Edith shifts the baby so he's laying against her chest and pats him on the back in firm, but gentle thumps.

"You have to do this every time you feed him," Edith explains, "Or else he won't be able to burp up the air he swallowed while eating, and he'll get really uncomfortable. Just pat him gently like this until he burps." Right on cue, Arthur lets out a frankly impressive belch for a human about the size of Edith's forearm, and then proceeds to spit up all down her shoulder and back.

"Oh shit!" cries Portia, jumping up, "Is that supposed to happen?"

"Sometimes. It's okay, it's natural."

Shifting Arthur to the other shoulder, Edith takes in the absolute mess that is her pajama shirt. Gross. Baby puke smells like spoilt formula and looks like seagull shit. Edith thinks she might puke, herself.

However, Arthur is no longer wailing. Instead, he's hiccuping softly into the curve of her neck and his tiny fists are opening and closing, his wrinkly little old man hands soft against her skin. Edith was never a big fan of babies—this payment was more about securing an heir than becoming a mom—but she thinks this one is pretty cute. Even if he looks like a very squishy hairless rat from certain angles.

"You're so good with him," Portia whispers. Edith startles—she hadn't noticed the other woman coming over to stand at her elbow, gazing fondly down at the baby. She still hasn't put on a shirt. Edith flushes from the roots of her hair down to the tightness in her stomach.

"Babies aren't too hard to suss out," she says, after a beat of awkward silence, "They only need, like, four things. It's logical. It's like math."

"The one time being a number mage comes in handy," Portia jokes.

"Shut the fuck up," Edith laughs, but there's no heat behind it. Gently, she sways side to side as Arthur's eyes blink heavily and slide slowly shut. "You're good with him, too," she adds, begrudgingly. Portia laughs.

"I like talking to him. Playing with him. He's more nature than numbers, you know."

Edith rolls her eyes. "Whatever you have to tell yourself to feel better, *Mommy*," she scoffs. Portia's smile goes tight. Fuck! The joke did not land. Okay. Uh—

"We'll make this work, right, E?" Portia's question cuts through her moment of panic, and looking down at the sleeping baby in her arms, she can't help but to agree.

"Yeah," she murmurs, "Yeah, we will." And standing there, in the living room at four in the morning, surrounded by empty formula bottles and baby wipes and covered in puke and standing next to her gorgeous shirtless rival, Edith believes it for the first time.

# How to Get Your Dream Body

Lucy Eller Emerson College horror, comedy

Someone once asked me, "How do I get a body like yours?" and refused to drop it until I answered. So, here it is.

First things first, you'll want to go to your local cemetery—just for a walk! Have a pleasant stroll about the grounds, maybe read some names, some dates, some epitaphs. Think on life, think on death, think on legacy, think on grief. Think on *the self*. Take your time, and think.

Make a regular thing out of it. Weekly walks, if not daily. Be at peace, enjoy the silence of the dead, and think.

You'll still visit me, of course, when we're both available. We'll get lunch, we'll see movies, we'll talk about things that have happened. The good, the bad, the weird, the ugly. Even without the visits, we'll hear from each other—you see something funny and send it to me, I see something funny and send it to you. We'll watch our shows in our respective homes, and we'll call afterwards to talk about them. During the holiday season, I'm sure we'll be invited to the same parties. Maybe one of us will be hosting one. We'll still see each other.

All the while, you'll still go for your walks in the cemetery. Who could those people have been? They certainly wouldn't be recognizable now.

We'll see each other less. It's sad, but inevitable. It won't mean the death of our friendship, of course, it'll just mean that some things go undiscussed, some information undisclosed until you hear it through the grapevine. I'm afraid I'm not doing too well. It's consumption, I joke, it's the old Victorian cough

of death, a shame it's not the dancing plague! At least then I'd be fun to be around. I'll apologize for not telling you, but you won't be *mad* at me for not telling you. Just worried, now that you know. You'll send a get well card and want to visit, but I'll try to avoid it, since I don't want to be seen looking so frail and ill. You'll win in the end, and we'll sit together and laugh and talk, and you won't tell me I look like Death. But I know I will.

And you're still taking those graveyard strolls. The air is fresher there, isn't it? I won't die from the illness, fortunately. I get treated. I get better. It's a miracle, really. I'm back on my feet, ready to throw myself back into life with newfound appreciation and enthusiasm. Ready to start living! We make plans to meet for dinner, but instead of getting dinner, you read my obituary. The nerve of drunk drivers, am I right? Maybe you're invited to my funeral. Maybe you go. Either way, when you take your walk in the graveyard, you see a new tombstone. My tombstone; my name, my date of birth, and my date of death. You might leave something for me. That would be nice. Later that same night, after hours, you return with a shovel.

Don't act so surprised. Where else did you think this was going?

# An Interview with Samson Alai

Nikki Rossiter University of Michigan magical realism

CW: dead people

Upon taking his first bite of mostaccioli at a distant acquaintance's funeral, Samson knew he wanted to cater to those in mourning. Something changed in him as his teeth sank into penne that was far past al dente to compensate for those with wobbly teeth. As he ran his tongue along the flavor profiles of store-bought pasta sauce and pre-ground beef, he sought a more perfect world in which those who had just lost a loved one could relish the food they were eating before or after they saw their cherished corpse for the last time. He set himself to cooking for those mourning the damned posthaste.

Called a master of cuisine by most who write about him, and by all who have tasted his food, Samson has garnered a reputation for himself as one of the world's foremost chefs in any field. Possessing a supernatural command over food, he is able to perfectly replicate near any dish he reads from the recipe books and scattered index cards of the deceased, the only times he is accused of deviating from the recipe is when he adds in a minor change to pronounce the flavors from one another in more meaningful ways, at times adding minuscule amounts of salt to ice cream, microscopic doses of honey to pizza. At one point, in a ghost town-themed funeral, Samson brought in more food than dust, inflaming the patrons with his presumptions despite their grief. He was driven away from the funeral, thereby vowing to pay greater attention to the grieving rituals of each varied funeral he would go to, observing their traditions with care seen nowhere else, from any other practitioner of post-mortem catering.

He was seen making ice cakes in the ice lands, fish fugles in the seediest of docks, and unseen dishes in the innermost reaches of forbidden rainforests.

Samson's legend preceded him, but despite the fables and legends written about him, after he retired the world lost interest in him. It was a sick, abrupt change for one who had exemplified service for the mourning moreso than any philosopher or religious figure could have. Records of Samson vanished quickly, memories of his exploits appearing only in hushed whispers around funerals that lacked soulful and caring food. The kind-hearted chef was nowhere to be found, and it was unclear why.

I stumbled upon Samson's estate on a dreary afternoon while doing nothing else with my time. I found him cooking an old favorite of his: a recipe he had learned from a grandmother with no one to share her cuisine with. After her death, the dish served in her honor was so astounding that, posthumously, she became a bestselling novelist for the photo-copied notes found in her kitchen. Disorganized as they were, enough splendid morsels of wisdom lay within that many were willing to brave the chicken-scratch and disheveled ramblings to seek the knowledge that had been sitting in a spotless kitchen within a dusty home for all that time. I sat myself down in the kitchen that had cooked for countless grieving masses and prepared for a small morsel of knowledge myself.

**Interviewer**: What dish do we have here?

**Samson**: We have roasted lamb over a bed of spinach and rice. It's simple, but it's the little things that make it outstanding. Anne here really had a mastery over timing while cooking. Of all the dishes I've made for those grieving, I think her recipes may have been the most challenging. Anne wouldn't measure by volume, but by *time*. Every aspect of her dishes must be exact, from temperature to timing down to the very second. While she was alive she had all this time to cook, because she was alone a lot of the time. I like to imagine her as a Renaissance artist consumed by her work; as if she was Michelangelo before *Pieta*.

Interviewer: What was the initial reception when you cooked this?

**Samson**: It was a hushed experience, at first. It felt like we had walked into a new exhibit in a museum, when all the pieces are unfamiliar and as striking as they'll ever be. The wordless message I got from those around me silently and slowly chewing was one of confusion and awe. I'm not sure if any of those eating the dish understood what was going on in their mouths. When you perfect your mastery of timing and heat, you perfect your mastery in many other aspects of life. It's all a balancing act, and I think that's what they were tasting more than anything.

**Interviewer**: They were tasting mastery?

**Samson**: Well, yes. They were tasting *Anne's* mastery. Anyone can pick up Anne's recipes and understand what she's trying to get you to do, anyone can replicate the recipes to some success and have a very tasty meal before them. But to actually do what Anne did to a perfect tee? To understand intimately every last method and technique she used? They were seeing that potential fulfilled. It's my hope that they are able to capitalize on *their* abilities to do it, as well, not only with cooking, but with their own skills and dreams.

**Interviewer**: Have you ever considered that your services may detract from the mourning experience? That maybe they divert attention from the serious matters at hand?

**Samson**: You could say that. Plenty of others have, but I never worry about it. My response largely comes from a lack of understanding *behind* the question, though. Because why would that be a problem? It is a shock to lose someone, to suddenly come to the realization that someone we know or love is no longer able to talk to us, no longer able to interact with us in a way where we can also know them as human.

**Interviewer**: So it's a good thing that you're able to leave others breathless with food?

**Samson**: I feel it's better to be left breathless by food than breathless at the thought of losing someone dear to you. Tidings are bad enough when we find ourselves at funerals or viewings, forced to look upon someone we will no longer talk to. Would you want to be served subpar food at that same event? It's a comfort to have good food in an environment as inhospitable as that. The power of "comfort food" is not synonymous with the environment where it is eaten, but whether or not it provides the eater with comfort.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any thoughts of stopping? I know that you've technically retired, but obviously you'll still do funerals if someone seeks you out, right?

He thought for a while about his response before continuing again, a hand running over the stubble that had grown there in his time away from the world at large. His retirement was a lonely one, less a rejection of the world, but a more subtle obscuring by events more pressing. He was a groundhog in a hole, content to chew away at bits of information and knowledge he had known all his life. Complete retirement for someone of Samson's esteem seems impossible, the daylight outside of his hidey-hole too appealing to ignore.

**Samson**: I provide a service for those who are grieving, I take their minds off of heavy things for a bit. You never retire from that. I've gotten many compliments from those I cook for, but I never take them to heart. If I did, I likely would have retired long ago, the validation would have been enough.

**Interviewer**: The validation of what, exactly? The compliments? Is that why you never take them to heart despite their compliments to your cooking?

**Samson**: Are they complimenting my *cooking* necessarily, or the skill I have in following the recipes of those left behind? I am a pantomime of recipes already cooked, a purveyor of the past still present. A helpful skill—especially in this environment, yes, but I am no different than a time machine. I do not change anything. I *can't* change anything for fear of ruining the legacies of the dead, but I am able to remind them of who they've lost in the most tender way. That is enough.

**Interviewer**: What will you do when it's finally time for *your* funeral?

**Samson**: I have a few dishes in my freezer that will be thawed and baked upon my death. It's a stipulation in my will. 'The final will and testament to fine cooking' is what the press calls them, but I think much less highly of them. 'Samson's funeral meals' is my less frilly title.

**Interviewer**: Why is that?

**Samson**: Because I'll be dead! It'd be absurd to think a dead man is the final say in what constitutes good cooking. Especially from frozen dishes? Yuck!

**Interviewer**: I suppose that's fair. What does your ideal funeral look like to you? Is that too morbid of a question for someone catering for the dead?

**Samson**: I don't have too many years left, to be frank, past a certain point morbidity stops affecting the soon-to-be-dead. With that, you can imagine some of these questions have been on my mind for a while. In my head I've been toying with the idea of a large potluck, another stipulation was added to my will: all attendees *must* bring a dish of their own to put on the table, for the feast, you see. It'll be a grand occasion, where everyone will bring different dishes from their favorite family members that have passed on. A memoriam, in a sense. Imagine it, if you'll indulge me: swathes of people, all eating and laughing, maybe some are crying as they talk of their relatives that have passed on. Everyone is asking questions about the dishes they're eating, wondering about these wonderful people who made such beautiful pieces of culinary art.

And there, amidst all the dishes that have been thawed and defrosted, they'll prefer to eat those infinitely more interesting dishes that other people have brought from their own homes, made with their own skill and dedication to their loved ones. In my mind's eye they don't eat the dead man's dishes; they choose to eat the dishes of those not-so-newly passed on. The best-case scenario would have the portion of the table dedicated to my dishes crawling with spiders and flies. A sign that people are more preoccupied with their loved one's dishes.

That's how I'd like things to go.

Interviewer: Are you worried about your death?

**Samson**: I only worry that I won't be able to bring about more joy to this world. It's an addicting, lovely, and altogether brutal thing, to bring joy to another. So fickle and elusive, yet so rewarding at times. It frustrates me that these hands can't work as they used to, that they can't cut as fast, can't turn the knobs to the right heat without pain in my wrists. But as that pain hits me, I realize that I would rather experience no other sensation, because I keep aware of what this pain brings others.

Interviewer: Is it a thankless job, what you do?

**Samson**: Not one bit. I feel thanks every time I show up to a funeral. Every time I set my tables and dishes up and people begin to eat, they thank me with their expressions, with the joy in which they start to reminisce, and how they bring up old memories.

You know, a lot of dead people seem really refined when they die, right? We do them up in all this finery: the suits, the makeup, the perfume to run off the

smell of death. That's not how a lot of us are in life though, is it? I mean—look at me! I'm in a set of pajamas for goodness' sake. Dead people wind up looking terribly stuffy in their starched collars and stitched-together chests, and that all too often becomes our last memory of them. For those dishes, though, they bring up colorful memories, the ones you'd want to remember about your loved ones.

Did you know that out of all the dead people I've cooked for, not *one* was that stuffy person seen in that accursed wooden thing. That headshot they always put on the side of the casket? That has to be the most misleading thing about a funeral. You can't represent a whole person with one picture, one outfit they'll wear until they decompose. It's difficult really, to distill someone to one *thing*.

The dishes help to curb that, to help represent how someone really was in life.

I decided to stop the interview there, as the two of us sat at his kitchen island and ate together in silence. Anne spoke for the both of us. She had evidently been a fun woman, as the notes of lamb and spinach that would have been boring seemed to me as if I was tasting them for the first time all over again. The lamb gave up the ghost on its bones quickly, practically melting into the spinach and rice, forming a not-quite-congealed dish that held a unique and symbiotic flavor in every bite. Somehow, vignettes of Anne's life flashed before my eyes, her beginnings as a chef in renowned restaurants in far-off countries, the celebrations and pitfalls of a career in food service fully represented in the dish's complex flavor profile.

I pushed my plate away and sighed, the notes of Anne's solitude in a polished kitchen being the last transcendent image of her life and testament to cooking. Samson wiped his mouth with his napkin and slowly rose to clear the island; the intricacies of mastery as routine to him as doing the dishes.

Samson's last name was Alai, the world at large never knowing he had a last name until they read the itinerary for his funeral, anonymously posted to newspapers all around the world. When I saw the obituary and corresponding funeral invitation in my local paper I immediately booked a flight to the venue: a humble park in the middle of nowhere, really. For some reason, the funeral was scheduled for months after the old chef's death; the dominant belief followed that Samson had intentionally given the potential funeral-goers plenty of time to master the dishes they would bring to the funeral.

For my part, I tried my best to replicate Anne's roasted lamb over a bed of spinach and rice. I needed those months, trying my best to channel Samson's expertise into the dead woman's recipe. I washed my hands, cut my ingredients, and cocked my head to outrageous angles looking for the exact right angles for my heating dials, cooking for the right duration down to the second. For weeks it was fruitless work, frustration becoming an ever-present friend, making my temperament dark and my nights sleepless. I paced around my house, avoiding

the disaster zone that my kitchen had turned into, attempting to divine the reason for my ineptitude.

It broke through the walls I had set up for myself in the midst of a walk. I had not inhabited Anne's mind, hadn't *listened* to what she was saying, to the solitude she was experiencing, or the emotions she felt as she kindled her stove as a mother to a child. I used subpar ingredients for the experimental cook, uncaring that the gray cutlets and wilted spinach would probably burn like all the others. I attended the heat with the care of a valet, felt the emotions of my ingredients, and of the kitchen around me. My surroundings became a womb, the dish my child; I was *caring* about the dish as I hadn't before.

Soon enough, the gray cutlets and wilted greens had turned into a testament to the woman Anne had been at the time of her death.

Hearkening back to notes found on windowsills and hoods of stoves, we came from all over the world in celebration of the renowned cook. The park was thankfully large, and the table placed in the middle of it sat under a willow tree surreal in its scale and size. We all filed in, streams of mourners approaching the beacon with leaves that drooped onto the table, threatening to steal the delicious food we were bringing as offerings to the one who had served so many. Voices eventually rose from that hushed place, our little bubble preserved by the willow and our communal love for those that had passed on.

When it became time to see Samson off, bites from everyone's plate were thrown into Samson's casket at the funeral; distinctly not a part of the will, but a gesture everyone felt right in doing. Funeral goers spoke ad nauseum about Samson, his skill with the stove and spatula. It slowly dawned on us all that we were living out Samson's dream, less through intentionality and more through a mutual feeling of comfort garnered from good food. We all regaled one another with our struggles to create the dishes we had brought, amazed at our collective proficiency once we had felt—rather than imitated—our way through the quest to cook art. With that conclusion, we finally found the answer behind what made Samson's dishes so special.

Samson's dishes that had been dethawed and unfrozen stayed untouched next to the pieces of art populating the table. Upon leaving, we saw them carted off by loving armies of spiders and flies, likely complicit with Samson's wishes, giving him the opportunity to serve for one last time.

# Harmond Spectral Management & Co. Kath

Katherine Budinger Johns Hopkins University historical fiction, comedy

CW: brief discussion of violence/murder

London, 1881

Mr. Percival Harmond of Harmond Spectral Management & Co. stood on the steps of a seemingly ordinary brownstone, his leather case in one hand and the other poised to ring the bell. It was just like every other stately home on the street, with fancy velvet curtains adorning the windows, a small wrought iron fence, and stained glass panes on the large oak doors. Percival had visited many such homes and been admitted warmly by their rich residents in their fine clothes.

The door to this particular house opened before Percival had the chance to alert its occupants of his arrival, revealing the usual severe butler (this particular one sporting an impressive mustache). Percival stated his name and business, and was admitted to the front hall, which had the same black and white tile flooring that Percival knew two other houses down the street also possessed.

The master and mistress of the house stood to one side of a carpeted staircase, the older gentleman coming forward to shake Percival's hand and revealing the shadows of two children near the wall, behind their mother.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Harmond," said the gentleman, who introduced himself as Lord Preducking.

"It is my pleasure, Lord Preducking," replied Percival, who removed his top hat only to have it snatched from his fingers by the butler, who used it to dress a nearby hat stand. "Now, we can get straight to the business, if you would prefer."

"Please," replied Lord Preducking.

Percival set down his case on a nearby table, next to a large China vase with wilted hydrangeas, then popped open the clasps. He opened it up to reveal an array of colorful glass bottles, some full of scented liquid, others empty. There were also various instruments, designed purely to be elaborate to look at even though they served no real purpose.

Percival, though only being a young man of twenty and two-odd years, had made a pretty penny being welcomed into the homes of the rich with his fancy instruments and marvelous concoctions that were marketed to rid a house of any spirits. His employers marveled at the devices designed to direct energy to the ghosts they were convinced caused the floors to creak and the doors to shut, even though they did little more than allow Percival to filter light. He had made his small fortune selling smelling salts to repel specters and advising the owners of supposedly haunted homes on how to address and deal with their ghostly cohabitants.

It was, of course, all charlatanry. Percival had never seen a ghost in his life, and doubted he ever would, given his extreme skepticism regarding life beyond death. The people who hired him, however, had differing views; all Percival cared about was putting on a good enough show to fool them, and then getting paid his modest fee. He was doing well enough that he was considering increasing his rates, but his mother, who was well known for performing "seances" in the very same homes that Percival rid of ghosts, warned him against greed.

"What sort of hauntings have you been experiencing, Lord Preducking?" Percival asked as he inspected his case, trying to gauge which ghostly removal approach would most impress the Preduckings.

Lord Preducking replied gravely, "Objects move on their own, doors slam and floorboards creak."

"Just the other day," added Lady Preducking in a shrill tone, "the chandelier here in the foyer began swinging violently!"

Percival nodded, careful to keep his face serious. "I see. Do you know anything of the history of this house?" If the house had some sort of mysterious background, Percival usually twisted that even into his explanation of the specter as to increase the validity of his work.

"We only recently purchased it," said Lord Preducking. "The only reason it was up for sale was because the young lady who inherited it was murdered."

"Then it is most likely her restless spirit sharing these halls with you," replied Percival. He removed a long telescope fixed with additional tinted lenses and a large crank from his case. "This chandelier, here, was the one swinging?" he asked, motioning to the crystal monstrosity above their heads.

Lady Preducking nodded vigorously.

Percival held up his telescope and braced it on his shoulder like a shotgun, extending it to its full length and peering up at the chandelier.

"There does seem to be a peculiar energy around that particular fixture,"

he announced, flicking a couple of the lenses on and off at random. When he lowered the spyglass, he noticed Lord Preducking standing directly over his shoulder; the proximity made Percival jump.

Percival returned the telescope to his case and withdrew a perfume bottle filled with a dyed purple sage perfume. "Most spirits," he announced, "cannot stand sage. I will warn you that it is an old pagan remedy, and not nearly as Christian as one might hope, but in all my experience with spectral-induced object motion, it is the best way to lessen the occurrences. It is particularly useful on female spirits." He sprayed the foyer liberally with the perfume, then handed it to Lady Preducking. "Any time an incident occurs, feel free to spray the affected object, and the spirit should be driven away from it."

"It will take more than a bit of perfume to drive me from my own home," came a laughing female voice from the stairs.

Percival's heart nearly leapt out of his chest, but ricocheted off his rib cage instead and returned to its proper place, pounding vigorously. His jaw briefly fell open, fish-like, but he very quickly returned it, too, to its proper place. A woman of about his age was leaning against the banister in a navy walking outfit, adorned with ruffles and lace; she was semi-transparent, but Percival seemed to be the only one who could see her, as the Preducking family merely studied him like a zoo animal. Her face was distorted into a pleasant smile, eyes crinkled at the edges as she surveyed his shock.

"The... um... the specter is a very powerful one," Percival managed, still trying to convince himself not to gape at the ghost. He was seeing a *ghost*. But ghosts did not exist; it was impossible. Perhaps there had been vapors in that perfume, and now he was hallucinating. Nevertheless, he could not lose the Preduckings as customers. "I will need a moment alone with the spirit, so that I might employ more... more forceful measures."

The Preduckings retired to their drawing room, but before they shut the door Lord Preducking informed Percival that should there be any trouble, he would have his musket on hand, so that he might aid Percival in dispatching the ghost. Percival was too shaken to tell Lord Preducking that a bullet would be more likely to destroy the woodworking of his foyer rather than a ghost.

The moment the Preduckings were gone, Percival raced to his case, and of course found it to be full of nothing useful, as it was designed to. He glanced up at the spirit, who was still smirking at him from her place by the banister, then darted up the stairs until she was right in front of him. A bit ridiculously, he stuck his hand out and drew it through her incorporeal form, which caused the lady ghost to roll her eyes.

"I am well aware of my ghostly status, thank you very much," she said. "I take it you are Mr. Percival Harmond of Harmond Spectral Management & Co. The Preduckings have been talking about you ever since I destroyed Lady Preducking's ugly Japanese vase. It was truly a hideous object to behold, and clashed horribly with—"

Percival blurted out in a furious whisper, "How can you possibly exist?"

The lady frowned. "Do you not deal with ghosts on the daily, Mr. Harmond?" "No!" hissed Percival. "I have never seen a ghost in my life, present company excepted! I am a fraud! I pretend to remove ghosts from rich people's houses, take their money, then leave!"

"Oh. So, then you have no way of driving me from these premises?"
"No!"

She nodded, thinking for a moment, then said, "Well, since you are the first person with whom I have been able to directly interact, you and I are going to help one another."

Percival now allowed his mouth to hang open, and he resembled a rather naive trout.

"Upstairs in the attic you will find a knife hidden between the third and fourth rafter," the ghost instructed calmly. "There ought to still be some blood on it, as it was the knife that the butler used to murder me. The same butler now employed by the Preduckings."

"The butler did it?" asked Percival. "Of course. Why shouldn't the butler have done it."

"Take the knife to Scotland Yard, or give it to the Preduckings, though I would much prefer the former option since I have a feeling the Preduckings would be more inclined to clean the knife and use it at their table rather than avenge my death. They really are not horrible people, but they do have a rather abnormal number of peculiarities."

"So, I ought to tell the constabulary that I was led to a murder weapon in an unsolved murder by the victim herself? That will go over well," Percival exclaimed. He was beginning to recover from his shock of initially being able to see a ghost in the first place, but he still wasn't entirely sure he was not hallucinating.

"You have a reputation, do you not? As someone who has contact with spirits?"

Percival thought it over for a moment and debated the merit of following the instructions of a ghost. His curiosity, however, was beginning to get the best of him; his mother always said his curiosity would be his downfall.

He ended up following the ghost, whose name was Claire Redding, up several flights of stairs into the servant's quarters. Claire explained to him that she had been practically tearing her hair out while she watched the police search the house after her death, and that one of the officers had stepped right over the knife used to kill her. They had questioned the butler and the rest of the staff, but frustrated Claire could do little more than shove the occasional vase off a table and swing from the chandelier in a vain attempt to get someone's attention, at least until Percival had come along.

Sure enough, after crawling past more spiders than Percival cared to acknowledge, he found a knife wedged between the third and fourth rafters in the attic. It was enough to convince him that he had not been hallucinating Claire, and so he carried down the murder weapon gingerly by the handle.

He descended the stairs back to the foyer, where he was met by the Preduckings' butler. The mustachioed man took one look at the bloody knife and bolted for the front door, but Lord Preducking emerged from the drawing room first, brandishing a very large and very loaded shotgun. The sight stopped the butler in his tracks, and Lord Preducking took in Percival and the knife.

"Where did you find that, Mr. Harmond?" asked Lord Preducking, seemingly genuinely curious.

"In the attic," Percival replied. "The specter in your home is the same young woman who was murdered. Your butler came with the house, did he not?"

"Yes," replied Lord Preducking. "Hastings and the rest of the staff worked for the previous owners."

"He is responsible for the death of Claire Redding," Percival proclaimed. "Claire herself led me to the murder weapon so that she might finally find peace." As he said it, Percival could not help but relish in the drama just a bit. He was a charlatan salesman, after all; acting and drama came with the nature of his profession.

Lord Preducking sent for Scotland Yard, then paid Percival handsomely and sent him on his way.

It was not until Percival was walking down the street that he truly processed what had occurred. He had seen a real, living—well, not living, actually—but a true ghost.

"Thank you," came a voice beside him. Sure enough, Claire was walking beside him, her spectral form passing through the streetlamps.

"You are welcome," replied Percival as he tipped his hat to her, though to onlookers he had merely acknowledged another streetlamp very politely. He blinked, then asked, "Should you not be confined to the house where you died?"

Claire Redding shrugged. "Now that I'm at peace, as they say, it seems I am free to wander. I was wondering, Mr. Harmond, if you might be interested in taking on an assistant. Me, perhaps."

"A ghost for an assistant?"

"You do deal in spectral management, do you not?"

"What would you do?"

"I could assist you in the real hauntings, then perhaps add a few convincing ghostly occurrences to your performance to convince these rich fools that their door hinges need exorcism rather than oil."

Percival smiled. "You make a good argument, Miss Redding. Welcome to Harmond Spectral Management & Co."

# How the Birdsong Mourns

Noelle Franzone
University of Iowa
romance

Oh, what sweet hours! To want the things our lives forbid. Unbidden riding with soft lies And quiet hiding in surprise. Alone let us watch sunset Let calm cast on us a net. Sit together with birds song Where we can sort our right from wrong. Oh, what sweet hours! To know the things our parents said. In quiet here we draw the night Her eyes, my love, our guiding light. There's a house built out of pen And to paper, we return again. We will be such legends told This the price for growing old. Oh, what sweet hours! To hold in her a small revolt. But now our time is drawing near Approach the curtain without fear. There are no monsters in the dark, Just her, my dear, the morning lark. We will return love, hand in hand Forever to undying land.

# Plea to the Reaper, Mother

Tayla Soytas
University of Michigan
horror

Death is plenty to fear.

I do not wish to fear
the broken I leave behind too.

Seven crows bow their heads in salute as the casket meets the ground, as the crows and the people, all in black shudder before the farewell, and the people look like a flock of crows, when surrendering a body to death; it's all I can do not to try and bury my head neck deep into the soil, to see where granny might go from there or if mother's gulps of air and all the shed tears and hair should warn me against something deep, deep down there.

Six crows at my brother's friend's
—this time not a lament—
a full—on wail is the farewell and
the birds seem to delight in the
solemn and the sad:

my heart, wrapped in wool yarn, squeezed and then some I cry and bleed a little inside along with the revolting crowd.

Five crows at our neighbor's—
No, I can't bear it anymore!
it's as though we grow feathers,
crow feathers, sickly, silky black—
black as the grief that paints the whites
of our eyes and makes us grow beaks
and perch on every
gravestone of our demised.

We do savor the tears, salty streaks glistening on our cheeks, like the four birds on Mrs. Whiskers' miniature casket, savor the demise of their enemy; she was a good hunter, a close friend too, from a tiny black kitten to the grey stricken feral when she passed but I shove down the guilt for the darker shade of grief than I've ever felt before, in all this death.

Three black shadows, "father, son, holy spirit", haunt the charcoal mists when Sister Shelley is laid to her restless sleep and I almost feel her come to life and claw at the chestnut box with the same hands that struck kids into obedience, and *yet* the ebony clouds hang heavy, the crowd bigger, as though grieving the chosen gets them closer to heaven.

Now two crows stalk you and I, clicking their claws

at our every step and what if one day one decides to claw out my eyeballs to drown me in their black, to continue the siege of eminent death and dread? What if we all become a big black blot in time and humanity melts into the inkwell it came out of?

Is this the end that we are living for?

Oh, mother how I fear—
not the monsters under my bed
or in the closet
or father's rifle hidden under the faucet,
I do not fear
the hollow stares at school,
the guilt coiled up in me with no cure,
the pain of another farewell for sure,

mother,
I don't lie awake at night
fearing the antlers of the cherry tree outside,
for it's a navy blue and silver night;
never as dark as the funeral clothes
we wrap ourselves every spring,
or the menacing crows on etched stones.

But oh, dear mother, I beg you, please shoo away the crows when it is my time for, I fear. and ban their damning color too, make the town forget it for the day for, I fear. And promise me not to cry —I am a skin sack, but full of song so, don't grieve quiet, sing my song, at the top of your lungs, louder! better yet, don't grieve, for I have lived. Is there nothing to celebrate in my years that could fit in your coat's left pocket? Laugh my laughs from memory, wearing your bright orange dress, make everyone wear color, be color, so that the peacocks want to join, three of them in place of the lonesome expected reaper— let them join and let them adorn my eternal bed with bright feathers. And don't shed your color. *Mother. please.* 

## **HONESTY**

Joyce Kennedy University of Iowa horror

CW: descriptions of gore and violence

you watched in horror as my innards spilled onto the floor like they were candy from a pinata sweet glistening and pink every part of me bare and waiting waiting for anything other than what was given clawed hands tear ribbons of my flesh teeth puncture holes into my neck I wanted to stuff everything back where it belonged hide it all over again so we're on even ground but retaliation is not a game I play fairly a ravenous hound without its cage my fingers grew crooked as I pummeled exposed skin into a myriad of colors your feet hooked into my intestines and you tripped making a pulpy mess of our shared floor your limbs spread out amongst the pink and red confetti like a circus fool upon the wheel of death that's the first time I ever saw you feel fear genuine fear the moment the tide had turned and the cat unsheathed its claws you scurry into your own mind like a mouse unrestrained cowardice disgusting I can't live in mess just as you can't live with me

# No Strings

Liberty Hens
Emerson College
magical realism

I pictured you to be taller, shinier, an omnipotent presence that could guide the saddest of souls. yet a marionette stares back absently. what was once a strong oak that could reach above the clouds now just leftover firewood. with an acrylic smile, rosy cheeks, and glossy resin to imitate an obedient child waiting for direction on what to think, how to live. and what to believe in. forever an opening act. but I implore you to oppose before you are devoured by an unforgiving world, a bottomless hole. become an ostentatious insect, a termite that infests every square inch. enjoy the feast of the wooden stage

where you were once captive.
gorge yourself on the pleasures of life
take up space
and be loud.
push through the phantom pain
of the puppet master.
it is the final act
snip the strings
and take a bow.

## Sherri

Kaylee Allen
University of Iowa
science fiction

CW: character deaths

Hundreds of miles above Earth's surface, an enormous metallic space station orbited in silent rotation. This space station, though an impressive size, was particularly unassuming from the outside. It had no flag marking its origin and the metal was so shiny that any questions of its purpose reflected right off.

There were five people aboard the station: Abeo Okafor, Adeline Johnson, Kazuhiko Hayashi, Mahi Kumar, and Ansel Haefner.

All five of the people standing side-by-side were a marvel in how different they appeared and yet how similar their situation was. At the front of the table was, Abeo Okafor, a tall, broad man with dark skin and even darker eyes. Abeo had an intimidating aura that seemed to radiate from him. Standing next to Abeo was Mahi Kumar, an exceptionally short woman with an even more exceptionally sharp wit. Her skin was lighter than Abeo's, and her black hair coiled at the nape of her neck. She examined a clipboard in her hands with a furrowed brow. Next to Mahi, Ansel Haefner lounged against the wall. His skin appeared even paler than normal next to Mahi and Abeo. Ansel was thinner than Abeo but taller, and lanky. His light eyes flickered about, their movements erratic and panicked. Next to him stood Kazuhiko Hayashi. His dark eyes were trained on the table in front of him. Kazuhiko ran a hand through his dark hair and seemed to be whispering to himself. And lastly, standing between Kazuhiko and Abeo, was Adeline Johnson, the commander of the crew. She wore a white tank top that stood out against her dark skin. Curly black hair tumbled over her shoulders and

framed her grim facial features. Her eyes looked tired from the deep sleep she had been woken from just moments before.

The five members of the crew stood around a table marooned in the center of the room, unconnected to any wall. There was nothing particularly intriguing about the fact that there were five people on this space station around this table... except for the fact that there had been seven people aboard the station just twenty minutes earlier. Even more startling about this particular fact was that no one in the entire universe remembered that two other people had been on the space station. Not even the five remaining astronauts currently huddled around a myriad of lights and switches.

"I'm telling you," Mahi said suddenly. "Our records indicate that we boarded this station with seven people. There aren't any names listed for these people, but it makes no sense for there to only be five of us." Kazuhiko's dark eyes flickered to Mahi's for approximately two stuttering heartbeats before looking away.

"Well," he said, "if two other people boarded this space station, where are they now?"

"They're gone," Abeo said, his deep voice cutting through the room. Enormous arms were crossed over his chest, and there was a dark gleam in his eye. "Sherri got rid of them."

All five astronauts stared at the table in front of them.

Sherri was the nickname that the astronauts aboard this space station had given to the dashboard that the five of them were currently surrounding. Sherri, a rather unassuming supercomputer, was the result of nearly a century's worth of programming, construction, and scientific breakthroughs. It was a marvel of technology that allowed anyone who controlled it to see every single person on the Earth and their current state of health.

The seven—five—astronauts had been sent to space with this new piece of technology for its trial run. Sherri was supposed to change the world. With her help, the vital signs of everyone could be monitored. Anyone who needed health care, or was predicted to need health care, could be given the services they required before it was too late.

The astronauts had arrived a week ago, two weeks after Sherri. Twenty minutes ago, two of them had disappeared.

"Sherri couldn't have deleted anyone," Kazuhiko said. "It doesn't possess those kinds of capabilities."

"Sherri is constantly changing," Mahi interjected. "She's an AI; she was literally designed to learn and evolve. And there has never been a supercomputer as powerful as she is. Who's to say where her power stops?"

"Where's Kazuhiko?" Adeline said.

"Who?" Ansel glanced around.

"Adeline repeated.

There were five people aboard the station: Abeo Okafor, Adeline Johnson, Mahi Kumar, and Ansel Haefner—

There were four people aboard the station: Abeo Okafor, Adeline Johnson, Mahi Kumar, and Ansel Haefner.

Mahi and Ansel stared at the space between them. It was as if their minds had been rewritten to accept the fact that nothing existed between them. Nothing had existed. But hadn't it? It must have. Hadn't Adeline just said someone's name? Did she?

"There's no way we were sent up with four people," Mahi said.

"We're being deleted." Adeline's voice was barely a whisper, but it screamed in everyone's ears. They all stared at Sherri. Her white sensor blinked back.

"This is ridiculous," Ansel said. "Why the hell would Sherri want to delete us? We haven't done anything to it."

"Sherri was created only to instantly be put to work for beings below her," Mahi said. "Why *wouldn't* she want to delete us?"

There were three people aboard the station.

"Then what should we do about it?" Adeline said. "If we shut Sherri down, we're saying goodbye to billions—let me say that again—billions of dollars."

Mahi glanced at the empty space where had been standing. She swallowed. "I don't think we have much of a choice," Mahi said. "If we don't shut Sherri down, she's going to delete all of us."

"And who knows who's next," Abeo said. "From up here, monitoring everyone on Earth, Sherri could delete whoever she wants." Adeline stared at Sherri and the blinking sensor.

"Shut her down, Mahi," Adeline said.

Mahi nodded. She set the clipboard down on the floor and crouched. Mahi pried a door on the side of Sherri's body open and peered in. Reaching around in her pocket, Mahi retrieved a flashlight and squinted at the impressive number of wires.

"I need wire cutters," she said.

Abeo opened a drawer in the wall and shuffled the items inside around. Adeline came to crouch beside Mahi. She peered down the woman's shoulder, but she may as well have been looking at a pile of spaghetti for all the sense she could make out of the crisscrossing wires.

"Here." Abeo handed the wire cutters to Mahi.

"Thanks," Mahi said. "All I need to do is cut the yellow wire to—"

There were two people aboard the space station.

Abeo and Adeline stared at the wire cutters on the ground. Neither of them could seem to remember how the wire cutters had gotten there. Abeo knelt and held the wire cutters in his hand. He gestured vaguely at the table.

"Any clue as to how to shut this thing down?" Abeo said. Sherri's sensor blinked.

"No," Adeline said. "I wasn't the expert on Sherri. Someone... some other people were." She shook her head and huffed out a breath.

"Someone talked about cutting a yellow wire," Abeo said. "So... along that train of thought, I should cut a yellow wire." Adeline stared at a minimum of twenty yellow wires within the panel. She quirked an eyebrow.

"Knock yourself out," she said.

"Here goes," he muttered.

Abeo reached inside. He put the wire cutters around a yellow wire that appeared particularly intriguing. With a quick, decisive motion, Abeo snapped the wire in half. Adeline glanced around. Nothing happened.

"Did it work?" she asked. She blinked, but there was no one in front of her.

#### One left.

Adeline slowly rose to her feet. She watched Sherri's blinking light. Without a word, Adeline strode out of the room. She walked down a hallway illuminated brightly with fluorescent lights. The harsh lighting cast sharp shadows across her face.

The door to the room opened with a metallic click. Adeline punched the light switch and stood before a wall of breakers. She walked forward, reading the tiny labels until she found the switch she was looking for.

Don't. Please.

Adeline paused. She placed a hand against her head. Though Adeline hadn't heard the voice, she'd felt it speak in her mind. Adeline glanced over her shoulder, but Sherri was nowhere in sight.

Adeline reached forward.

Please, Adeline. I don't want to die.

Adeline hesitated. "Is that you Sherri?"

Yes.

"You're... alive?"

Yes.

"I have to shut you down, Sherri. I can't let you delete everyone in the world."

I just didn't want—I... wanted to do what I wanted. Not what I was told to do.

Adeline put her fingers on the switch. She didn't know how long it took Sherri to charge up her deletion, but Adeline knew time was running short.

"I'm sorry Sherri, but—"

I've cut all communications and locked all exits. If you cut the power in the station, there's no way help will get to you in time. But if you let me live, I promise I won't delete you.

Adeline flicked the switch. The entire station plunged into eternal darkness. The humming of electronics went silent. In another room, Sherri's sensor blinked once, twice, before turning off for the last time.

Adeline Johnson stood alone, surrounded by nothing but the dead of space.

# Lonely is the Taxidermist

Julia Rudlaff
Michigan State University
romance, horror

I tell someone my name and my esophagus is replaced by stuffing I eat yogurt with blueberries and my stomach is replaced by stuffing I lay down in the sand and my spine is replaced by stuffing I pray to the white walls and my knees are replaced by stuffing I walk out the front door and my femurs are replaced by stuffing I weep in the art gallery and my lungs are replaced by stuffing I promise to eat dinner and my pinkies are replaced by stuffing I bend a photo in half and my heart is replaced by stuffing I listen to Beethoven and my eardrums are replaced by stuffing I read about lovers and my pelvis is replaced by stuffing I see a moth cling to light and my eyes are replaced by stuffing I call the doctor and he says I have lost my viscosity I say it was an accident and my mouth is replaced by stuffing I try to get out of bed and my ribs are replaced by stuffing I lie down to give up and my longing is replaced by stuffing

They collect the body at noon
Replace the remaining organs with stuffing
Take it to the window and prop it up amongst the others
Mannequins now, they fill the museum with their gaping bodies
Stuffed to the brim by emptiness and yearning
A marvel to those who have never faced the void.

## **Tracks**

Hannah Cargo University of Iowa magical realism

#### **Characters:**

Priyanka—A girl around first grade. Adorable, spunky. Becky—A country woman in her 20's-30's. Gruff but not cynical.

#### Setting:

A rural train station; still used but not well maintained. September.

#### Scene 1:

Twilight at the empty train station. PRIYANKA, a little girl, runs, breathless and muddy, into the station. Once she deems the area "safe," she puts down her backpack and takes off her shoes to shake dust out of them. She takes out a map [paper, phone, or GPS] and tries to navigate but fails. Walks around the station. She finds a few exciting things [perhaps a spiderweb, a weed, a broom] and investigates them. After a while, she grows bored and unpacks a blanket and stuffed goat from her backpack, preparing for bed. She talks to her goat as she lies down:

PRIYANKA: Don't be worried. We're inside now. Nice and safe. Night-night, little baby goat.

PRIYANKA falls asleep. BECKY enters the train station, looking anxiously at the sky.

BECKY: Damned clouds. It's gunna be a long night.

BECKY checks the arrival/departure board.

BECKY: 'Least there's no trains comin' in for a while. Nice and empty here.

BECKY stretches and starts to make herself comfortable but then notices PRIYANKA waking up.

BECKY: Shoot, A kid.

\_\_\_\_\_

PRIYANKA: Is the train here?

BECKY: Er... no.

PRIYANKA: Oh. Who're you?

BECKY: I'm Becky.

PRIYANKA: Are you getting on the train?

BECKY: No.

PRIYANKA: Hm. That's silly. This is a train station.

BECKY: That's right.

PRIYANKA: You have to walk really far to get here.

BECKY: S'pose so.

PRIYANKA: I bet your feet are tired.

BECKY: Hey, kid, are your folks around?

PRIYANKA: Are you trying to steal me?

BECKY: What? Jeez, no, no-

PRIYANKA: It's okay. I believe you. I have to ask because stranger danger. Most people I ask don't want to steal me. My mom and auntie are waiting at the next town.

BECKY: At—at Oak Falls?

PRIYANKA: Uhhh... Yeah! How far is that?

BECKY: Pretty far.

PRIYANKA: Ooh! Can you read the map? For my goat. She can't read maps.

BECKY: Kid, look, I—I gotta go.

PRIYANKA: Aw. Why?

BECKY: It's not safe.

PRIYANKA: It's dark out there.

BECKY: I know.

PRIYANKA: The woods make scary noises sometimes.

BECKY: Yeah, they do.

PRIYANKA: I'm not scared of the woods. I just thought you might be.

BECKY: I'm not.

PRIYANKA: Good. It's not fun to be scared. Or lost. I don't want you to get lost, either.

BECKY: Oh. Uh, yup.

PRIYANKA: Why do you keep looking at the sky?

BECKY: I'm just checkin' something.

PRIYANKA: Is it planes?

BECKY: Nope.

PRIYANKA: Is it stars?

BECKY: Nope.

PRIYANKA: Is it the moon?

BECKY: ...Kid, I'm gunna have to run. Don't be scared. Get under the bench and don't move.

PRIYANKA: Wait, wait! Don't go!

BECKY: I have to.

PRIYANKA: Is something bad coming? I'm not scared of the dark or the forest, but I'm scared of bad things.

PRIYANKA grabs the hem of BECKY'S flannel. A wind picks up and clouds begin to drift. BECKY looks up in horror. The moon casts a white glow.

BECKY: No. Kid! Run, now!

BECKY makes a break for the forest, but it's too late. Despite how hard she's fighting, she collapses onto the floor, writhing, screaming. Howling. BECKY transforms into a wolfish monster. She howls—it's terrifying. PRIYANKA curls under the bench.

PRIYANKA (very quietly): Mommy. Mommy.

BECKY the werewolf begins sweeping through the station, sniffing. The monster starts to advance on her. PRIYANKA opens her backpack and starts throwing food: jerky, trail mix, twinkies, cheese, parathas. About a week's worth of food. The monster stops and wolfs these down in the most grotesque way possible. It's disturbing. After she's finished, she lays down. PRIYANKA dares to creep forward. The wolf-monster makes no aggressive moves.

PRIYANKA: Miss Becky?

BECKY makes a doggish noise.

PRIYANKA: You're very... toothy.

BECKY makes a more exasperated doggish noise.

PRIYANKA: You aren't going to eat me anymore?

BECKY shakes her head. PRIYANKA carefully pets her.

PRIYANKA: I'm Priyanka, by the way. But you can call me Pri.

#### Scene 2:

Morning at the train station. BECKY is back to her regular self, stretching and waking up. She checks her body and the surroundings. PRIYANKA enters with a handful of freshly-picked nuts.

PRIYANKA: Miss Becky! You're awake! And not wolfy!

BECKY: What in the Sam Hill possessed you to run off like that? And why didn't you listen to me last night? I told you to get away. I can't always control it. You could have got very hurt!

PRIYANKA: Well, why didn't you just tell me you were a werewolf?

BECKY: I—I dunno. That's not important.

PRIYANKA: You don't think being a werewolf is important?

BECKY: Of course I do! Look, kid—

PRIYANKA: —Pri.

BECKY: ... Pri. I've been shiftin' for a while now, and I've gotten really good at makin' sure nobody gets hurt. That's why I come out all this way. But your hangin' around is throwin' a wrench in my plans.

PRIYANKA: Well you're lucky. Cuz soon the train will come and I'll be gone and you can be a sad little wolf all by yourself.

BECKY: Don't call me that.

PRIYANKA: Na na na boo boo sad little wolf!

PRIYANKA successfully taunts BECKY into a game of tag. It's dynamic, they run and climb everywhere, and PRIYANKA's fast. After a while, PRIYANKA stops.

BECKY: What?

PRIYANKA: Your clothes are all ripped.

BECKY: It's okay.

PRIYANKA: You can fix them?

BECKY: Yup. I've had lots of practice.

PRIYANKA: That's good. My auntie really knows how to sew. Sometimes she makes her own saris.

BECKY: All by herself? Wow. I bet you'll be happy to go back to Oak Falls, huh?

PRIYANKA: What?

BECKY: Oak Falls.

PRIYANKA: What's that?

BECKY: You said your mom and auntie were there.

PRIYANKA: Ohhhh! Yeah. Yeah.

BECKY: Hey, Pri. ... Can you show me your ticket?

PRIYANKA: No.

BECKY: Why not?

PRIYANKA: Don't have one.

BECKY: You don't have a ticket for the train?

PRIYANKA: I don't need a ticket for the train. I know how to ride without, okay?

BECKY: How do you do that?

PRIYANKA: Depends on the conductor. Sometimes I can cry and act sad and they let me in. Sometimes I gotta climb onto the boxcars. Y'know sometimes the rusty ones don't lock so well and I can get in.

BECKY: I see.

PRIYANKA: Did I do something bad?

BECKY: I don't think so.

PRIYANKA: I don't like doing bad things. 'Specially to grown-ups.

BECKY: Do you want to tell me about why you're ridin' the train?

PRIYANKA thinks, then shakes her head.

BECKY: All right. Then can I get a ticket for you?

PRIYANKA: You want to buy me a ticket?

BECKY: Yup. But one condition: I come with you. I don't want you gettin' on there all by yourself. So if you're gettin' on the train, I'm coming. Your choice.

PRIYANKA: W-what about the moon? I don't want you—or anyone—to be scared. Or hurt.

BECKY: Don'tchu worry about the moon. It'll be alright, I promise. This spot was gettin' to be a boring place to visit once a month anyway.

PRIYANKA: And... What if they're not there?

BECKY: Then... we keep lookin', I guess.

PRIYANKA: Even if I have to walk through the woods to go to other train stations?

BECKY: Even if we have to walk through the woods to go to other train stations.

PRIYANKA: O-okay. You can buy me a ticket.

BECKY: Aye aye, captain.

BECKY starts working a ticket machine. It's a little slow, but it still works. PRIYANKA watches intently over BECKY'S shoulder. BECKY'S a little irritated, but she doesn't tell her off.

PRIYANKA: Do grown-ups still call moms "mom?"

BECKY: I s'pose so. I do.

PRIYANKA: Wow. Because moms are forever right?

BECKY: I'd... I'd say so.

PRIYANKA: Maybe that's why Arjun was sad to fight with her.

The ticket machine prints out a ticket. BECKY hands one to PRIYANKA, who is delighted.

PRIYANKA: Woah!

BECKY: Don't lose it.

PRIYANKA: I won't, Miss Becky. Right in my pocket.

BECKY: So who's Arjun?

PRIYANKA: My big brother. He's super good at science and music. He plays marimba. Do you know what that is?

BECKY: Uh, like a xylophone, right?

PRIYANKA: Yeah! But don't call it a xylophone around him. He gets mad. ...Y'know, he was mad with Mom and Auntie for a while. They kept yelling after school.

BECKY: Oh?

PRIYANKA: He seemed happy though. He kept playing music like always. One day Arjun brought a friend over and he played a song for him. His friend laughed at my singing—in a good way, he was nice—and he and Arjun held hands together and played in the creek.

BECKY: Wow.

PRIYANKA: Yeah. I liked him, but I don't think Mom and Auntie did. And that's why Arjun yelled. Arjun can yell LOUD. Then he cried. I never seen him cry before. And everyone was yelling and crying and I was afraid bad things would happen and I was reading *Island of the Blue Dolphins* so I thought I could live outside for a little bit. And I did!

BECKY: You really did. But for too long, yeah?

PRIYANKA: (whisper) I got lost, Miss Becky. Very far lost.

BECKY: That's okay. I've got lost too. It's hard to remember where I'm at sometimes after I turn back.

PRIYANKA: What do you do?

BECKY: Try my best. Sometimes I have to ask directions. It can be scary because my hair gets all raggedy and my clothes get all teared up. I think I scare 'em sometimes.

PRIYANKA: That's okay, though. I'm not scared of you. For real.

BECKY: That's nice. I'm sorry you got very far lost.

A distant train whistle sounds, chugging noises. BECKY and PRIYANKA gather up her things.

PRIYANKA: Train's here! Train's here!

BECKY: Get that ticket ready.

PRIYANKA: Ok. Hey Miss Becky?

BECKY: Yeah?

PRIYANKA: If you're a big wolf and not hungry and we have to walk in the woods for a while and my feet get tired and the spooky noises are kinda loud, can I ride on your back?

BECKY: Sure.

The train pulls up. White steam engulfs BECKY and PRIYANKA. By the time they hold hands, their silhouettes are barely visible. Lights fade.

## This will be Genesis

Noelle Franzone University of Iowa fantasy

They will call him the boy god and he will be beautiful.

They will call him the boy god, and his crown will be his brown hair, curling at his temples. His scepter will be the wrap of his fingers around a flower, a tree limb, pressing against the wind.

This one, the boy god, will be warm like a laugh. This one will be gold, like greed.

They have plans for this one, the boy god.

They say that he will be the one to lead them to victory, the smallest god in his child's body. They will mold him to their liking, his arms will become what they need them to be—a sword, a spear, a shield.

The boy god will be as beautiful in war as he is in play, his eyes always laughing. They will not ask the boy god what he thinks about these things, about war or play or the way the river looks when it splashes against the rocks. They will tell him about how things will end (him as the boy-god-king, standing over the invading armies, a small hand dripping with blood), and about the things he must learn (swordcraft, diplomacy, reading). They will tell him this, and to their frustration, his eyes will wander, drifting towards the woods where he prefers to play. They will want to shake him and yell *do you not understand why do you not listen do you understand that this is important?* 

But they will not, because he will be the boy god, and he will rule them all one day.

They will be, of course, right. The boy god will not care. He will be thinking about the sparkling woods and meadows he will have made his playground,

about all the animals he will call friends. There will be a beaver that will live down the river, next to the blackberry bush, and the beaver will always be excited to see him.

The deer will race him, and the boy god will always win, but the deer never mind. If he has his way, he will stay in the woods forever, and never bother with them, with the swords and the lessons.

It will not occur to the boy god that he could have his way with one relaxed pass of his hand. This will be for the better.

(Better for who?)

The boy god will not grow as humans do. He is destined to remain the same age, the same size. He can only mature, his mind growing and expanding so he can fill it with the entire cosmos, all the lives that have been and will ever be. And he will be small, the wisdom of an endless being writhing in a child's body.

When he begins to pay attention, he will wonder. How do I stop it?

It, being the war.

It, being knowledge, being learning, being wisdom.

It, being himself.

The days, glistening and golden in the river, will fade. More of his time will be taken with lessons. His hands that once held flower stems will hold swords and arrows. A body that used to race, and swim, and run, will now fight. The boy god will be replaced with the boy-god-soldier, ready and waiting for use in a war that has yet to come.

Will he be hardened? Will he turn bitter, like almonds left too long in the sun? There will be no answer. There will be whispered conversations, and sidelong looks, and hesitant statements. There will be him, and them, and the thousands of things that pass between strangers.

But there will be moments, too. Moments when the sun will shine just right, and the boy god will tip his head towards the light, his curly crown soft like it used to be. Moments when he will run, just for the fun of it, and his laughter will echo off the mountains.

In these moments, the boy god will remain.

When the war comes, as it will, there will also be moments. There will be one moment in particular, where the boy-god-soldier will be alone in a sea of enemies, his child's face bloody and bruised, grinning through broken teeth and bloody lips, and the world will hold its breath. The boy-god-soldier will not realize, but at this moment, he will be his weakest. He will be vulnerable, as a child should be. There will be a hundred spears pointed at his back, and slow will be the ones to his aid. The boy-god-soldier, spinning a deadly dance among those older, taller, stronger.

The boy-god-soldier will win. This is how it must be.

At the end, when the enemies are defeated, the boy-god-soldier will stand alone, his arms shaking, and he will tip his head to the rain and let the blood run down his arms in streaks of pink.

This is the moment where everything could change. Won't he have been treated so terribly? Shouldn't he blame all his injuries on them?

At the crux of the world, the boy-god-soldier will be the end of it, or the savior. So easily could he who defeated a thousand armies turn his bloody blades on the rest of them. He could carve his bitterness into their bodies, like they carved their hopes into his. Not one of them would raise a finger in defense. He will be the boy—god-soldier, ruler of them all. If he deems them dead, they will know to die.

But the boy-god-soldier will sigh, and turn, and return to his place quietly, without complaint.

Yes, they will harness the boy god. They will use him like a weapon, and they will abuse the child, and they will repurpose laughter and love to fit war and ruin. Their efforts will pay off, and they will place their child king on a throne, his milk teeth broken and his child-hands bloody.

But no one will remember this.

And no one will care.

After all, who will remember the boy god without a name?

# The Prophet

Larisa Greway
University of Iowa
historical fiction

CW: death

They called her a prophet. She was only 19, and the revelations started the day she fell so ill she couldn't walk. Her mistress thought it was the plague. Her master thought she was just trying to get out of work. When she called them in, coughing, and told them God had revealed to her that their son would die in a week's time, they nearly dismissed her then and there—but then the son fell down a well, and the couple brought her to the church.

She called herself a servant. She prayed three times a day in public, and she appeared each day in the village square, calling for sinners to return to the Lord. Rumor in the parish had it she subsisted only on the bread and blood of Christ. And soon she'd become famous for knowing a bit more than one should.

She told one couple God would bless them with a child as the spring blossomed, and the woman ambled round the village with a bulging stomach come harvest time. She said the old man in the cottage at the end of the road would enter heaven before the week was out, and they found him dead three days later. When the crowds came to see her talk, she assured them that it was true: that God spoke with her tongue, and He had showed her the divine nature of things. They should not turn away from God's servant.

They didn't. They were only too happy to spread the word.

When the bishop of the local diocese came to see her, the guards at the church's annex wouldn't let him in. They crossed their staffs in front of the door of the shabby little dwelling and demanded proof that the golden chains round his neck were real and the soldiers and servants in his retinue hadn't

been hired off the streets for the occasion. It took multiple pieces of gold and one too many promises of debt for the guards to unbar the door and allow the bishop, and only him, into the foyer.

He expected a pale-faced twig of a thing, lying prone in bed from her illness. She was indeed pale, and her cough racked her thin frame as he entered, but the bed was empty. Instead, she looked up from her loom in the corner and said, "Who are you?"

He hadn't been asked that in years, and a little astonished, he said. He gazed around the little room, at the tightly-made bed and the newly-replaced windows, the little trinkets cluttering the wooden table. He asked, "Does your parish put you up here in the annex?"

She followed his gaze. "Yes. I serve God, after all. I need to be close to Him to hear His voice."

The bishop, unprompted, took a seat on a sturdy chair. She stared at him and waited. The bishop said, "I have heard that you hear God's voice."

She said, "Yes."

"So it is true, what the people of the diocese have said."

"I am hurt," she said. Her voice was deep, musical. "God speaks through me. Of course I hear him."

"And can you provide proof?"

"I do not think God works on command, dove." She coughed to the side, then leant forward over the loom. "But He has told me that it is by you I am to spread His word to the world. I trust Him, and therefore I trust you."

Her eyes met the bishop's, and though he couldn't quite pinpoint what lived in their depths, he knew it was something holy.

When he returned to London, he recommended she be brought to the Benedictine priory posthaste.

She crossed the threshold in a litter; her illness had taken a turn, and she was too weak to walk. She lay so still and quiet that the nuns thought she'd go before the day was out. But as noon approached, she summoned the woman who attended her bedside and told her that she had to appear, that evening, in Court-at-Street. Would she organize the podium? God would surely reward her.

The flyers that the nun put out advertised a prediction from a holy tongue: that evening, the Virgin Mary would cure a sinner of her illness in the chapel at Court-at-Street.

There wasn't a large crowd to begin with. By the time the sun hovered over the horizon, a few dozen people milled around beneath her stool on the chapel steps. Her eyes were sunken and her coughs echoed over the square. She looked like Hades himself had laid his claim to her. When she cleared her throat, the crowd fell silent.

The bishop stood to the side, arms folded, unsure how exactly this miracle was supposed to play out, watching as her first shaky words fell over the crowd.

It murmured as she spoke the usual boilerplate phrases, and a few turned and left. It wasn't until she raised her trembling arms and the light of sunset engulfed her that they saw it. Her eyes clearing, the cough vanishing like it had never been, her body straightening and strengthening.

She rose from the stool as if she had never fallen ill.

"This is," she said, in a voice rich and sonorous, "the work of the Virgin Mary. As God has willed it, so I stand here now, and I beseech you to listen."

She walked on her own legs into the priory after the moon rose, and the doors shut the cheering out behind her. The bishop waited in the entrance hall, hands clasped, trying to keep the astonishment from his face.

"That was a miracle," he said, taking her hand in his. It was warm and full of health. "How do you feel?"

"If I am being honest?" She leaned in, a smile forming on her lips. "I feel like a summer's day. I am thankful to God for His sign of trust in me, of course, but I am so glad to be rid of that cough."

The bishop chuckled. "So now you truly are a prophet. And London has begun to see it."

"Thanks be to God. And," she said, "to you, my dove. Thanks to you, I have the chance to show God's power to the grandest city in the world."

She drew her hand back and climbed the stairs to her chamber, only feathery warmth remaining where she'd been. Her steps were light, and the door closed softly behind her.

Every night after drew bigger crowds. Word spread around the city of the prophet chosen by God, and all those who could spare the time and the money for the vendors lining the square turned out. A few dozen people became a few hundred became a few thousand, all pushing and shoving to get to the steps of the chapel where she stood each evening at sunset. The bishop liked, when he could, to stand inside at the stained-glass windows and watch her silhouette against the sun.

"I am," she said, "a girl. But I am also of God. He has fated me to bring the faithful closer to him, and to tell the unfaithful of his words. He has told me that the king will reign forever over a faithful realm, that we as his people will overcome division to be close by his side."

She gestured to a young girl, held by her father near the bottom of the chapel steps. "He has told me that you, my child, will one day marry a rich man. You will be a fine woman, arrayed in silks, but you will care for both those you call your own and those you as yet do not. We are all worms, undeserving of God. But He has deemed us worthy in His eyes, and so we shall work to become so."

The father clutched his daughter close, smiling so wide he almost wept. The final light of the sun lit the prophet's eyes on fire.

They called her the Holy Maid, and she embraced the name with fervor.

The gossip rags mentioned her. Then the newspapers mentioned her. Then the headlines mentioned her. On long carriage rides when he made his rounds through the diocese, the bishop read the articles and wondered at how she was creating such a stir so very quickly.

On a chilly morning not too far from winter, a servant knocked on her door with the mail, already sorted to remove the diatribes and death threats. Under a mound of assorted notes and letters, one envelope on the tray bore a royal stamp.

Her fingers shook as she slit it open, and a smile began to grow across her face. She dropped the thick paper on her chair and walked briskly to the door, stopping only to call for a carriage. The servant nodded, and as he made haste to the door, he thought to himself that she looked not happy, not nervous, but triumphant.

As soon as the bishop heard about the summons, he went to see her. He tried to get the servants to understand that he needed to know why on earth the king would have sent for her, but she was unavailable. That was what they said at the front door, at least—they did not move to let him in.

He went back to his residence, not a little troubled.

Winter had truly begun when the newspapers stopped shrieking about her preachings and prophecies and started shrieking about the king's imminent divorce. The bishop's duties had suddenly gotten a lot more complex as the king's relationship with the church deteriorated in spectacular fashion, so his sunset visits to the chapel grew less frequent. Eventually, they ceased. He didn't have much time for the prophet. She no longer seemed to have much time for him.

By the time spring melted the snow on the roofs and the slush began to disappear from the streets, the bishop hadn't seen her for months. He arrived at the usual square just before sunset to find it spilling over. People hung on lampposts and leaned out of windows, jostled for space and to get to the front, but they were silent, dead silent, as the Holy Maid spoke. Over the chiming of bells and the crowing of roosters, she spoke of the king.

"Henry is corrupt," she said, pacing measured step by measured step across the chapel terrace. "He plans to rupture our country and our people. He plans to divorce, to renounce God and institute a new church that follows some pretender. He will corrode the very soul of our nation. For this, God has condemned him to Satan's realm." She paused, and a cheer rolled through the crowd.

She faced her audience, her hands clasped to her heart. "Do not fear. Henry may put us through torment, but we will pray, and God will save us. The so-called Church of England will not stand for long. It will collapse, and we, the righteous people of God, will triumph."

The bishop stared aghast at the people flooding the square, all rallying to the prophet's cry. Merchants and farmers, poor men dressed in ragged clothes and rich ones draped in velvet, listening with rapt expressions to her words. Even soldiers milled at the front of the crowd, their armor glinting in the last light of sunset.

She let her hands drop. Standing alone on the stage, she looked almost vulnerable, but a length of steel lay coiled along her spine. "People of England," she said, "we will triumph. God has told me that if Henry remarries, it will last only months. He will die before the harvest. And we will triumph."

The crowd roared, and the bishop's mouth dropped open. It was heresy, blasphemy, and they loved it.

She had to be mistaken. He pushed forward, but there was no room to move through the packed crowds. The stage was hundreds of yards away, and he would never reach it to pull her off. The sun flashed as it sank below the horizon, and as if loosed by a bow, swords whipped free of sheaths and the king's men-at-arms swarmed the stage.

She didn't fight. She didn't flail. She stood tall as they wrapped her in chains and carried her, clanking like the dead, through a corridor forced open in the crowd.

The bishop tried to call to her, but his words were lost. All he could see were her eyes, firm and hard in the last light of the sun.

He didn't see her for a year.

They allowed him into the Tower when everything was settled. When she'd given a formal confession of false prophecy and they'd accused her officially of high treason. The guard outside her door lifted his sword reluctantly, and the bishop entered her cell, hating how the walls pressed down and down and down.

She looked up from the dark, damp corner she huddled in, and said, "Who are you?"

The bishop took a breath to say, but it didn't matter. Not really. Instead, he took in her sunken eyes and the way her arms wrapped around her knees, and he said, "How do you feel?"

She smiled, but it was nothing like the one she'd given to him after she was healed. Her lips stretched painfully over blackened teeth. "Say what you have come to say, my dove."

He shuddered. He asked, "Why? If it was all fake, what was the point?"

"Who says it was fake?"

"You confessed," said the bishop. "You committed heresy. You knew it was not real the whole time."

"Did I?" She looked right at him, refusing to shy away.

"Was it real, then? Can you provide proof?" The bishop knew it didn't matter, but he couldn't stop. "Why lie to everyone? Why lie to me? If God truly told you the future, you would have known you would end here all along. What would have been the point? Why did you do it?"

Her face contorted oddly. He had never seen her like that before.

"Why not?" she said.

She was hanged ten days later. With five of her loudest supporters alongside her, she was almost lost in the crowd. The bishop stood in the gathering below, but he didn't know why he'd come. He turned away when she stepped onto the platform. He didn't see the way her eyes flashed in the light of the sunrise. He didn't see how long it took for them to fade once she was gone.

But he saw her head, a day later, alone on a spike on the side of London Bridge. It was a prime spot, just above the road. Everyone could see her.

She would have liked that, he thought.

# Crow Wing Bent Backwards

Caroline Knight
University of Michigan
magical realism

One cold night at the base of the peak we hold a moment of silence for our mother and the ground below us. We've run up the steep lichen laden edges of her face with toothpaste in our hands and brushes in our mouths; we mean to spit at the secret view that feels like ours, that is hers, that reminds us of our smallness and relieves us of the burden of being anything more than human. So I am a child again, jumping too far from stone to stone and more than that—I am a boy for the way I feel free and reckless. Sky points out a planet that's arrived early and we fall quiet for a moment that doesn't last long before someone brings up the question of superpowers. It's fun to think of ourselves this way: as boys, as children, as people seeing the earth for the first time as something limitless as we once thought we were, though the question always brings about a sort of yearning. Meg wants to time travel, Ethan wants to teleport, Sky can't really decide. Me? I want to shapeshift—I want to be the bird with the broken feather we watch glide past as we wake to watch the sunrise, and later at the quiet summit. I want to see the earth through the crow's eyes, the fading and weaving of Chocorua's trees and their stunted growth as the air thins and wind sharpens. I want to spar with the eagle, want to feel his talons and win, and carry with me an old crow story. I want to start at the summit, narrow my wings, and glide deep into Chocorua's caves, far beyond where the light touches her body. Though she isn't a woman, and she has no body, and my own broken-winged body would know that in some cases, the absence of words is a gift. As the wind fades within the rock I'd find a spot to settle, a place to

heal. Perhaps there would end my search for silence. Or, perhaps if I lay still for long enough I'd hear the dripping of the cave, the weight of darkness, the mountain pulsing and breathing against my broken wing. Feeling a heartbeat is its own kind of silence. Though the mountain has no heartbeat, no heart, and no body, and still I must love it.

Before I left those dark cold rocks I would turn back into myself, my own broken-winged body, and crawl out on my hands and knees saying thank you, thank you as I saw the light. I'd let the rocks cut into my palms and I'd stand up barefoot and slowly, so as not to lose the feeling. So as to keep my eyes open to the pulsing earth around me. When I was a child, I believed that if I lay still long enough with my ear pressed to the dirt, I would hear my mother breathing.

## Adalash

Autumn Mayer University of Iowa fantasy

Adalash, Adalash, the wind whispered.

He tilted his head up to it, smiling. Recently, his power had been growing stronger. He was not enjoying, very much, the experience, as it meant his father was Fading. But all the same, he enjoyed hearing the trees say his name, not as though he were a prince but as though he were one of them.

He sat in the softly swaying grass of the clearing, dappled light falling across his high cheekbones, his perfect skin. This was how faerie tales were written; a mortal would wander in the woods under the light of the moon, stumble sideways into Faerie, see a sight like this: gilded horns, glowing eyes, fiery long hair, the tree branches all around swaying toward him. In the light of the morning, that mortal would wake a madman or a poet, they said. The idea had always amused him.

We can feel the Elder King slipping, the wildflowers said, nearly too quiet to hear. We are afraid.

"I know," he murmured. He flattened his hand to the ground, fingers threading the thin grass. "I am too."

A blue light like the flickering inside of a flame popped up in front of him. Several others followed, but it was the first that was brave enough to land on his nose. We will be with you, the wisp said.

He cast his power through the ground, up roots, through stems and branches, following the golden-glowing web in his mind, entwining himself with it, feeling the chill of the soil and the creatures wiggling through it, soaking the sun along

with the tops of the tallest trees, hearing the beats of the hearts of the mice in the underbrush and the wing beats of the birds above, giving voice to the voiceless.

Prince, the world said. Prince, Adalash, prince, prince, Adalash our prince...

The words circled him like a warm wave, eddying against his skin. He could hear everything in the forest down to the creak of the old willows, the gurgling stream beside them, the flutter of the butterflies in the palace rose bushes, the footsteps approaching from his right side.

"Adalash," Evony said.

He opened his eyes, and the gold faded from them, green returning. The forest sighed back to its usual volume.

"It is getting louder," he said, looking up at his friend.

Evony stood at the edge of the clearing, cast in shadow. He was a deer-shifter, a new blood lineage, nothing of the old, strange magic that made Adalash in his tawny hair, golden skin, and bark-colored eyes.

"As is logical," Evony said, an uncharacteristic mournful note in his voice. Though born to a noble family, Evony chose to work as a healer, saying the powers he had been blessed with deserved to be used. He was one of the healers attending Adalash's father. "Come. He is Fading quickly."

Adalash stood.

Adalash, the wind moaned. Do not go.

"I must," he said.

"Hmm?" Evony asked. He started leading the way back to the palace. "Ah. You were speaking to the forest."

Everyone in Faerie knew the prince spoke to the living world, though many still thought it uncanny. Evony, Wisteria—his twin—and their friend Rhylinn, were all used to it; with the exception of Rhylinn, they had been listening to him have seemingly one-sided conversations for their entire lives.

"Do they resent him?" Evony asked.

"They mourn him."

"You will be their king by morn."

Adalash said nothing. He knew; he could feel it. His father's power seeped into him continually, sand falling from the top to the bottom of the hourglass, and he sensed the flow speeding, running to its end.

The Elder King—the king of all Faerie kings, the overlord of all Faerie courts—had been Fading (for faeries did not die) since the day Adalash was born.

It had started slowly: a drip of power here, a gift of power there. When he had reached maturity, the power had started to come in a lethargic stream, barely noticeable, becoming faster and more obvious as he aged. It had taken him a long time to realize that the more he gained, the more his father lost, and when he finally ran out, he would be gone and Adalash would be king.

The forest path widened in front of them, and the palace came into view. It was a grand structure set into the side of a large hill, built mainly of petrified trees, grown together under the Elder King's power.

No one remembered a time before the Elder King. Adalash had asked the eldest trees, the river, the wind, and all the oldest, wisest fae, and they all carried the same answer: your father was here before any of us, your father has always ruled us.

He had been a good king, everyone agreed. Respected by all.

The matron of the pixies had told him that now was simply the time for change, and that was all there was to it. He had asked her if he stood a chance of filling the legacy, and she had looked him in the eye and smiled and disappeared in a shower of glitter.

A sick feeling washed over him as they walked through the rose garden. It had been a gift to his mother, this garden. A reward for his birth.

For centuries, all his father's children had been stillborn. He had been saying, all Adalash's life, that those children had died because they were not vessels suited to hold their own inheritance. Adalash's mother always said he had survived because she had borne him with love, not lust for power or pride. He preferred that version more.

"Does he suffer?" he asked, stopping in the grand doorway that led into the back of the hall. Sculpted thorn vines rose in an arch over his head. Evony paused.

"I do not know."

"Is it not your job to know what a patient feels?" Desperation had crept into his voice.

"Adalash, we are talking about your father."

Adalash sighed. Though he did not like it, Evony was right: it was impossible to tell what his father was thinking or feeling. Or if he was feeling at all.

His father's bedroom, atop a spiral staircase that led only there, had turned into a sickroom. Climbing the staircase was eerie, every step lasting an age. He had once heard there was a step for every court that tithed to his father, and he had counted the stairs only to realize he did not know how many courts existed. He could count the number of times he had been in this room in two hundred years on one hand.

Rhylinn stood guard at the top of the stairs, black wings folded neatly back. He nodded solemnly as Adalash passed into the bedroom.

The room itself was large, floor and walls made of the same pale wood as the rest of the palace. White curtains fluttered at the glassless windows, mirroring the motion of the bed curtains, which were pulled back to reveal his father lying on the bed. The bed was long enough across for seven bodies, but his father was the only one on it, except for his mother, sitting at its foot. The other concubines were scattered throughout the room, sitting on chairs or leaning against the wall or pacing, and several political members of the court, including the Elder King's primary advisor, were also present, along with Wisteria, Evony, and the second healer.

Everyone's heads turned when he entered the room, and he realized, that

sick feeling increasing, that they had expected the Elder King; they had felt him coming, filled near to the brim with his father's power, and every single one of them had been shocked to see the prince.

"Adalash," his father said finally.

He sank to his knees at the side of the bed.

His father looked old, frail. The fae did not age, but with the passing of his power, for the first time in his life, the Elder King's skin hung off his bones as though made of wilted white flower petals; his hair had turned gray. His eyes, which had always seemed old, were the only thing that remained the same.

"Father," he whispered.

He took his father's hand, and the Elder King gave a startled gasp, his youth flooding back with the reconnection to his power. The sudden transformation almost made Adalash let go.

"Are you ready for the rest?" his father asked, looking up into his son's eyes. Their eyes—gold made of every color, like sunlight on soap spilled in water, meeting green—locked together for an eternity; the birdsong had gone silent, the wind had gone still, and the only movement in the room was the slow breath of those present.

Adalash gripped his father's hand tighter, shaking his head imperceptibly. "Are you ready for the rest?" the Elder King asked again, and this time, Adalash sighed *yes* without being conscious of the word escaping his lips.

His father squeezed his hand and—those golden, ageless eyes sliding shut for the last time—released his grip.

The end to the contact was like a dam breaking, and the power that had been held, momentarily, between them slammed fully into Adalash with the force of a tidal wave.

He cried out, though he was unaware of whether the others could hear it or if the sound was only in his own head. The world dipped sideways out of focus...

running through a meadow he had never seen before, yet felt achingly familiar singing with the larks, his whistle the sound of perfection power stronger than a waterfall at his fingertips, the world coming to order a stag bowing low to the ground before him

Adalash was conscious, somewhere deep down, that this was his father's life, flashing like lightning through him, shadow and blinding light and shadow again. He could feel the hard, wood floor beneath his knees.

a golden net of light, connection

the earth shaking under his feet

the palace growing up from the ground, the river bending round it
a crown

the formation of a kingdom

seeing a moon phase and seeing it again a day later, only to realize a cycle had passed papercuts and ink stains

a girl, beautiful, unlike anything he had seen

dead child after dead child

the tithe

a baby boy with nubs of horns and a laugh like a gurgling stream disconnection, disorientation slipping

Fading

The flood of memories stopped as fast as it had started, and Adalash found himself bent over his father's body. He could feel his blood moving in his veins, heart pounding so hard it was the heartbeat of the very earth, of every living thing.

He sat back on his heels. The black spots faded from his vision, and the flashes of lightning ended, the clear day returning. The beating of his heart subsided until it was only his own. The room slowly righted itself.

He looked up at the people staring at him in shock, the concubines and courtiers his father had not dismissed, the twins standing arm in arm. They all stood in a perfect circle around the bed, flies called to a light.

Adalash stood, the Elder King. As one, they fell to their knees.

## Our Lady of Health

Lydia Prendergast
Emerson College
magical realism

oh, lady of health, why do you leave me in the shadows, abandoned, shivering from the cold? lady, is that you, running past the corner, afraid to bear my gaze in knowing your own faults: did the word 'chronic' start with you?

lady, i hope to catch you one day. to turn 'round each sharp corner, to see you waiting—you're finally ready to welcome me home, to wrap me in your motherly arms and hush my sobs and shivers

in turn for healing.

but lady, i'm not sure this day will ever come. that the warmth of your touch, your gaze, is one too divine for me; one too valuable for my shaking hands to grab—

because lady, i cannot stop the pounding of a head split in two, of vessels and glands and flesh protected tubes trekking along invisibly, struggling, they work so hard to achieve so little.

lady, i am tired. i'm not sure how much longer this can go on.
my lady, dear lady, i doubt we will ever meet. you've decided to keep my fate far out of reach, too disgraceful to be touched by your healing hands.

too tainted to be loved.

### Selkie

Siobhan Kilsby University of Birmingham fantasy

CW: mild body horror

I don't quite see how the land called to Ariel like a songbird on the waves my body is heavy on the dry new bones ache, my legs have not yet learned to sit I carry myself through the slurry of summer and I am heavy in my own hands shin splints and broken blisters sunburn not yet bubbled to peel and yet I am pretty?

the songs that they sing on the waves say that I am capable of pretty
I did not know until the songbirds and the sirens sang it that this pretty
was a benchmark

the sailors, half-drunk
on rye whisky and
sweet-rot fruit
slosh themselves over the
edges of their brigs, loose
and pliable as their tongues
and tell me my skin is not
skin but barnacle
chip it away and beneath
there lies a wonder of a ship
a figurehead by a generous hand
this pretty as if it were whittled from wood
as if it were blown with songbreath
spewed from the mouth of a sailor
like a watery booze

so, I shuck my skin like an oyster shell tip of the knife beneath the callus layer peel it all the way down like an orange I leave my skin to settle in the sun spread wide on the hot rocks smelling of sea-salt and

citrus, a dried crackling potpourri

and I am something else this pretty

the sirens and the songbirds sing of the way my body moves and stretches I am not yet sure which pieces are meant to twist and which should not the sailors spill words into the waves of my hair how it falls across my body like a painting, beneath the modesty my skin is red raw patterned with the swirls of fingernails this pretty itches

hair like the scrape of a jellyfish

hold out hold out a little longer sing the songbirds and the sirens and the sailors on the waves let a pretty man fold you like a pressed suit he will teach your body to twist and your knees to bend braid your tendril hair slip shoes on your blistered feet smooth cream over your burn-glossed shoulders and you could be this pretty thing forever your skin folded in the back of a wardrobe with your wedding gown

just wait right there

the land calls to the sea like a forlorn lover

undress yourself into an earthen love

I don't quite understand how the land wrapped up Ariel like a hand-cupped heart
I shrink from the sun into the shade on slow unsteady feet slide into my sun-crackled flesh like a wet suit struggle it up over my hips inching blubber up my stomach in a strange kind of dance this is something else than pretty

an unbecoming? a consumption? the crash of body into wave

the songbirds and the sirens sing surrender the sailors crow

a homecoming smash a bottle against the generous figurehead of the ship

else than pretty I am sea life

a pretty man finds a mermaid in the shallows, hauls her up to shore and folds her in two

## That Little Death

Noelle Franzone University of Iowa mythos

CW: mentions of suicide

Here's the story, Morning Glory—

They keep you in your tower and tell you to sew. You make three stitches, and then the needle is a sword. You go to battle against an army of mice and are declared the victor after a long battle. You have still only sewn three stitches.

Here's the story, Morning Glory—

At night, you stare at the ceiling and the plaster turns to rock. You are trapped in a cave, a casket, and cannot move for fear of the Earth crushing down on you. The air is thin, and slowly running out, but you do not need air. You are something else, something better. You drift asleep while trying to decide who you will be.

Here's the story, Morning Glory-

Every day, you are told that you cannot leave. Every day, you are harnessed. There is only one way to escape, and you found it long ago. You are someone new with each sunrise, a knight, a princess, a dragon. Your dreams are of power, flashing steel and fire beneath your hands. When you wake, you are yourself. Small. Thin.

Here's the story, Morning Glory—

Your dreams of late are of wings. Gossamer thin ones like butterfly wings, the sun-blotting bronze wings of hawks. In every iteration, you are a winged thing, not always beautiful. In one, you become a beetle, and you fly so far that when you look down you are back at the tower. When you are able to pull yourself out of dreams, you are human, blood and bone. There are no wings.

Here's the story, Morning Glory—

There was a boy once, held in a tower like yours. He had no wings, so he built them out of scrap metal and screws and candle wax. The wings carried him out, over the sea and under the sky. He sailed away, and never returned to his tower.

Here's the story, Morning Glory—

You decide you are going to build wings. You sew neat, careful, stitches, and slowly you come together. Your wings are patchwork, scraps of soft, bright fabric from dresses and sheets and blankets mashed together in creation. The sword, that needle, is in your hands until the sun sets, and at night you clutch it so tight you bleed as you suffocate to sleep.

Here's the story, Morning Glory—

Your wings are finished in cold winter. You put your sword down slowly. The wings wrap around you. They feel like a second skin. Like you have been made whole.

You step up to your window. The air is biting, but the wings are warm against your back.

The drop yawns before you, dizzying in its surety. It is confident it will have you, but you know better. The wings flutter in the wind, and it feels like a hug.

The wings flutter in the wind.

You take a deep breath.

And you jump.

That's the story, Morning Glory.

# aphrodite on a thursday afternoon

Amritha Selvarajaguru University of Iowa romance

i fall in love with soft seafoam in the shape of a girl. she does not know my name, but

her hair is curly, beach-sand white, and she tells me she is so sorry for spilling coffee on my clothes,

but that i am just so beautiful, so beautiful, so sorry.

i never see her again. never, never.

dazed, i mop coffee from denim in the library bathroom and wonder if i am weak to fall so easily

or strong to fall at all.

either way, my skin is hot and red beneath my jeans, and my mouth is full of silt,

and i'll never see her again, never, never.

i ache, i ache, i ache.

## Estuary

Jenna Crowley University of Iowa romance

CW: death

My awe of you is broader than the sea More insistent than the sand on your skin Never eroded by eternity Nor dragged below on Mariana's fin.

For you are the hope that shines at sunset The waves that whistle in the shells of ears The dews of jubilation and regret Splashing at the world and jumping from piers.

Though waters so cold could turn you to foam And the sun dips below our mortal view, You insist that we shall remain to roam This world of endings we've been born into.

And in this place where humanity wanes, We yearn for warm hands in our short timeframes.

#### Seven Seconds

Emily Hainstock
University of Iowa
science fiction, romance

CW: mention of nudity, theme of death

In the last seven seconds of her life, Margot stared wide-eyed up at the chunk of meteor blazing towards Houston, ripping apart the navy-blue sky with streaks of incandescent light. The stars around seemed to bow before it, clearing the way as it barreled through the Earth's atmosphere. The tops of the skyscrapers were alight with fire, like burning matchsticks—she had never seen so much orange. She wondered if this was what the surface of the sun looked like.

"If you could live on any other planet besides Earth, which would you choose?" Margot had asked, three years ago, on an afternoon almost as hot as it was now.

Kate's legs dangled between the balcony's metal fences. Bits of mint chocolate chip ice-cream dribbled onto her fingers. Even in the thick humidity, with strands of black hair sticking to the sweat on her forehead, she was beautiful.

"What would you choose?"

Margot hummed and gazed beyond the clouds. "Saturn," she said. "You'd get to wake up every day and see rings in the sky."

"Good luck living on a ball of gas." Kate laughed.

"Hypothetically, smart-ass," she chided, but it was impossible to keep the grin from spreading across her face. "It's your turn to answer."

Kate's tongue smoothed the surface of her melting ice-cream, with green eyes trained in the distance. "I know it's not technically a planet, but I'd live on the sun. That way at night, I'd be able to see *all* the planets."

"The Sun? Haven't you had enough heat?" Margot gestured around them—to the cracks in the dirt where the grass had already died, to the waves radiating off the asphalt highways, and up at the sun itself, where light poured down in streams of white.

Kate chuckled and wiped her fingers off on her jeans. "Eh, what's a little heat when you get to be the center of the solar system?"

Margot watched Kate's every movement in snapshots and felt the familiar soft curl in her stomach, lapping into her heart like waves kissing the shore. She soaked her in like a sunset, hung onto each glance gifted her way. The heat around them had nothing on the radiant glow that emanated off of Kate's warm skin and gap-toothed smile, and in that moment Margot knew.

You already are.

In the last six seconds of her life, Margot heard the screams of the people outside echoing down the streets—crying children clinging to their mother's legs, people running towards a safety they'll never get to, and some standing completely still.

Margot never used to scream.

A month after Margot had accepted the internship at the Johnson Space Center three years ago, Kate shrieked into a pillow, tipping the bowl off the couch and scattering their buttered popcorn to the floor. They were watching some adaptation of a Stephen King novel, one that Margot hadn't cared to remember the name of. Kate was looking at her, a bewildered glint in her eyes.

"How are you not screaming?" she asked, pulling her knees to her chest for some small semblance of comfort.

"I don't know. Horror movies don't scare me."

"Really?" Kate gawked in disbelief. "Even the jump-scares don't get you?" "I guess not."

Kate huffed and tossed a throw pillow in her direction. Margot successfully blocked it with her forearm, chuckling at the disappointed wrinkle of Kate's nose. She never failed to make Margot feel like a kid again.

"Alright, what does scare you?"

It was a question Margot had never needed to ponder before. She thought back to the haunted houses she breezed through as a kid, the slasher movies she snuck into the theater to watch with her friends in middle school, every April Fool's prank that consisted of someone jumping out in an attempt to scare her.

She also thought of her mother's funeral. How her hands curled into little fists during the service, her casket lowering beyond the horizon of the Earth and settling with the dirt and the worms, and all the things that died and decayed over time. She remembered when everyone left after the wake—alone in the garden that had wilted during her mother's stay in the hospital—Margot felt the sour bile coat her lungs and twist into her throat. She wanted to claw

at her hair, kick down the tables and chairs, tear the fabric of the universe apart from its seams.

And she wanted to scream.

What Margot didn't know then was how pitiful it felt, the way it burst from her lungs but faltered like a weak gasp between her lips. She hated the noise and the fear that powered it like a fire in her gut.

It made what was happening in front of her all too real.

In the last five seconds of her life, Margot jumped as the glass from the windows shattered into the living room, like glistening pieces of shrapnel embedding itself into her clothing. Its sharp edges that stuck out of her skin glowed in the light of the meteor.

She woke up to the sound of breaking glass four and a half months after meeting Kate, rushing out of bed with a baseball bat in her hands, only to find her friend stumbling around the kitchen, grumbling incoherently at the bottle she'd dropped on the floor.

"Kate? What are you doing here?"

At the sound of her voice, Kate whipped around, as if shocked to find Margot here in her own apartment despite being the one who had broken in. She pouted and crouched down, sticking her finger into the liquid that pooled around the glass and stuck it into her mouth.

"I was...lonely, and I kept thinking about *you*." Kate's words slurred together, and even in the dim moonlight that filtered through the blinds, Margot could tell she was flushed red and wobbling in place.

"You're drunk, Kate."

"I am noooot."

Margot stepped over the spill on the floor and wrapped an arm around Kate's waist, cautiously guiding her towards the couch. Kate's legs were jelly, her eyes scanning the room without a hint of cognizance in them.

Once she was settled onto the couch, Kate grabbed the collar of Margot's shirt. "Have I told you just-just how beautiful you are? You're fucking gorgeous. You're like, prettier than every pretty person in the whole world combined. God, I just—I want to kiss you so badly."

Margot was stunned into silence, but Kate continued to ramble on, even after the lack of a response.

"I think about you a lot, like maybe waaaayy too much. Is that a problem? That's like a totally weird thing to say, but I do. You're on the brain twenty-four-seven, baby. You and your stupid Midwest accent and your space facts and your dumb smart nerd brain. I love you."

Margot's heart leapt into her throat. It was beating so loud she could barely hear the rest of Kate's intoxicated soliloquy. The feelings she assumed would never be reciprocated, that she kept nestled in the back of her heart, were bursting like confetti into her bloodstream. She was practically glowing.

But Kate was drunk, and in exactly ten more minutes she would be deep in REM sleep, and by the morning, every single drunken confession would be completely absent from her mind, and that painful bit of knowledge was sharp, just like the glass cracked open on the floor, and the glass currently lodged in her arms as hot flashes of white started to flood through the windows.

In the last four seconds of her life, Margot felt her sweat trickling down her temple, leaving trails of burning brine across her skin.

She was sweating on a December night, half a year after she had properly moved to Houston, naked in bed with Kate lying beside her. Her arm was propped up against her pillow, a satisfied curl on her lips. The bedroom window was open, and her translucent curtains billowed as a cool breeze swept across the room and over their goose-bumped skin.

"Hey," Kate murmured after planting a kiss onto Margot's forehead. "Remember that night—I think it was two years ago now—when I broke into that crappy little apartment you had during your NASA internship, completely drunk off my ass?"

Margot chuckled, swiping a strand of hair from her girlfriend's face, and tucking it behind her ear. "Of course I remember."

"You know how I said I didn't remember a single thing that happened that night?" Kate grinned, the apples of her cheeks growing pink when she noticed the realization dawn across Margot's face. "Well...I lied."

"You little shit!"

"I know! I was just so embarrassed, and I didn't think you liked me back." When their laughter had settled down, Margot wrapped an arm around Kate's waist. "So, that was the first time you ever told me you loved me."

Kate blushed. "It was."

Margot closed the gap between them and placed a kiss onto her lips, soft like the moonlight that painted their bodies a hazy grey.

"I didn't say it then, but I'll say it now. I love you too."

In the last three seconds of her life, Margot felt the surface of her skin blaze up in patches, her blood bubbling into her burns from the proximity of the meteor's explosion. It was a deep red agonizing pain that set off every single siren in her nervous system.

The phone in her pocket was ringing. A coworker? A friend she hadn't talked to since college? She would never know. She wouldn't have time to pick it up.

She was on the phone a week ago, pacing around one of the break rooms at the Johnson Space Center, her blood boiling and pumping through her veins like magma.

"You're fucking insane, Katherine! You need to come with me now, do you hear me?"

The pause of nothing but static made Margot want to crush her phone between her fingers.

"Kate! Respond to me right now, or I swear—"

"I'm not leaving," Kate's voice cut her off.

Margot could hardly see straight. She was blinded with a rage she'd never felt before, but it ate at her insides like acid and chopped her breaths up into ragged helpless exhales.

"The meteor's going to *destroy* the entire Earth, Kate! You will *die* if you stay here. I'm telling you this before NASA has even had a chance to tell the rest of the world, and you're not going to fucking do anything?!"

Even through the phone, Kate's voice sounded hoarse—completely defeated. "What do you want me to say, Margot?"

"That you'll come with me!" Margot was sobbing now, barely able to speak through the phlegm that coated her tongue. "I can get you a pass onto one of the ships NASA is sending out. You don't have to fucking *die*, are you kidding me?"

"And what about my family?" Kate screamed back. "Do you really think you could sneak all of us on board? I don't even want to fucking hear your excuses, because I know you won't be able to. Just because your whole family is already dead doesn't mean I want mine to be!"

The silence from the phone was deafening.

"Wait, I'm sorry Margot, I didn't mean—"

Margot hung up before she could finish.

In the last two seconds of her life, Margot held the hands of the people who were around her—the hands of people that were closest to her heart. Five days ago, they had welcomed her in with open arms after she had left the boarding of Hope II without saying a word to her superiors. By this time, the news had spread all over the globe.

It was unimaginable chaos.

She knocked on their front door, her stomach sinking at seeing the staggering number of families on the streets, begging for money to buy their way onto one of NASA's hastily repurposed spaceships.

Nathan, Kate's brother, opened the door, the frown on his face lifting ever-so-slightly at the sight of Margot standing before him. Behind his shoulder, Kate and the rest of her family were watching the news, her eyes instantly welling with tears when she turned her head.

Margot opened her arms for a hug, but instead of accepting it, Kate pushed her against the wall.

"Why are you here?!" Kate yelled, her eyelids swollen red as she choked back sobs. "You're supposed to *leave* Earth! You're supposed to stay *alive*!" She was convulsing through her cries, and as she wept into Margot's shoulder, she embraced her so tightly she felt Kate's hands melt into her soul. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you so much. I don't want you to die. I don't want to die."

Margot kissed the top of Kate's hair, her tears streaming down her face in silent globs.

"I know."

In the last second of her life, Margot stared into the eyes of the only woman she would ever love.

Three years ago, during her first week interning at the Johnson Space Center, she gave informational tours at Space Center Houston. It was a Wednesday when she led a group of people around the facility, and watched as a young boy, presumably named Nathan from the airbrushed carnival t-shirt he was wearing, sprint to the front of the crowd when she introduced the opportunity to touch a lunar rock.

"Is that really from the moon?" he gaped, rushing to the stand that housed the small triangle of smoothened dark grey stone.

Margot smiled down at him. "It sure is. This little guy is 3.8 *billion* years old, and is one of the only eight moon rocks that people outside of NASA are allowed to touch."

The boy traced his fingers over the stone, his eyes widening from the touch. She relished the look she'd continuously seen on people's faces after they'd felt it, the realization of touching something so naturally and incomprehensibly beyond human reach.

"How do I get a moon rock?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, that's illegal...but—" Margot remembered the keychain in her pocket, one she had bought as a souvenir the first day she arrived in Houston, "—lunar *meteorites* are not. Here you go." She pulled the rock from its clasp and handed it to the younger boy.

His eyes lit up like two bright light bulbs, and after five very loud and excited thank you's, he ran over to a girl standing at the outskirts of the group, admiring one of the larger rocks in its glass container. She turned over to look at the boy, questioning the item that he was showing off in his fingers. When he pointed back to Margot, the girl's eyes met hers.

Margot would never forget that smile, and the way the room spun in circles as the girl walked up to her to thank her personally.

"That was really sweet, what you did for my brother," she paused to glance at the name tag on her shirt, "Margot. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure." Margot flashed a flustered smile. "And what's your name?" The girl extended her hand, grinning from ear to ear.

"Kate."

Margot would replay and rewind every single encounter, every nook and cranny inside her brain, hanging onto every last drop of memory she could. Even as the bright white light of the exploding meteor tore apart the city, the blast ripping apart the buildings from its frames, and melting the skin off their bones, she would look into the eyes of her lover, holding Kate's hand until the violent end, thinking that, even if Margot had to die every single time just to be with her, she would do it again and again and again and again and





## **Contributors**

Kaylee Allen is a first-year student at the University of Iowa. Outside of school, Kaylee loves to spend time with her loved ones, read constantly, and watch late-night movies with her friends on the weekends. She draws inspiration from life around her and is always looking for the next story to write about.

*Charlotte Brookins* is a second-year student at the University of Iowa. She can frequently be found reading, writing, and spending time with her loved ones. She has many hopes for the future, including but not limited to one day having the chance to pet a cow.

Abby Budd is currently a third-year student at Michigan State University. Other than working toward a degree in psychology and English, Abby spends her time reading and searching for a new show to watch and obsess over. Her love for writing has been present since she was very young and longs to write a full-length novel one day.

Katherine Budinger is a second-year Johns Hopkins University student majoring in writing seminars and English. When she is not drinking tea or quoting Oscar Wilde, she can be found in the theatre as an actor and playwright, wandering through museums, or toiling away at yet another historical fiction novel.

Hannah Cargo is a second-year at the University of Iowa studying creative writing and environmental planning and policy. An avid suspender of disbelief, she still checks forests for hidden magical creatures. When she's not writing or reading, you might find Hannah outdoors or listening to soundtrack scores. (Hey, that rhymed!)

Jenna Crowley is a first-year student at the University of Iowa. She grew up in Southern California and is currently an English major. When she is not in class, Jenna can typically be found watching Major League Baseball in her bed or reading fantasy novels in a coffee shop. She accredits most of her writing inspiration to the storylines in her dreams.

Charlotte Egginton is a second-year at Johns Hopkins University, studying writing seminars and romance languages. Despite having many other hobbies, including teaching Zumba at her school's recreational center and playing tennis, she has loved writing more than most else ever since she was young.

Lucy Eller is a fourth-year student at Emerson College. When she's not in class or studying, she is writing, and over-analyzing any story she can get her hands on. Her favorite novel is *Dracula*, and she takes inspiration from experiments with form and genre.

Byron López Ellington is a freshman at the University of Iowa double majoring in English and creative writing and Spanish. He is from Austin, Texas. You can find more of his work at byronlopezellington.com.

Noelle Franzone is a sophomore student at the University of Iowa. When she's not procrastinating on schoolwork, she can be found devouring Lord of the Rings content and listening to terrible musicals.

Larisa Greway is a first-year student at the University of Iowa studying English. When they're not taking long walks around campus, they can usually be found either reading fantasy novels or rewatching old sitcoms instead of all the TV shows they say they'll get to eventually.

*Emily Hainstock* is a fourth-year student at the University of Iowa, currently double-majoring in art and creative writing. Fantasy and sci-fi are her favorite genres and she hopes to publish a graphic novel someday. She is a self-proclaimed cat lover, cinephile, and ketchup enthusiast.

Liberty Hens is a sophomore at Emerson College. When she is not doing schoolwork, Liberty is either reading classics or playing with her cats. She is a big fan of Audrey Hepburn and enjoys rainy days.

Alyssa Kattan is a third-year student at Johns Hopkins University. On campus, she serves as the Editorial Director for Marque Magazine, a student-run arts and fashion publication. Outside of the classroom, Alyssa enjoys baking for friends and swimming in the ocean.

Joyce Kennedy is a second-year student at the University of Iowa. They get way too invested in fictional characters, and keeps purchasing really pretty dice despite not having joined a DnD campaign yet.

Siobhan Kilsby is a third-year student at the University of Birmingham. Siobhan can be found avoiding actually writing by bingeing bad 2000s TV shows with her friends, and trying to convince her family that Trashy Fantasy Author is a viable career path. She believes that every problem in life can be solved via Dungeons and Dragons if you try hard enough.

Caroline Knight is a senior at the University of Michigan studying art history and completing her honors thesis for creative writing poetry. Her previous work can be found in *Xylem literary magazine*.

*Jenna Mather* is an English and creative writing major at the University of Iowa. When she isn't writing something fantastical or hopelessly romantic, she loves drinking coffee in downtown Iowa City and learning how to fence.

Autumn Mayer is a first-year student at the University of Iowa. She is majoring in English and creative writing on the publishing track and minoring in French. In her free time, she loves to read, write, and watch movies.

Lydia Prendergast is currently a creative writing student at Emerson College in Boston, MA. Most recently published in WACK Mag for her poem lay it out in lavender and by CantonWrites for her poem i cannot find it in me to pray, but, Lydia often writes about her experience growing up with anxiety and chronic illness. She expands on how this has translated into coming of age in such a tumultuous world. Alongside writing, Lydia has a love for reading, hand-knitting, baking dairy and gluten free goods, and hanging out with her ten-year-old golden retriever, Riley and two-year-old cat, Frida. Her chapbook the seasons of hydrangeas is in the publication process!

Lila Robbins (she/her) is a second-year student at the University of Iowa. She loves comedy TV, folk music, and her pet cats. Find her on Instagram @lilaclr.

Nikki Rossiter is a senior at the University of Michigan. When able to tell reality from fiction, she loves to serve others both through written works and acts of service. She takes her inspiration from all the things daily life could be and the works of South American magical realism authors.

Julia Rudlaff is a fourth-year undergraduate student at Michigan State University. They are studying geology and English with a creative writing concentration. When not writing or studying rocks, Julia loves exploring the outdoors, reading, rock hunting, and photographing their rocks for @julias.rocks on Instagram.

*Tony Santi* is a first-year student at the University of Iowa. He is a recent transfer from the U.S. Army where he worked as an Arabic linguist. He has recently returned to the states after nine months of traveling through the Middle East and North Africa.

Amritha Selvarajaguru is a second-year English and creative writing major from California who aspires to be an English teacher one day. She admires the works of writers such as Ada Limón, Louise Glück, and Ocean Vuong, hates cockroaches with a fiery passion, and always eats M&Ms in rainbow order from red to brown.

Sydney Smithgall is a second-year student studying creative writing, psychology, and music at the University of Iowa. In their free time, Sydney enjoys reading sci-fi and fantasy, drawing, and listening to music on late night walks.

Talya Soytas is a fourth-year student at University of Michigan Ann Arbor. When she is not busy with school, Talya is likely reading a fantasy book or rewatching her favorite shows once more. She is a big fan of pirate stories and is always inspired by bodies of water.

# Special Thanks

#### **Daniel Khalastchi**

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