



# Wilder Things

VOLUME 8

*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.

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Wilder Things Magazine

Volume 8

The University of Iowa

Magid Center for Undergraduate Writing

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VOLUME 8







# Letter From the Staff

Dear Reader,

Life is littered with choices. Coffee or tea? Walk or drive? Sometimes the answer is obvious, you can't call in sick to work to jetset around the world. What happens when the answer isn't so clear? The *Wilder Things* staff and contributors have been working to offer you a simple choice; where to start.

Sifting through Volume 8 you will find many different options: queer love, to eat or not to eat, sickness, etc. This is a rare moment where you don't have to choose wisely, taking risks and trying new things is how speculative fiction was born. Flip to a random page and see what you find, start at your favorite number or start with the piece your friend wrote. After that it's your choice, flip the page, go back to the contents page, or close the magazine altogether. We hope you continue reading.

As humans we are conditioned to fear the unknown. That fear influences the way we walk through life and how we react to moments of fearlessness. With record setting submission numbers we want to thank our contributors for their art and entrusting us with their work. Many of these stories live in the unknown and pose choices we never realized we'd have to make. Which arm do you like less? What do you write on the bathroom wall?

The staff at *Wilder Things Magazine* thank you for picking up this magazine and reading it. Without readers like you we wouldn't be able to keep creating volumes and spreading speculative fiction as far as we can reach. We choose to immortalize these collections in print and online to pave the path from author to you.

As paths cross and time goes on, we push you to surprise yourself. Walk on the grass instead of the sidewalk, order a coffee instead of a tea, read a horror story when your shelves are full of comedy. And when you see *Wilder Things Magazine* again, we hope you'll choose to pick up another volume.

With Love,  
The *Wilder Things* Staff



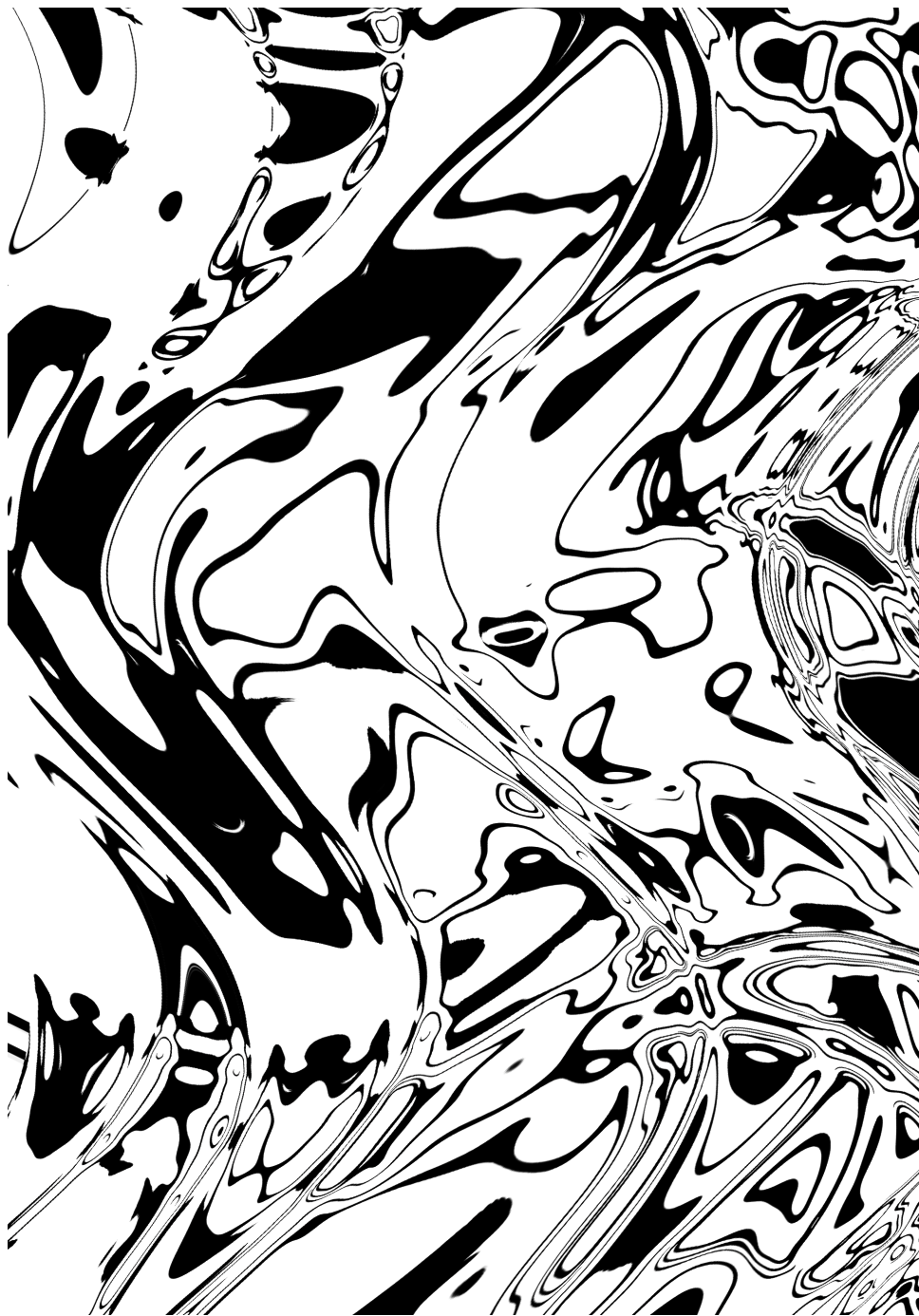
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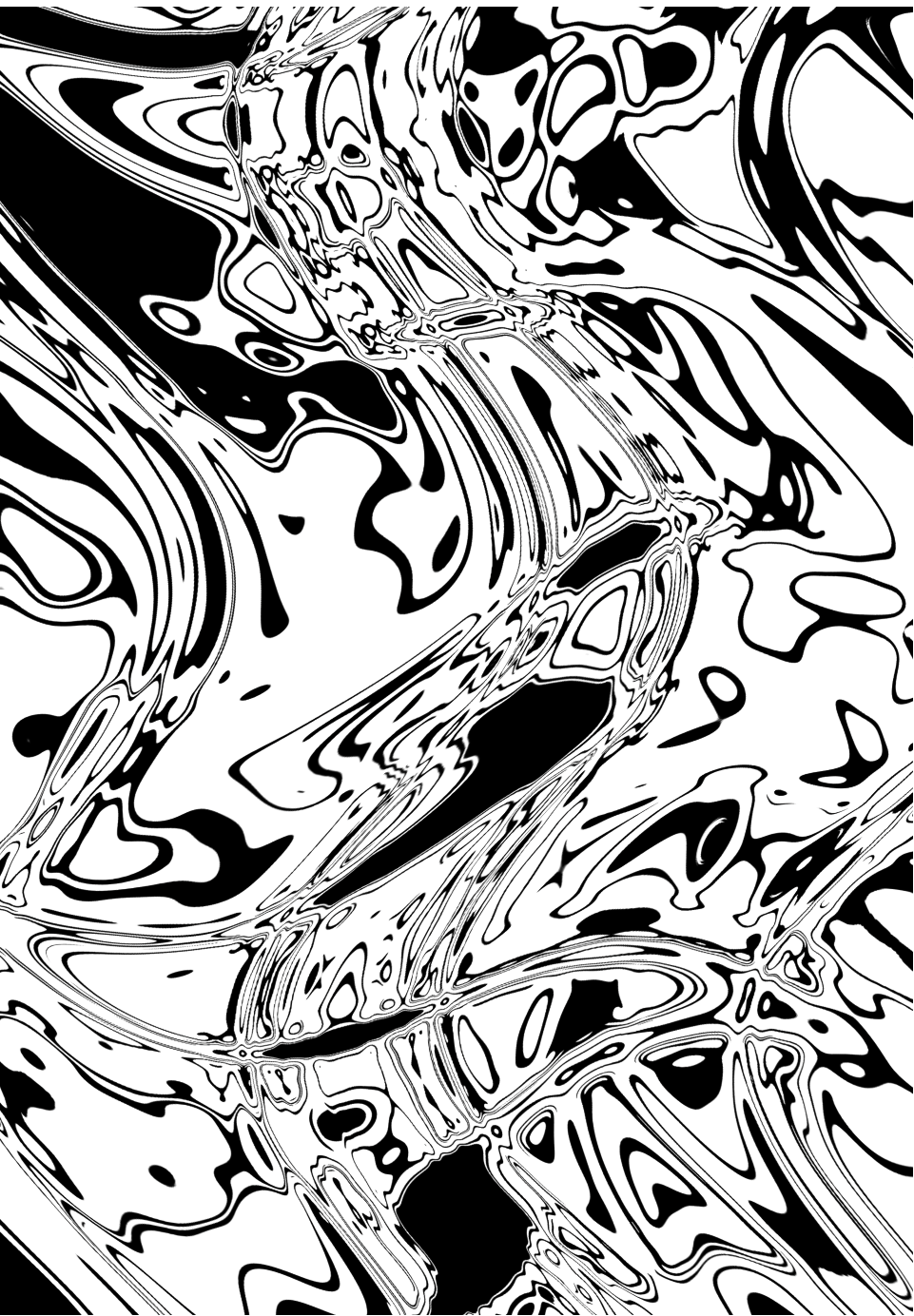
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# Ill Ghazal

*Albert Ho*  
Johns Hopkins University  
comedic horror

**B**eing bedridden, I'm offended by the tendency of medicine to perfume-and-cube  
the body's  
Bits and its metastases into oral pleasantries—clavicle, niacin, noro-virus—and  
claim to  
Know illness.

Rather, I prefer the chthonic cry of a metrical foot that bleeds, like “bowels.”  
Its fecal notes  
Cocoon the horror of possessing them. Consider: “As his bowels inverted, the poet  
came to  
Moan illness.”

No, I'm not “sick...” I'm radioactive! Aglow like green uranium, enriched &  
yellowcake,  
Contaminating winds and exhaling gamma rays. Caution! Keep away! This  
isn't over-  
blown. Illness

Is at least a sly word, befitting for a serpentine specter that summons migraines.  
It sounds  
Royal, like an empress. Ennoble me, enfeoff me, enervate, enfeeble me. Rule me  
like I were  
Rome, illness.

“Disease” is like black licorice—pestilent, shriveled, unwound, a coiled corpse  
getting gummy  
In the root canal, blackened. A term that’s fuming scents of old world spice and  
rot. It has a  
Tone illness.

You can call me diseased, or you can call me ill. Better yet, say I’m besieged. Say  
I’m consumed,  
That I’m evanescent. Claim I must be drenched or drowning, that I have tubas in  
my temples (an  
Oboe illness)

Or weasels in my gut. Denote my body as a stratospheric streaker or a butt of  
worms—mudslide,  
Squelch of viscera and parasite stranded in a galactic delirium. Or let’s say: it’s  
just having a bad  
Show. Illness?

No. Never call me sick, and never call it a virus! Call me jeopardized, dogged,  
xenic, willowy  
Convolved, enlightened, benign. Call it Hegemon, or a black fly. Call it Albert  
Ho—After all, it’s  
My own illness.

# “Wait Mr. Murderer, Don’t Go Out That Door!”

*Anna Richardson*  
UCLA  
comedy

When they draw the chalk I want to be showing off my best angles  
Can you take out the knife?  
I can’t roll over to my better side;  
my face looks best when it’s *just* tilted to the left  
Mr. Murderer? Mr. Murderer have you left yet?  
My creative vision may be flourishing, but the physical sense is going dark  
Take a finger before you go; they’ll think I was blackmailed  
Or maybe just hold my hand for a little while?  
Mr. Murderer are you still there?  
(I already have one cold shoulder, don’t give me two!)  
I think red lipstick would look nice, it would go with the blood  
One last touch on the lips, it’s all I want.  
And with the blood, oh it’s quite a lot of blood  
Its cold touch is pressing against my cheek  
I’m sure your hand would feel less cold  
Oh my whole body is cold now  
If it was going to happen like this I wish I’d died younger  
the paper won’t make a dime on me. It’ll just  
blow into the next day. Like a cold breeze.  
Without me.

...

Mr. Murderer are you still there?

Please don't leave me

looking like this

I haven't done laundry in a week so

I've just been wearing these sweats but

there's a red dress in my closet—you see the vision?

I don't ask for much but

if I'm to be photographed, I will *die*

if I'm not looking my best.

# written in a fog of pines and actual fog, in the spirit of old urbana

*Albert Ho*  
Johns Hopkins University  
romance

**a**nd so i've often wondered now and then of when you'll really come to get me—  
and even whether i will have you now; you know that what I've always meant  
to say by saying all the things i've wished i'd said i sometimes hadn't said e.g.  
“ah, i do so wish for our souls to transmigrate back into an occultated vale  
or sun-adumbrated hill of rural frederick county, maryland, so then as impish  
children—

genderless, slashing naked kudzu paths with diaphanous palms, phasing  
vis a vis reality and campgrounds, like will-o'-the-wisps—we could have  
the other students' lunches and eat them too (and for dessert perhaps scarfing  
down our absolute globules of berry, pills of acid we denoted dearly as our  
'boysenberry

lozenges”) is that maybe we could find ourselves again! though you say you cannot  
even recall the mere camber of my skin, let alone any boysenberry lozenge  
summer camp, let alone another time when twelve, we were driven to confront  
the redwoods on a snow-cast californian day, i'll still put faith  
in other signs: one, the rarity of snow in coastal california, its vulgar scatter  
which I thought you once described to me as being “across the thighs of every  
statuesque

sequoia tree,” and the fecundity in posture with which black ice had “crawled  
behind our tire tracks from i-80 in nevada to the pacific. a luminously bodied,  
animal omen, whimpering the traffic;” two, a crocus, blooming in full gape,  
a lavender gash erupting convulsively from understories of bleach-white frost  
and umber redwood roots “harsh at touch like paper mache”—whose purpleness

involved me only insofar as it was duplicity: nature's deep-hued, inky handprint, feigning fragility as an apparently ductile manifold of stem and droopy petal; and three, and finally, the sheerness of the redwoods—their “trenchant, incisive bark,” their “veteran aggression,” their ancient violence, their sheer violence, their sheer sheerness, altitudinally sheer as well as in a nauseous sense of impossible depth of time: histories wedged between seams wedged between sorely silent hunks of heightened lumber, a languorous growth methodically nourished by seasonal snowmelt, by mycelium—creatures of nitrogenous gas and of the topsoil who once before that were cumulonimbus and mold spore who once before that were milkweed sprouted in nebraska as succor for a monarch-butterfly-to-flap-its-wings. we used to claw our way through ream after ream of wet and sagging air. we used to steal away in a noctilucent clearing pimpled by hawthorn and boysenberry, hairy from infection of grating lemongrass. we used to chew marbles of northwestern sleet, throw snowdrifts at each other, reimagine oregon as a land of crater lakes and bad herring. oh yes—no doubt, it is cruel.



# Lick vs. Twiddle

*LeDavid DeLouis*  
University of Iowa  
comedic fantasy

*TW: Genre-typical violence*

## CHARACTERS

Narrator: an aged man or woman.

Explorer, Bartholomew “Twiddle” Twiddlefoot: a twenty-five-year-old man.

Goblin, Wicklicker “Lick” Ikduung: a three-foot-tall, middle-age, green, male goblin.

## PLACE

Far, far away, amid a Forsake Forest.

## TIME

Long ago.

## ACT I—SCENE I

Setting: The Forsaken Forest’s dark forest floor. Center stage serves as a small clearing of muddy ground, and beyond it is overgrown flora. The backdrop contains many trunks of tall, thick trees. Spiderwebs span branches, while mosquitos buzz and snakes hiss faintly.

At Rise: Our explorer, Bartholomew Twiddlefoot, stands in the middle of the clearing. He’s holding a stone tablet, presumably lined with some dry animal hide, and a goose feather quill. He appears confused.

## NARRATOR

*(off-stage)*

Please enjoy the following reenactment, proudly sponsored by *Feel-Fine-Flask™* and known to be true by all veritable accounts. The following events were biographed on parchment by the hand of Sir Davy Dulloo, the esteemed interviewer and scribe of our King von Maxfort's Kingdom of Urb...

## TWIDDLE

*(stomps in frustration)*

Help! Someone, help!

I'm here to map this forest for King Max, but now I'm lost and can't find my way back! I've got nothing to defend myself but my pen and sack, and I'm only looking to get back on track!

*No answer. A dire-spider the size of a small elephant passes through the clearing, thankfully ignoring Twiddle as he recoils away. There's a quiet rustling in the overgrown flora as a goblin, Lick, approaches. We see the spearhead of his spear bob obviously above the flora, but Twiddle notices neither the sound nor the bobbing spearhead in his frustration with his map tablet.*

## TWIDDLE

*(pacing in a circle)*

Gods! Whichever way I go, it all stays the same!

Trees, grasses, bushes too grown—and beasts no man may tame!

How can I map what never changes?! Keep exploring what only deranges!~

*Twiddle has his back turned to where Lick peers out from the overgrown flora. Lick oggles Twiddle and licks his lips before sneakily stepping into the clearing with his spear poised. Twiddle quickly turns around, but Lick rapidly prostrates so that Twiddle looks over him without realizing the goblin lies there, just before him. Twiddle turns back around, and Lick leaps at him with the spear. Twiddle turns toward Lick at the last moment, so the spear sinks into his chest. They collapse.*

## TWIDDLE

Ah, fuck! What bad luck!

Did you—you really just stab me?! Amidst an hour so crappy?

You've just committed an assault, you know!

## LICK

*(raspy, cheery, and high-pitched, as he holds the spear planted in Twiddle's chest)*  
Oh, so silly! Yes, you'll fill me. As for assault...  
I'm just a Grin, and we know no sin!  
Sееee, I need your sweet meat, to feed my wee teens!  
They've cleaned out our heap, and we really must eat!  
Mind if I season ye with dire-spider cheese?

*Lick attempts to lick Twiddle's face. Despite his injury,  
Twiddle slaps Lick across the face with his stone tablet map.*

## TWIDDLE

Who do you think you are, inflicting such a scar!

## LICK

Aha, what a real kicker! I'm Ikduung, "Lick" Wicklicker.  
Proud father of Pizzmonger, Barfartz, and John...  
*(whispers to audience)*

*Jonathan is adopted.*

And we're going to drink the blood from your head!

## TWIDDLE

I have food for your youths, you dumb ass! Rather than stab me, you need  
only ask!  
And as for slaying me—best of luck. Even laying injured, I'll fuck you up!  
Now show me the way out of this forsaken place, and maybe you can eat off of  
your largest plates. Eh?

*Twiddle threatens to beat Lick with the stone tablet  
again. The spear in Twiddle's chest seems to be more of  
a minor inconvenience than a serious injury.*

## TWIDDLE

Had I not drunk my *Feel-Fine Flask™*, I quite might be dead!  
How would you feel, I ask, with my murder hung over your head?  
Or as me here—with a spear's end, sent deep within my breast?  
Are you, Lick, such a thick prick?

## LICK

Ye. And hungry, see, just like my three! So give up the food, or you'd—

## TWIDDLE

Shut up!

*Twiddle swings the stone tablet. Lick takes a glancing blow off his newly bloodied forehead, and he retreats into the flora.*

## LICK

Aaah! *Fine!*

Once you sleep, we'll dine! Your flesh, we'll smell and find!

As we munch, your bones will crunch—beneath the teeth of *all* my kind!

I asked for some food, but you are too rude, so you'll be alive whenst you die!

Tonight! Sleep light! Don't let my Grin kin *bite!*

*Lick makes a horrible, hungry growling sound before disappearing into the overgrown flora. Twiddle stands, dusts himself off, removes the bloody spear from his chest, picks up his feather quill, and writes on the tablet's map. He speaks as he writes...*

## TWIDDLE

*(slyly, to himself)*

Approximately four 'n a half thousand steps "N" of "F. forest S. entrance"... encountered blind dire-spider—*euwgh*—and was stabbed by "Lick" the Grin goblin, father of Pizzmonger, Barfartz, and John the Adopted, all purportedly starving.

*He admires the small clearing before slowly walking away from it, smiling, with the spearhead still within his breast.*

Gods, I love my job.

## CURTAIN

# Up or Down

Paige Comito  
Michigan State University  
magical realism

One time, Wayne saw a dead rabbit on a ski hill. A brown lump beneath one of the trees at the far edge, shadowed by the great collection of pines that stretched towards the dark night sky. A fascination led Wayne to slowly ski over, cresting over the edge where orange plastic roped off the ski zone from the descending mountain. He had bent down to fiddle with the ropes that kept his boots tied to the baby blue skis, stepping out of them and climbing over the plastic.

The rabbit's tiny jaws were locked open in an eternal final cry. A festering wound covered most of its side, yellow pus frozen and dried against the exposed meat. Wayne crouched down as Paul McCartney crooned from the speakers at the ski lodge from the bottom of the hill; *Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name*. Wayne looked up from the corpse and into the thicket of pine trees that descended with the mountain face. The stars were out tonight. *Nobody came*.

"It's your shift."

Wayne's eyes peeled open, peering through slits to gaze at the dull combat boots in front of his face. He gazed up at his coworker from his place on the snowy ground leaned against a pine. The man was scowling down at him, a thick scruff covering his face and one hand stuffed in the pocket of his torn leather jacket. The other, holding a bottle of Jack Daniels. Gray smoke drifted lazily from his nostrils, curling down to his prominent collarbones and the veins that spiderwebbed up his neck. He used the bottle to point at the ski lift farther up

the hill. Wayne watched the liquid poison slosh in the glass for a beat before he got up, dusted off his pants, and started away.

The ski lift was a bulky thing. The bullwheel colored in bright-reddish orange paint with a constant creak whenever someone got onto a chair. There was always someone getting on, after all. The line of people stretched past Wayne's vision, twisting down the mountain and all the way to the snowy plains. He stepped into the old booth and stood in front of the table that faced the ski lift's destination. The only thing on the control panel was a lever.

Up, or down.

Wayne sighed and rubbed his arms as he tried to get a bit more feeling into his flesh. His turtleneck cable knit sweater was not nearly enough to keep out the near glacial chill of the eternal ski lift. After all, no one expected to die and end up in limbo. It was a tedious job, sending people up or down. Heaven or hell. Moksha or naraka. Nirvana or... bad karma? He still wasn't sure about Buddhism.

Nevertheless, Wayne took his place by the obnoxious red lever and glanced back. At the front of the line was a brunette middle-aged woman, gray smoke following the contours of the bones within her arm and legs. Perhaps broken from a car crash. When she noticed him staring at her she stepped up to the booth, watching him silently, warily.

"Ticket, please," Wayne said. He held out a pale hand and she handed over the ticket, their cold fingers brushing for a second, twin in the way not a heart beat through the veins under their nail beds. Wayne examined the scribings on the ivory slip of paper and dropped it into the slit of a locked box beside him. He gestured for her to stand in the path of the lift. A chair came creaking over and scooped her up. Wayne switched the lever down, causing the wires to shift like changing train tracks, taking her down into the cavernous pit in the mountain. He didn't wait to watch her disappear into the fog, turning to the next person. "Ticket, please."

Limbo molded depending on the person. For Wayne, it was a ski resort with an inky black sky, constant snowfall, and a chill that seeped into his bones. His first few months working were when he was at his most curious, spurred by asking his coworker why he wasn't shivering in just a leather jacket. Wayne tried to ask everyone else what they saw in the beginning. Some people would scream in his face, or cry, or stare blankly, but some entertained him. One man described the area around him like a trailer park. One woman, an ever-twisting office building. A river in Arizona. A desert. A boat on the ocean. An abandoned car factory in Detroit. As if the area surrounding them were an entity in and of itself, rippling and obscuring. The more Wayne asked, the more he thought and the more he grew mad. One night found him leaving his shift to collapse into the snow, crawling towards one of the avalanche dogs, its yellow eyes watching him with a disconcerting emptiness and a cool calculation. Before Wayne could

bare his throat, a soft voice carried over the horizon. *Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been.* Wayne gasped and shuddered even though he knew his lungs no longer needed breath, pressing his blotchy face into the snow like a blind kit searching for a tit. He thinks of concerts and songs and dead rabbits and an eternal duty. Limbo cradles him through music, shifting to bring him a little closer to Earth than he's been in months, a little more human. Even as it works he couldn't help but wish for The Rolling Stones instead.

The adaptability of the human mind is magnificent. And as it always does, it shapes itself to fit the circumstances. Whenever he found himself drifting towards the edge, thinking about following the people who ran and got taken down by the avalanche dogs, "Eleanor Rigby" drifts from a direction he can never find, cutting through the snowflakes. Wayne never asks what his coworker sees when he watches him stagger in an odd direction, eyes transfixed on the sky as if something will descend from the heavens to swoop at him. Wayne never tells him about The Beatles.

Wayne finds himself dulled to it by now. It was hard to faze him. He didn't listen to the ticketless people beg anymore, their cries of *anything is better than this bleak nothingness* not reaching his ears. He's seen plenty of dead kids. Children, teenagers, babies carried in baskets by one of the avalanche dogs, he's seen it all. The boy is no different.

Floppy blonde hair, baby fat that still clung to his cheeks, gray smoke drifting from the side of his head in thick plumes, and narrowed eyes that both at once screamed juvenile delinquency and grew-up-too-fast. Perhaps the two were interchangeable.

"Ticket, please."

"Send me down."

"Let me see your ticket, and hopefully I'll be able to," Wayne snarked. He didn't like people interrupting the flow, not anymore. The boy bristled, hackles raised. Wayne watched as his eyes darted to the empty spot where the chair lift scoops people up and then to the avalanche dogs that prowled nearby. The kid scowled in frustration and anger.

"Just send me down, you jackass!" he yelled, stomping up to Wayne and standing nose to nose with him. He grabbed the boy by the shoulders and shoved him in the snow to the side. By the time the kid got up, screaming more profanities, Wayne was already asking for the ticket of the next person in line. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the kid glare at him for a few seconds before stalking off. Good riddance.

Time moves slowly in limbo, like molasses dripping off a spoon. Wayne had no way to tell the time. The line of people was endless, dipping into the horizon. His body didn't tire, his stomach never yearned for food nor his throat for water. The starless sky stayed black. Wayne allowed himself to fade out of his body,

hands and arms still working to pull levers and take tickets but mind reminiscing. Eventually, his coworker came to both relieve him of his duties and shake him out of his stupor. Wayne watched as the man sauntered up to the control panel, drunken swagger in his steps and dreary eyes. His whiskey bottle that never seemed to run out still clenched in one hairy fist.

Wayne slipped past him, heading back to his favorite pine tree. He grunted, more out of reflex than anything, as he sat on his ass and leaned against the bark. The sensory experience against his sweater provided a spark of pleasure, nerves seeming to stutter awake. There were so few sensory sensations to experience here. Besides being cold, anyways. Not for the first time, he contemplated his coworker's alcohol. Wayne resented him for it, for being able to get through this barely comprehending what was going on. In heaven, you got what you desired. In hell what you loathed. But in limbo? You got what you think you deserved. It took Wayne what was around a decade (judging by the slowly evolving fashion of the people lined up) to convince himself he deserved to have winter boots. He's tried to for other stuff. Gloves, a hat, even just a record player. But the universe probably decided he hadn't lived life honestly enough for such luxuries. Wayne sighed, curling up against the tree. He was prepared for a nice, long nap when the obnoxious sound of gum chewing popped behind him.

He turned around and was faced with the boy. Apparently the kid already figured out limbo. In one lanky hand he held a pack of bubblegum. Of course, the most obnoxious kid he has ever met would decide he deserved something to make himself even *more* annoying.

"What's up?" the kid asked smugly.

"Why are you here?"

"I want you to send me to hell."

Mundanity has reduced Wayne's nerves to a razor thin wire. It felt as if the boy reached into his body and plucked them with his dirty fingernails. Everything about him engineered perfectly to drive Wayne's apathetic existence *up the wall*. Wayne stumbled to his feet, a brief satisfaction swarming him as the boy stumbled back in a moment of vulnerability. Wayne shot forward and reached into his pocket, plucking the ticket and holding it up so he could read without the boy grabbing it from his grasp. He let it flutter to the ground when he was finished, stepping away as the boy hurriedly snatched it up and retreated a few steps away.

"It says you're supposed to go to heaven. Why do you want to go to hell?" Wayne asked. He clenched his fists, not for the first time feeling a rush of emotion as he gazed down at the loathsome child. "You're lucky. You get to get out of this barren wasteland. But instead you're here, taunting me!" He took a step forward. The boy scrambled two back.

"I have my reasons!" Wayne watched as the boy's jaw worked as he tried to figure out what he was going to say. But he didn't say anything. Just watched



Wayne with tears brimming in his eyes, chewing furiously on the gum. Wayne felt himself deflate, apathy seeping back into his veins once again. He settled onto the snow.

"I remember this one woman," Wayne began. The boy drew closer, crouching near Wayne on the balls of his feet as if Wayne were planning to strike him. "Before she gave me her ticket she showed me the ring on her finger. Asked me to remember it, that she was worried her wife would be joining the line soon and begging me to send her up if she did end up here. Crying that an incurable sickness took her and how the wife couldn't help that she was mentally unstable. Suicide must'a been against their religion." Wayne leaned his head against the tree, forehead brushing the bark. He peered at the swaying branches of the tree, needles shivering against the wind. "Turns out she was right about her wife. She appeared pretty soon after. I recognized the wedding ring. I also recognized her smoke." Wayne gestured to his head. "Gray fog shooting upwards from the side of her head. Shot in the skull. But her ticket said down." Wayne lowered his head to gaze straight on at the kid. He looked less like a spooked deer. "So I sent her down. I listen to the rules. I'm not going to send you down."

The kid shifted, looking thoughtful instead of teary-eyed now. "How do you remember that? I imagine you get a bunch of people saying that."

"The woman was the first death-by-cancer person I saw. It sticks with you." He was fairly immune to it now, but it spooked Wayne the first time. The gray smoke clinging to the woman's bald head resembling holes in her flesh. Like the suckers of an octopus, visceral and meaty. Wayne found himself preferring even the burn victims to the cancer patients. At least the gray flames under their flesh were pretty to look at. "It's also how I know how no brain sickness got you. Got hit in the head, did you?" The boy tensed, his body may not be able to send the fight or flight signals but the mind still remembered. "This place tends to heal most of the wounds, but I can see the way the side of your head dips in, as if it were concave before you died. Your right eye droops ever so slightly. Far too severe for just one fatal fall." Wayne's words were mean, biting and hoping for the vitriol to chase the boy off. Instead, the kid raised his chin, lip trembling and tears rising once again.

"My brother bashed my skull in." It's as if a dam broke and the boy began sobbing, collapsing to his knees and hiding his head in his hands. Wayne watched as he gasped and shuddered "It's just—" the boy wheezed, "he's always going to church, and he's just so religious and I know he'll find me when he dies because *he'll go to heaven*. And there's crosses everywhere here and all the stained glass exactly how he described and—" the boy cut himself off again with a long whine, like a rabbit caught in a snare. Wayne allowed him a moment to gather himself, looking away as the boy heaved and held his breath and expelled it. He finally glanced back up at Wayne, who stood up and dusted snow off his pants. Wayne held out a hand.

“Let’s make sure you never see your brother again, okay?” The boy instantly grabbed on in a desperate bid for comfort. Wayne slung his arm around the boy and began walking them back towards the ski lift. His coworker saw them coming and hurried out of the booth, probably not willing to look a gift horse in the mouth. Wayne leaned down to the boy when they arrived next to the booth. “Can I have your ticket?” he asked softly. The boy nodded and grabbed it out of his pocket, giving it to Wayne. Wayne ruffled his hair and pointed towards where he needed to stand. The boy obeyed. He glanced back at Wayne as the chair picked him up.

He grabbed the level and pushed it up.

It only took a few seconds for the kid to start yelling. Wayne watched as he twisted around in his seat, tears back with a vengeance. His hands reached between the bars of the chair as he begged and pleaded and screamed not to be sent to heaven, yowling like a cat set on fire.

Wayne turned away and asked for the ticket of the next person as “Eleanor Rigby” drifted through the winter wasteland.

There was a reason *he* wasn’t sent to heaven, after all.

# How to Skin a Deer

Paige Comito  
Michigan State University  
horror

*TW: Graphic violence*

Jonas ran his fingers along the yellowed porcelain of the bathtub, tapping his finger once, twice, thrice before remembering his manners and stilling them. The empty bathtub was a snug fit, built into the wall in such a way that Jonas had to slightly bend his knees to fit entirely. He rubbed his sweaty palms against his shorts.

The artificial scent of disinfectant wafted through the bathroom, clinging to Jonas' nostrils. He eyed the grit growing at the edge of the bathtub where the basin met the wall.

"Maybe you could use some of that disinfectant and scrub the grout after this. In fact, I see some mold in the corner. Would it kill you to clean this place up a little bit?" Jonas suggested. It wasn't just the bathroom. The entire house was reminiscent of an HBO drug documentary. Armchairs with ripping fabric, the kitchen yellowed, boxes everywhere, out in the sticks with nobody near. Trailer park trash but without the trailer park.

"I'll be busy after this. Do you realize how hard on the back this can be? Do you think I wanna strain it even further cleaning everything?" Miles retorted easily. He didn't turn to look at Jonas as he spoke, standing at the sink and continuing to clean off the bone saw. He worked meticulously. Every divet along the edge was thoroughly wiped down. Even the handle was given attention to. Once that was done he set it on a piece of cloth alongside other sharp objects of varying sizes. He picked up a scalpel. Started cleaning it. Jonas' leg jerked, hindbrain coaxing him to run even as he stayed still.

Jonas swallowed and leaned his head back against the tub. "I don't know why you bother sanitizing everything so much if we're going to be in an unsterile environment. I'm risking an infection either way." He sat up, placing an arm on the edge of the tub to rest his chin on. His eyes roved over the green rug lying atop the white tiles, avoiding the other's eyes. "Maybe I'll find somebody else. Somebody with a *clean* bathroom."

That started a laugh out of Miles. "I'd wager you wouldn't be able to find a single person who knows what they're doing. And even if you did, it would be dangerous work. You know what happened to the silk road. Police are crawling on the dark web everywhere now."

"Yeah, but that was for drugs. And it was a big site! You really think police are just going to be dickering around on random links?"

"If it's not the police, it's stupid kids who think they can find a red room. You won't get anywhere these days."

The two men lapsed into silence as Miles worked. He was right, Jonas knew. The cannibal cafe was shut down as well. It's as if the sterilization of the surface web leaked down through the code protecting the dark web. But oh, how it was fun while it lasted. When Jonas was still in college barely keeping his head afloat, it was a haven. Akin to a kit crawling underneath its mother, warm and protected among the other wriggling bodies looking for an escape from the too-big world. The forums offered everything to Jonas. He recalled how desperately suicidal he was at the time. Looking up the methods to kill himself, the most and least painful. There was a comfort in falling into that tar pit. He had options, ways to escape as the low grades rolled in. And he didn't want to get out. Because if he got out of that tar pit, let the black liquid slop off him and face the light, then he may never go through with killing himself. It seemed to be inevitable to him. Like he was walking down a road and could see it in front of him inching closer and closer with each step he took. He wasn't expecting anything to come out of posting on the cannibal cafe. He was idly suicidal at the time. But when he got a message from Miles that seemed to be the real deal, why wouldn't he choose to run to the end of his road?

Miles finally finished cleaning all the equipment and wrapped it in a towel, settling it on the floor by the bathtub next to an IV pole. He knelt, almost as if praying to the man he would soon slaughter. Jonas raised his head from his arm and rested the back of his head against the tub, eyes tracing a spider wrapping a fly in her web on the ceiling. Nimble fingers practiced and quick, Miles took Jonas's right arm and turned it so the underarm faced up. He ran his fingers along his arm in search of a sufficient vein. Upon finding one, he tapped it for a few seconds before taking the IV and inserting the needle. He pushed the catheter within the vein, and upon the backflow of blood he took the needle out and attached the IV to the catheter. Miles dropped the needle in a nearly full sharps bin.

For a minute he was silent as he leaned up to fiddle with the IV. Once the rate at which the adrenaline was being delivered was to his satisfaction, he leaned back down and took another tool: a small leather band that looked akin to a belt. Miles grabbed Jonas' left arm and wrapped it just below his shoulder in order to sufficiently cut off blood flow. Jonas watched as he picked up the bone saw. His eyes flickered to Miles'. The man stared at him.

"Remember to breathe," Miles instructed in that blank nurse voice of his. Jonas barely had time to retort before the teeth of the bone saw was placed on his upper arm and began to cut in. Blood beaded up from the wound, running over his wrist and dropping into the tub. White began to peek out between the ridges created by his flesh. Jonas squirmed, his stomach seeming to crawl up his throat as blood loss caused nausea. The cracking of bone as the saw began to tear through it rang out through the bathroom, and soon the harsh sound of a slap joined it as Miles struck Jonas' cheek. "It is far too early for you to get whiny," the man hissed as he sawed harder. Jonas' breath hitched and he clenched down on the lump forming in his throat. Miles was right. It was hard to train instinct out of Jonas. That animalistic part of his brain that screamed for escape. But they certainly tried. Jonas would think Miles was trying to completely dull his nerves with how many beatings he suffered, but he thinks he just liked it when Jonas crawled back to him afterwards. And Jonas would think it abuse if not for the fact that he felt there was no separation between himself and Miles anymore. A slippery slope that started when Jonas convinced Miles to quit his job because he got lonely and ended with each being the other's entire world. As if the wires in Jonas' brain melded with Miles'. There was a sheer ecstasy in their mutual destruction.

The last of his arm clung to his shoulder just by a few shining tendons. It stretched with the weight before snapping and plopping to the floor. Jonas gasped, a shudder running through his body as he peered at the bleeding stump.

"Other one," Miles said. He picked up another leather band and fastened it to Jonas' remaining arm. He began cutting into Jonas' flesh and Jonas let himself drift. The blood loss created a special high that kept him prone in the bathtub, heart jackrabbing in his chest and sickly feeling pooling in his stomach. He imagined it rising up, through his throat and past his teeth and leaking over his lip and maybe Miles could lick it up so they could be even closer and closer. He was more affectionate in the beginning. Miles would hold him with a reverence as he destroyed him, cutting him into small bits. And perhaps that's why Jonas got attached so quickly. His cheap fucking in college kept him alive, but not living. He would have flings with men or women, becoming fuck buddies until they realized how much he was drunk. Jonas would vomit into a trash can or his bed or on them enough times and they cut ties and run, the sexual gratification not enough to warrant dealing with Jonas' slow ruination.

One girl stuck with him longer than the others. Perhaps that's why it hurt the most. Perhaps it's because she was as unstable as him. A vegan feminist

punk girl with dyed hair who protested animal testing facilities in her spare time. She was an angry woman who would smack him if he so much as dared suggesting he didn't want to take it up the ass that night. By all standards she was more nuts than him. But then she looked at him, when he was swaying on his feet and screaming "Bohemian Rhapsody" and told him 'there's nothing behind your eyes. You're just waiting to die'. They didn't speak after that. If the punk vegan feminist was more well-adjusted than him, what did that make him?

But then he fell into Miles' arms. He gazed up at him as the man steadily sawed through Jonas' arm, lips peeking between his teeth in concentration. His eyes were so dark they were nearly black, a pool of tar more refreshing than any spring. Oh, how kind Miles was in the beginning. After they realized Jonas' special ability he was akin to prized cattle for the man. Nearly worshiped. He had gone so far to even make Jonas a housewarming gift when he moved in, soon after the first time Miles killed him. Wind chimes made of his finger bones. It disappeared after a bad storm blew in a couple months later. Miles never made him another one. His kindness was a slowly depleting thing, draining until Jonas was treated to his cold nurse-demeanor. With the absence of his kindness came the abundance of his filth. Dishes abandoned in the sink, beer bottles scattered about, pizza boxes when they ran out of Jonas' meat. Jonas could feel himself going crazy, living in the mess. He often peered out the window, at the trees that surrounded their home. There was nothing keeping him there. He could disappear and never see Miles again. But what did he have without Miles? Academic probation and trying to find the best way to kill himself without coming back? What would happen to Miles if Jonas left? Would he kill another to satiate the blood lust? Would he crumble? They were too deeply intertwined by the time they began to snap at each other. Like rats with their tails stuck together. They were completely and wholly each other's with the first bite of Jonas' cooked flesh. It was only natural that if Jonas was drowning that he would grab Miles and drag him down with him, take away his job and friends and family so they both sacrificed everything for the other. His other arm hit the tub.

He slammed his head back against the porcelain. It was getting hard to think, his body's sympathetic nervous system reducing him to a prey animal. "The organs now," Jonas gasped. "Please. I can't make it any longer. I wanna see the organs."

"You made it with all your limbs chopped off that one time," Miles muttered. But he listened to Jonas. He dropped the bone saw haphazardly in the tub, ignoring as Jonas flinched away. He grabbed the scalpel. When he turned back Jonas was attempting to wrestle his shirt off, only succeeding in getting himself stuck. Miles let out a short, annoyed spurt of breath and tore the shirt off of him. He didn't make any effort to put pressure on Jonas' wounds. Cauterizing ruins the taste, Miles always preached.

Jonas whined, long and drawn out as Miles sliced into his stomach, parting his flesh and letting out a sea of blood. Jonas shifted upwards, gasping in and out as he kept his stomach under control long enough so he could peer at his own organs. And peer he did. His organs, pumping and squirming. He could peer the white of his ribcage just at the top. The room around him swam, the low drone of the lights seeming to pierce his ears. He glanced down at his shoulders and imagined coarse fur growing over it, his hands as hooves and arms as legs. He remembers running his fingers through brown fur and looking up at his dad who held a knife. His dad worshiped the deer he hunted. Gave it respect when he made an incision down the belly just below its sternum, when he taught Jonas how to remove abdominal organs and take out the digestive tract and tan the hide. His dad worshiped the deer. Jonas never felt as loved as he does under Miles' hands. If he wanted to he could supplement his life with romantic dates and quick fucks but nothing could ever touch intimacy of consumption. Where his entire whole is embraced.

Miles watched as Jonas began to jerk and shake. His blue fingertips twitched, as if to reach out to Miles and beg for his life. As if this were his first time dying. He gasped and gurgled and choked until the blood loss took his consciousness. His life followed shortly thereafter.

With Jonas dead, Miles would move efficiently. He would scoop out the organs and place them within the freezer. He would sever the limbs and wrap them up before they joined the organs. Jonas' rib cage would be drilled into and taken out, as per the man's request. He always liked to make rustic bone knives with it. All that would remain would be the head. The next few days that follow would be slow, like the root of a plant reaching into soil. Jonas' nervous system would begin to peek out the flesh of his severed head, stretching down and down and growing until flesh and meat and skin began to take form. What follows is days of agony as Jonas twists and turns and writhes. The nerves lighting up, the onslaught of sensory details all he can *feel*. But the fog would clear and Miles will carry him from the bathtub to the living room, where a steaming plate of Jonas' organs will lay. Or perhaps a cut of his leg. Whatever Miles is fancying that day.

Miles will feed *Friends* into the DVD player, no matter how much Jonas complains about the sitcom.

After the night is done Miles will help Jonas into the only bedroom in the house and leave to go to sleep on the couch, knowing in the morning he'll wake up to Jonas curled up on the floor at his feet, watching him.

# The Bone Sewer

*Lucinda Riebe*  
University of Iowa  
speculative fiction

*TW: Blood and violence*

*“Up and down and in and out,  
the thread bobs with the needle.  
I hum my song and sing along  
keep quiet from upheaval.”*

Helen murmured in her soft soprano voice, pulling the needle and thick thread through the hem of her dress’s skirt. The thread had come loose the other day but it was her favorite and she was determined to make it last as long as she could.

*“Another stitch,  
another thread,  
A pop of color  
to raise the dead.”*

The fire in the hearth hummed and danced along with her song, popping and crackling in tempo to the tune. She stretched and tossed another log onto the flames, smiling fondly as the fire rattled before claiming the wood for its next meal, hungrily jumping onto the dry bit of tree. The flames would chew it until it was gone, reduced to charcoal to be used anew tomorrow but until then it would burn contentedly and warm the walls of her home.

She held up her dress, happy with her work. If she kept good care of it, she wouldn’t have to make a new one until next season. The deep blue color had



been expensive and had begun to fade but it was well worth the meat she sold for it. She still had some color left, which she decided she would save until she had to start over on a new dress. She hummed to herself as she thought about the garment. Should she make another just like it, or should she try her hand at something new?

*"Weave it through and pull it taught  
with carefulness and ease,"*

She bit the thread until it snapped and tied off the end. She so liked having new things but there was something satisfying about saving a dying. She had gotten good at repurposing old and unwanted things. What some saw as trash were really scraps to be remade.

*"And soon your dress will be on the mend,  
and swaying in the breeze."*

She folded the dress carefully and set it beside a skein of yarn in the basket next to her. She didn't know what to do with it yet. Maybe she would knit a new pair of socks for her son and his ever-growing feet or mittens for when the nights would surely cool. It was too late to think about starting a new project now, though. Her late nights were for finishing things. Settling tasks of the day so that with the dawn she could see her home through fresh eyes. She stretched and snuggled closer into her chair, enjoying the warmth of the fire as it popped. She eyed her needle lazily. It had begun to chip and fracture along the edges. She would need a new one soon.

The faded white needle had done her well throughout the year, carved delicately from a piece of bone. She had spent hours chipping the big thing down into something small enough to sand against rock. The delicate point had been perfect and sharp but now it dulled with the year of use. The rest of it had been sold or carved into a comb in her room or a knife in her kitchen, but she hadn't left a good enough piece to make another needle for mending. She didn't think she would need one so soon but with the way Georgios kept growing... She stretched her toes into the deep, red carpet, warmed by the fire.

*"Weave the threads and weave them tight  
and poke right through the needle's eye.  
Up and down and in and out  
'til silver lights the sky."*

She slunk to her feet, dragging her toes across the soft material, twirling in a loose, lazy circle. She drifted her way to her son's room like that, light on her

feet as if she were a phantom in the wind. As if she could pass right through her walls and into the night like she was blinking. She stepped through the extra large door frame to where her son slept snugly in his bed, warm in his wool blanket.

*"But listen darling to the sound  
of monsters on the wind.  
Sew a pair of curtains so  
as not to let them in."*

She drew the curtains shut tight to his window, snuffing out the moonlight and humming softly all the way. He was snoring all tucked in and off to the realm of dreams. If he had asked her to snuff out the light of the real moon, she would have found a way to do it. She neared him with the lullaby on her lips and brushed at the dark curls around his face.

*"And if they part the fabric  
and take you by surprise,  
baby, don't you hesitate,  
to stab them in the eyes."*

She kissed him softly on the forehead and headed back to the living room, the song still swaying in her step. She would need to mend Georgios' pants in the morning, or maybe she would do it the next night so that she could do her mending by the moon. Georgios loved it when she would weave little animals where the holes had been or over the seam of new material. It made him excited to keep the old clothes and she was happy to do it for him. The way he would wait patiently all the while she stitched and upon receiving it, would beam up at her like she was the very sun itself. Tomorrow during the daytime, then, she decided. Then she could do her work with the comfort of her little boy.

It was just the two of them against the world. Half a day's walk from the nearest village and perched on a hill, their little house was more than enough for the two of them. She kept it warm and she kept him fed. Moreover, he did his very best to make his mama happy. What more could she ask for?

Something loud came from outside. The shriek of an animal being butchered? The cry of a child doing it for the first time? A scream or a shout of a human met by the hungry maw of a wolf? She shook her head. It all just bled together into noise at the end of the day. What was a scream but a scream? She only hoped it wouldn't wake her boy. Maybe she should make him some earmuffs with the yarn. That might help with both the cold and the bother.

Then the cry began to clarify. It was the shout of a man but not that of a dying one. It was that of one who wished for such a fate and had no other way to meet it.

“Oh, great beast!” The voice yelled its challenge. “I will end your reign of terror in these lands! Come and face me if you dare!”

*The nerve of people these days,* Helen thought, brushing off her hands. *Right when I was so ready to tuck myself into bed.*

She went to the kitchen for her bony knife and eyed the wooden hilt. She weighed the edge of the blade in her mind as something inside of her kept on humming the song. She left it on the countertop beside the stack of clean dishes Georgios had helped her with after dinner.

*“Weave the threads and weave them tight  
and poke right through the needle’s eye.”*

She could be gentle tonight, she decided. She could be soft and kind. Softer than a wolf and as kind as the butcher. Her neighbor knew how to take his animals out in one quick move, spilling blood without letting the animal suffer. Helen needed a new needle after all. Besides, if she was delicate enough she might earn enough from him that she could buy some new color. A new pair of pants for Georgios. Dates for her cupboard and salt for their dinners. Fabric for her next dress.

She rolled her shoulders back until the joints began to crack, and then the bones, unfolding from where they were wound, deep within her. Her skin stretched and morphed to accommodate them, playing back and forth with each other under a thin layer of skin. Wings began to sprout from her back like saplings through cold Earth in the spring. She flexed her fingers until the claws began to poke through, layering over each other until the scales appeared, climbing up and over her skin. She loved her soft, delicate form that worked with tiny needles and hugged her son but sometimes, being sharp was useful. Fun, even.

*“But listen darling to the sound  
of monsters on the wind.”*

She hummed to herself, just a whisper on her breath, as the man continued to shout from her lawn. She didn’t know where the men kept coming from. How they knew where she was. She was always oh so tidy, even when she wasn’t feeling quite as generous as she was tonight.

*“Sew a pair of curtains so  
as not to let them in.”*

She laid a delicate claw on the door handle and moved it down and in, slowly, slowly, pulling it forward. The things were oh so fragile when she

was sharp and it would cost more than the man was worth to replace it if she forgot it.

Helen also learned a long time ago that if she didn't come out to the screaming men, they would come in. One of them once ruined a lovely tapestry she had woven, and another had gone straight for Georgios' room. That had not been a smart choice. She had not been very generous that night.

Her eyes, smarter in the dark than any human's, found him quickly. His face split into a grin beneath the light of the moon. She unhooked her shoulders, broadening them in a few slow moves in the open space, and waited.

He brandished a sword, his pretty little stick of steel, before her. "Horrible creature of the western mountains," he shouted. "I shall bring your head back to my king."

"Shhh," she hushed him, her voice echoing across the mountainside in a low hiss. Her neighbor's lanterns flickered off all across the hillside.

*"And if they part the fabric..."*

She shut the door softly behind her with a cold shriek of the hinges.

*"And catch you by surprise..."*

"Stop with your singing, Siren!" The man ran at her, sword above his head like every other warrior before. The metal looked nice and new. *It might fetch a pretty penny at the market*, she thought. *I wonder how much a pound of your flesh will go for along with it.*

She slunk to the side, drawing him away from the house. She wanted to keep his cries away from her little boy. In a second she sliced clean through his arm, flinging the shiny sword out of harm's way. In another she pinned him to the grass, one clawed hand on his chest, the other palming his face, pressing just enough to draw blood. She kept her grip gentle. One of the upper arm bones would be the perfect size for a sewing needle and she didn't want the thing to be crushed to splinters before she chose a piece to work with. Maybe she could carve his thigh bone into a fine comb to sell if she was patient enough. Oh, how she loved to take what was useless and give it new life. She leaned her head in close to his ear and whispered with the evening wind,

*"baby, don't you hesitate..."*

*"to stab them in the eyes."*

# Eurydice's Aubade

*Madeline Riske*  
University of Iowa  
mythos

***Y**ou're telling the story wrong.*

I pulled myself out of Tartarus, blood under  
nails, rock between flesh. I looked Hades'  
bronze snake in the eye, never tricked

by the same venom twice—Not Orpheus  
with fists he pummeled against his chest  
to make a heartbeat, the toxins of his whining.

Only when I hit the bottom could I see  
in the dark. Felt my way to crater  
after crevice, I coveted the sound of my own voice—

*Why did I never build my own ship and sail it?  
Too busy convincing the viper I didn't deserve the bite.*

Thank the gods I am angry. I've found energy.

To cut and suck the poison from my own body.

*Did he tell you I followed?*

To want.

I lead. I abandon.

# Mesopotamia

*Dominick Stoops*  
Michigan State University  
poetry

*"Have a sense of pride in your motherland. Just as your mother has given birth to you, so too the land has given birth to you."*

—Sathya Sai Baba

Softened from sandstone,	our kingdom
plastered to the horizon,	like mud on leather.
We carved between	the legs,
Euphrates,	Tigris, the wombs of
our mothers. We rose	above the riverbeds, soaked
the sheets: dripped blood	on bleached sterile floors.
Slushed copper sand,	our desert bore the earth and all within.
We dammed ideas	with immortality, forever
etching them to clay.	We poked our thumbs in silt,
cultivated apples only to be	rotted from the inside out.
We placed gods in the sky—	begged for them to come down.
When silent enough.	When the traffic finds its melody outside
the four walls of my cage,	and my chest grows shallow.
I hear crashing water,	stones gliding past the reeds.
How that water whisks stone	against rock until only one
comes out smooth, matured	with perfect round edges.
How those rivers have churned	in my marrow. When I lunge myself through
planes where not even God	can find me, I hear those stones inside
of me clack together. Clack	after clack. A beat, after beat, constant rhythm.
From barren odds my kin crawled	out of mud, polished stones in hand.
And for the first-time	the flood was not an omen.

# From, Your Dearest

*Jordan Ivonen*  
Michigan State University  
historical fiction

*TW: General content warning for hate crimes*

Olivia—

It has only been a month since I saw you last, but it feels as though an eternity has achingly slowly crawled by. How are you doing? How is your health—and your mother’s and father’s, too? My life is as usual. More rigorous than when we were together, certainly, but enjoyable. Do not worry about me.

Think of me, your closest friend,  
—Sam

Olivia—

I realized that in my last letter, I hardly included anything of substance! Now, I cannot keep you curious and wondering about my doings, so I shall share a short anecdote.

Just the other day, my unit set out to explore the woods: a training exercise, my captain called it. There were certain parameters we had to abide by... but those are unimportant to my tale. I, alongside two of my fellow soldiers, ventured deeper into the woods than any other group. I know, I know—you will call me foolish for doing so, but I have always been the brave one between the two of us! But! There we were—deep within the forest, with trees so tall and thick they blotted out the sun—when we came across a clearing of pressed grass. Now I, of course, knew what such a sight foreshadowed, although the city-bred men

beside me had no clue. You, Olivia, would have been able to recognize it too: it was the location of a bear's resting place, and of a rest that had occurred not too long ago! I told them to retreat quietly, but city-bred folks can do nothing quietly, and so of course we attracted the bear's attention.

And what a monstrous creature it was! Eleven feet tall, with claws as long as my forearm! But do not be afraid! I am *Sam*, after all, your dearest and bravest companion, and so I chased the creature off! My companions nearly fainted in fright.

Please, regale my tales to your friends, and watch their eyes widen in shock and glee!

The mightiest adventure,  
—Sam

P.S. The mail-delivery person does not come every week, I have found, which means that this letter will be arriving much later than I anticipated. Please accept my deepest apologies, and expect my letters to arrive every two weeks.

Olivia—

I am worried that my story from the last letter might have frightened you. That is the last thing I want, so I will tell you a happier tale today.

Before we are able to set out onto the frontlines, our company must first pass a series of tests—our “*basic training*.” (I, of course, am passing with flying colors.) Our assignment this past week had been to avoid the traps set up by our “enemy.” My bumbling companions (although soon I may call them friends, though none as dear as you) stumbled right into the very first trap! Luckily, it was not one of the “deadly” ones, and so I—single handedly!—rescued them.

(But I am sure you already knew that I would save the day.)

My captain praised me quite vigorously afterwards. Had I been the type to be embarrassed, I would have been sweating! I can picture your sweet face—such a pretty red whenever you are flustered—in my position, and I know you would have hated the attention.

The bravest hero,  
—Sam

~~My dearest Olivia~~  
Olivia—

Ignore that. My friends (for we have now known one another long enough to be considered as such) are being silly. Paper is scarce, and so I cannot get a



new sheet, but I refuse to become a source of embarrassment for you by sending torn up pages.

The food here is mighty dreadful. I am no great chef myself—unlike you, with your ability to create the sweetest of desserts—but even *I* could do better than churning out slop night after night.

Ah! But do not worry about me. I promise you that I am safe and happy—or, as happy as I can be. Writing these letters to you is my greatest joy; what faces do you make when you receive them? Do you smile fondly? Do you laugh at my bolstering? ~~Do you miss me?~~ Do you cry? Please, never cry on my behalf. I would sooner face that monstrous bear again than be the cause of your tears!

Missing you,  
—Sam

Olivia—

Do you remember our last night together? We gazed at the moon and the stars, and marveled at the great expanse of the sky. The moon—the lovely moon, a full one, wasn't it?—beamed down upon us, and it seemed so much larger than us. Then we could ever be.

—Sam

Olivia—

The other day, I was struck with a peculiar memory. It was how we first met—or rather, our lack of meeting, in the traditional sense. I realized that there has never been a time in my life where you were not part of it. Our mothers were companions when we were both in their wombs, and remained friends as we took our first gasping breaths of air, a mere seven days apart from one another.

You used to lord it over me: the fact that you were seven days older. Remember, Olivia? You would take charge and lord over me, always deciding on what games we would play and if I dared to disagree, you would claim: "*I am older, so I get to pick!*" I will let you in on a secret: I never minded, not like how I pretended I did. All I wanted—my only preference—was your company. My favorite game, I recall, was House. You always made me act as the mother and you, the father, because my hair was longer.

You would braid my hair, saying it is the "*husband's job!*" but neither your father nor mine ever braided our mothers' hair. Did you just want an excuse to do so? You could have asked. I would have let you.

Alas, I have cut my hair short to maintain my facade, so there is nothing for you to braid. Maybe you will let me do the braiding next time.

Your friend for life,  
—Sam

Olivia—

I have another story for you, although you must promise not to be angry with me.

Together with my friends, we snuck away from the base and into a nearby town once the sun set. There, we proceeded to engage in revelry until the sun had nearly spilled across the horizon, and we had to race back to the base in order to not be caught. My friends found it very enjoyable to flirt with the women—saying they have been starved of feminine company—and I wanted to laugh at the irony of it.

For some reason, I find it imperative that you know I did not partake in the flirting. While I did drink and dance (it felt good to relax) I stayed alone or alongside my companions, and did not engage much with others. Odd of me, I know. Back home, I was the one who would drag you away from your teetering stacks of books (how they never fell on you, I do not know!) to go outside in the sun or to speak with other people. Even then, you often stayed quiet and let me do the talking.

(I did not mind, do not worry.)

The sneakiest soldier,  
—Sam

Olivia—

I am so angry all of the time. How could he? How dare he? I just know it was him. I know what *he* did. What he did to you. But do not worry. I took care of it. Took care of *him*.

—Sam

Olivia—

When I am not training—something that takes up most of my day—I think of you. I wonder what you are doing, what has engaged you, what books you have recently read, or if your little sister has mastered the waltz yet.

Even if she has yet to master the dance, I am certain she will still be better than you! You have always had two left feet; no matter how long our lessons would last, you kept stepping on my toes. I spent hours teaching you, to what I felt was no avail. I enjoyed dancing with you, of course, but still! Imagine my surprise when during your sixteenth birthday party you stepped on none of the men's toes that you danced with! You were rather stiff, but I suppose that is only natural. You must have been very careful when dancing with them!

I hope you are happier, wherever you are. That you are not in pain, or scared, or alone. That you are surrounded by those who cherish you. I shall be there soon, never fear! We will be reunited once more.

Always yours,  
Be safe,  
-Sam

Olivia-

Training is almost over. Soon, I shall have to face the frontlines. Think of me, alright?

-Sam

Olivia-

I am sorry for my lack of silly stories. I can make one up for you.

Once upon a time, two little girls were best friends. They did everything together: danced, played, read, drank tea. They were inseparable. Until one day, many years into knowing one another, an evil man swept into their little town and kidnapped one of the girls! Fret naught, my dear, for the girl's friend rescued her, and together they danced the night away, into the moonlight and far from the darkness of the evil man, who faced extreme punishment and never bothered another girl again.

A good story, no?

Your masterful storyteller,  
-Sam

Olivia, *my Olivia*-

I hate to admit it, but I am terrified. The walls are closing in on me and every day seems grimmer than the last. I am hungry. I am uncomfortable. I miss you. My only solace is my memory of you, shining golden even in the grim: of your

melodic laugh, your smile, your grace, charm, elegance, humor. Everything about you. My memories and my paper have kept me going.

This paper, that I write to you on. It means everything.

—Sam

Olivia—

My last letter was very presumptuous! To call you mine—how silly of me.

But still... it feels imperative that you know one singular truth: I am yours. In every sense of the word, I have always been yours.

Do not worry about me, dearest Olivia. Brave Olivia. Lovely Olivia. I will be alright.

Yours,  
—Sam

Olivia—

I like the idea of being yours more than I can ever admit. But I would admit it all—tell the world shamelessly and unafraid—if it brought you back to me. To see you under the moonlight once more, or amongst your books, or by my side... I dream of such an occasion every night.

—Sam

Olivia—

While the weeks have been endless—dim without your smile—I believe they will soon come to a close. All will be as it will be.

—Sam

Olivia

My best friend, my closest confidant, my love, *my Olivia*—

Today is my last sunrise. As the sun's rays shimmer through the bars of my window, I close my eyes and imagine it is your warmth washing over me. Your comfort—boundless and beautiful.

I have always been afraid to imagine your last moments. Were you in pain? Did you call for help? Did you call for *me*? I was not there. I failed you.

Yet—

Yet I know you have forgiven me. If you were here (please, be here) you would tell me there is nothing *to* forgive, for I did no wrong by not being there. But then I *did* do wrong, in the aftermath. And now *they* shall force me to pay my recompense.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I will say it as I die, just as I breathed it as I lived. I told you of my love in every way but words. Did you know? Did you hear?

Would you have ever accepted it?

Can we play House once more, a perfect family: together, unbreakable, *innocent*?

But we cannot go back, for you are gone in the most dreadful manner, and I have erased the original sinner.

But now I have sinned in the eyes of the Law, though I see my actions only as judicial in nature. True Justice.

I apologize in advance for the unseemly look of this paper, for I am going to tear off the bottom and write one last letter. One last letter before I hang.

Love,  
—Sam

My dearest Olivia Wallerton—

I love you. Desperately. Irrevocably. Destructively. And I am yours, in every sense of the word. I have lived as yours. I shall die yours. And when we reunite, I will still be yours: eternally.

Love, forever and always,  
—Samantha Grace

My Sam. My Samantha. My *Sammy*—

I kept you waiting. I am sorry. I am so, *so* sorry. Please, will you come back for me? Please. I came back for you... and I will *always* come back for you.

You did not know that I had managed to escape him—*them*—so long ago, but even then, it had been long after you took rightful Justice into your own hands. It took me far too long to reach you—to find you, for they took you so far from me, my dear—once more and, *God*, I am too late. Please, Sammy, darling, love, dearest. Please come back to me. If only you could be mine again, I should be at peace. You would not leave me restless, would you?

I know it is not fair of me—for *you* are the one who has died—but I want to be selfish. I want you to be *mine*, as you should have always been. As you were. As you are. I want so many things, my love. I want *you*, most of all.

But I have your letters. Your beautiful letters. You were so brave, darling. Thank you for giving me these pieces of your soul. Thank you for sharing your heart with me. I am so *lucky* to have been loved by you, my devoted soldier. Some of your precious letters are crumpled (*I am so sorry*) as they were trampled upon when they fell from your pockets in the aftermath (*Please, please, I am so sorry*) but *I have them*. They are mine, and you are mine, and I shall never stop loving you, my dearest, most lovely Sammy. I am sorry. *I am sorry*. I can never say it enough. Please forgive me, for I have failed you. Please wait for me a little while longer, my love. I will join you one day, when all who did this to you have been taken care of—been *destroyed*—like how you took care of *him* for me. I will see your soul at ease.

(I know I am lying to myself. I saw your soul settle into pure bliss in those last moments, your—our—last moments, when we locked eyes. When you saw me. You were *smiling*, my love, even as you died. You truly are braver than I.

And I know you would never have wanted me to sully my hands in gore and violence, but I cannot let this stand, my darling, I cannot stand by—I *refuse* to stand by—when it is *justice*—not Justice—who killed you, so cruelly, so terribly. When it is a false *justice* who took you from me.)

Yours, forever and always, to the beyond and back, endlessly and infinitely,  
*Olivia.*

# Radioactive Auntie

*Jiayou Shen*  
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science fiction

I have an Auntie, and she is radioactive. This is not a metaphor, standing near her with normal clothes is akin to standing near an active nuclear reactor. When I visit her in the containment facility she lives in, we're placed in separate rooms with lead walls. We see each other through a screen of reinforced glass. We talk through specialized landline phones and play virtual poker. We do a lot of things together through computers, actually. It's a wonder of the modern era.

I'm not sure how she became radioactive. She says it was from an accident in her youth, an accident that got her a hefty severance package and a luxury containment cell. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure how we're related outside of being distant relatives. Everyone who might know something is dead, so it's not like we can ask. We're the only family we have left so far, and that is to be cherished.

My friends ask me about her a lot after they found out. They ask me if I must burn my clothes after a visit, if I must do a bunch of health checks afterwards, if I must inject medications into my blood. The truth is simpler. Allow me to walk you through my previous appointment. You deserve to know.

First, I drove into an underground garage in the middle of nowhere in my old red parka and reliable K-N95 face mask. A man checked my ID and led me into an elevator. The elevator went down, down, and down. I clutched the parka close to my body, but the cold sunk in eventually. The elevator had no windows, yet I felt it get darker the deeper I got.

The elevator stopped and opened. I was led through a hall where I was screened thoroughly. No cameras or film, no incendiary devices. After that, I entered the visitor's room.

Auntie came in through a separate door after I waited. She took her place in front of me through the glass. She looked lovely. The scientists working on her did wonders in making fake skin. She smiled at me, and it almost looked like normal. I suppose for Auntie, this has become her normal smile.

"I missed you," she said.

"So did I," I replied.

We talked. I told her why I won't be able to visit her for a while. I described the weather, and how the wind felt on my skin. I showed her a funny cat video through the room's connected computers. Auntie was contained before the internet boom, and she never got used to today's technology.

We were halfway through a video of a cat batting a toy mouse when she asked me, "Why do you even stay with me?"

"You're family. I can't leave you."

"What if you had more of me, who made food you could eat and hugged you when you needed it?"

"I would still visit you. You're the only Auntie I know who glows in the dark and has immunity to most viruses."

"Because I kill them all before they have the chance to enter my body."

"Do you know how many people would kill for that ability these days?"

"And people have no choice but to social distance themselves from me!"

"Exactly!"

We watched a movie. The same movie, synced on two screens. Over the reunion between the lead and her family members, I saw Auntie place her hand against the glass. I placed mine over hers. The glass felt cool, but I swore it became warmer over time. That was the only scene I remember from that movie; the rest of it was rather generic.

The movie ended, and so did my visit. I air-kissed Auntie's cheeks, and she repeated the action over the glass. I was screened again. After that, I walked back to the elevator. I felt it go up, up, and up into the parking garage. The man handed me yet another pamphlet of what I must do afterward, and I left.

When I got back, all I had to do was shower and toss my clothes into a UV Light Sanitation Box. Government-provided, and unbelievably useful at the height of the pandemic. That was all I had to do. I also pinned the pamphlet onto the fridge with the others. Pictures of your father's family are on there too.

I can't wait until you are born. Not only do I want to be able to see Auntie again, but I also want to touch my toes again. Auntie's facility is very safe, but your father and I agreed that I stay away until your birth. He has never visited Auntie and doesn't want to. Still, I believe I can convince him to let you see your Great Auntie eventually. Maybe as a toddler.

I hope one day, she can visit us on the surface too.



# At the Garden

Lynne Inouye  
University of Iowa  
horror

*TW: Past child abuse, unhealthy relationships,  
unreality, and referenced smoking and drinking*

**Y**ou sit across the table, a plastic knife in one hand, a paper plate between us. “One bite,” you ask of me. You lean on your elbows, push the plate closer. The table is long and brown, an unbridgeable gap, and I look at you to avoid looking anywhere else. I listen; I look; I do not speak.

Grey hair, green eyes. There is your labored breathing, the pound of my heart. The hum of the fridge from where its door has been left open—left to spill light into the dark room. It frames you; it reveals slivers of truth in the dirty floor and the counter piled high with groceries and garbage. It turns you into a pale, long-limbed creature, and I realize I have started to feel afraid.

“Come on,” you say to me, gesturing at the plate. When I still don’t look at it, you gesture again; you crane further. Your hands are planted on the table, your eyes squinted in annoyance. Long, gray hair spills down your shoulders. “Eva,” you sigh. “I worked hard on this, you know. The least you could do is *pretend* to like it.”

Your hands tap on the table—another sound for the cacophony. Heart, breath, hum. You keep tapping; I keep staring. But there’s only so much to look at in the darkness of your apartment. There’s only so much of the noise I can take. I reach for my wine glass, and it’s dry. Empty. I look to the neighboring bottle, and somehow that is empty, too.

How did we get here? It feels blurry, distant, with the alcohol. But I remember the phone call; I remember how I saw your name and let it ring and ring and go straight to voicemail. You left a message full of “I miss you” and “come over” and “how old are you again?” Two minutes later, I called you back to tell

you “twenty-seven.” Somehow, I always end up calling you back. Somehow, I always end up back at your apartment, back at your side.

And so it went how it always does: you heated up a frozen meal, and we sat in front of the TV. You told me about your book club and the rude waitress at the restaurant. Your new boyfriend, my no-good father. You asked me if I’m married yet; you asked again how old I am. No matter how many times I tell you, you always seem to forget.

Snide comments are thrown in—hurried words and then a change of subject—a smug look out of the corner of your eye. And yet, I don’t fight back. I don’t mention your dirty apartment—the way one toilet leaks, the broken window. I still show up, even though I hate it. Hate you, maybe. It’s hard to tell these nights: my present life fades to past. I am a little girl again, wordless to the force of you. I hear your rasping voice in my head: be grateful. Eva, be grateful.

Even though you don’t speak again, I hear the echo of the words all the same. I hear the echo of one bite, Eva. One visit. One more night of burnt dinners, one more call, a few more dollars please. Sometimes, I think that you are all that I am. The silence suffocates. The room is dark and hazy; table and plate and your slanting smile swim before my eyes.

I take a deep breath. Outside, I hear wind and the rumble of cars. I hear the tap of your fingers, and it matches the beat of my heart. Dread unfurls in me, but I can see your impatience. And so my gaze slides across stained and pockmarked wood, and that is when I see it.

It has fallen on its side, and it sags into the paper plate—a mess of crumbs and smears of frosting. A jagged, hasty slice; a few bite-sized chunks scattered nearby. The frosting is a vibrant red. It’s the type that stains your teeth, that makes even the sunniest of smiles into something bloody. Vanilla with chocolate chips baked in. At first glance, it looks like an ordinary slice of cake. An ordinary interaction between mother and daughter—a gesture of goodwill. But you don’t say happy birthday. You don’t say anything, and your knife darts out and scoops a chunk of frosting to stick into your mouth.

I don’t look away. The longer I look, the more things twist, shift into something else. A single slice of cake but more than that. There’s more. I see myself after my twelfth birthday party, crying in my room. Frosty silence, a slammed door. I see myself at sixteen, spending the night at a friend’s house. I never told you I’d be gone; you never asked. Twelve, sixteen, twenty-seven. You’ve never made me a cake before. Sometimes, you’d buy cookies, but never cake. Never happy birthday.

But maybe I should be pleased. It’s a gesture of goodwill, right? A step towards mending the messiness between us, fixing up the cracks. But I feel paralyzed at the sight of that sagging, crumbing slice—at the chocolate chips. Brown splotches in pure vanilla. Dark, oozing spots, soaking into the cake, ruining the whole. In the dim light, with the buzz of alcohol, it almost looks like rot. Like

decay has marked it. And once a part is rotten, there is no hope for the whole. I could pick around it with a fork or carve out what's spoiled, but it remains.

It always remains.

My hand reaches out but doesn't quite touch. I want to crush it between my fingers, have the frosting stain my hands. I want to do as you told me; I want to grab the plastic fork nearby and take a bite. But paranoia has seeped in, and I feel wild, unanchored. Reality is a distant dream. Won't the rot get under my nails, soak into my skin? Won't my tongue and teeth turn red? My stomach turns, and you speak again: "One bite, Eva. I made it just for you."

One bite, one bite—just one bite. A memory comes in hazy spirals, memories of when you smoked when I was a kid. Our living room was often cloudy with it, and you liked to turn the TV on, sit on the couch, and smoke a whole pack. The smoke alarms had no batteries; the windows stayed shut. Once I turned sixteen, you offered me one. It's no wonder I got hooked on smoking. I wonder if my lungs have turned black. I wonder if I'll ever escape you, or if this is all there is.

Right now, I itch for a cigarette. But there's only you and the slice before us—a distant smell of sweetness that makes my stomach turn. Your fingers tap, my heart pounds, and I do not make a sound. The brown in the cake seems to pulse, expand, move an inch to the right and snap back when I'm not looking. The rot is in the cake, and in this moment, the cake is all there is. The cake is all you can offer me; there is no happy birthday, no apology. Just more demands and a ruined gift. A ruined, rotten gift.

I pick up my fork. My hands are shaking. And the realization comes:

You have made me who I am. Why does one bite matter? I'm already rotten. I have been since the first time you held me, since you nursed me, since you saw me off to kindergarten. You helped me learn to drive; you missed my high school graduation. You have made me who I am, and I am the culmination of your failures. I am rotten because this is all you can offer me: jabs and a smashed cake and a thousand words unsaid. It is the type of realization I will soon forget. It is the type of realization I have always known in some way, in some form. I do not have to look at you to know that you are smiling.

My fork touches the cake. My fork touches the rot—I have committed the first sin or maybe the hundredth or maybe the thousandth. Does it matter? You knew I would do this. You knew I would listen. My teeth sink in, and you speak. And maybe this was the first sin, the original source of doom for mankind: a lie disguised as truth. Mother and daughter, sweetness disguising the decay. You speak, and despite it all, I say it back. The words are as bitter as the taste in my mouth.

"I love you. I love you."

# The Story of Thunder and Lightning

*Elana Walters*  
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mythos

**I**n the age of old, a deity named Lei Gong was tasked to cleanse the middle realm of evil.

The mighty Jade Emperor—the supreme ruler of Tian and the first emperor of the people—armed Lei Gong with a chisel in his left hand, a mallet in his right, and a waxen, slick kui-skin drum that remained on his chest as he soared across humanity.

*Be the force of good and evil, the emperor instructed him. Strike down those who would use their will for evil purposes.*

And so, Lei Gong beat down on the drum. The roar that ripped out of his instrument tore through the sky until his ears ached and his vision blurred as he beat the drum harder and the clouds ebbed, swirled, and darkened to the sporadic song that made even Tian vibrate.

*Thunder*, the people said on the rare occasion that he was prayed to at the altar.

With his vision blurred, Lei Gong would aim the chisel, squint through the dark, and use the timing of the drum to swing, strike, and hope that the blade landed true. More times than not, because of the darkness and the height, Lei Gong would miss his targets to the disdain of the Jade Emperor. Anxious to prove himself, Lei Gong worked to uphold himself as a deity worthy of his title; someone suitable for his power.

Meanwhile, on the opposite end of the world, Dianmu was the daughter of an old woman in a small village. Her tasks moved her from morning to night as she cooked, cleaned, and sat at her mother's bedside to feed her by the spoonful.

Together, they rested by the nearest window, and Dianmu would become aware of her reflection in the glass as dusk turned into nightfall.

One day, Dianmu was startled to find her reflection staring back too early in the day and she lifted her eyes through the glass and to the heavens where storm clouds swirled overhead.

*The rice husks, her mother said, and Dianmu was brought back to the lone basket she'd left by the door. My teeth are too brittle. Quickly now. Get rid of it before the rain comes.*

Dianmu stepped outside and threw the husks across the open field as the heavens growled like a hungry stomach. She tossed them one by one, half-guarded by the gable roof of her hut, which did little to cover her as Lei Gong flew past. He stopped at the sight of the rice husks littering the ground and he tightened his grip on the chisel.

*Wasting food, he realized.*

The thunder became a bellow and Lei Gong took aim, narrowed his eyes, and swung. In an instant, Dianmu was struck dead, and Lei Gong shouted in triumph at having rid the Earth of a source of evil. Without a moment's notice, he raced back to Tian and to the Jade Emperor to celebrate his victory.

But there, he quickly realized his mistake.

Furious, the Jade Emperor pointed down at Lei Gong and said, *you will wed this girl, so that she is a constant reminder of the power you wield and the consequences of your actions.*

And so, Dianmu was revived and a deity she became.

As quickly as she had been wiped from the middle realm, Dianmu found herself tied to Lei Gong's side as he walked across the realm in search of evil-doers. Devastated by what he had done to her, Dianmu forced herself to keep her distance from him as she followed him across the skies and craned her neck in the hopes of seeing her mother again. Not only had he taken her life, but he had possibly taken her mother's, and for that, she vowed never to forgive him.

For the test of time, Dianmu drifted above the clouds and frowned down at Lei Gong as he worked. *I hate him*, she thought as he continued to miss, and frustrate, and plow forward through every storm and every wisp of gray with her at his heels. Her hatred must have seared the air because Lei Gong also kept his distance from her except for the occasional glance over his shoulder to be sure she was still following.

It was on a day when Dianmu dared to inch closer to his drum that Lei Gong was forced to acknowledge her by yanking himself away, practically flinging himself from her side. *I'm a deity*, she insisted. *I should be able to do more than sit and watch you.*

He shook his head and felt a pang in his chest that could rival his mallet. *You might be a deity, but your days of work are finished. Now is your time to rest and observe.*

*This does not feel like rest, she maintained. This feels like being punished.*

She turned away, and Lei Gong fought the shame that crept up on him like the dark mass that followed them for eternity. He knew that Dianmu was capable of using his chisel, his mallet, or his drum. He just couldn't do her more harm—not when he already stole her life. He would hate to steal more of her, so she would not use his chisel, and she would not fail like he did.

In the slivers of time when Lei Gong would have the energy to gust through multiple towns and villages at once, he'd leave Dianmu behind and visit her mother. He liked to check on her, and he used his winds to block her crops, and his rain to wet her soil which others in the town could harvest and bring to her when she needed. It was on a day when his hand grew tired, and he stopped beating his drum that Dianmu snuck up on him and caught what he'd been doing.

*Thank you, she said, her face chapped and pink from the wind.*

*This is how I care for you, he replied, and he didn't check to be sure she was following before he ventured back into the skies.*

After learning how he had cared for her mother, Dianmu watched Lei Gong more closely. For weeks, she studied the way the heavens sank where he walked and the rhythmic bounce of his mallet when he beat it. But most of all, she watched Lei Gong's chisel as he narrowly missed or wildly flung out, and his frustration clung to him with each new try.

*An accident, she quickly realized as he continued to throw into the dark. He cannot see which means what he did to me was an accident.* She continued to flinch and frown with each failed strike, and if he allowed her, she would have gotten close enough to rest a hand on his shoulder and comfort him like she did for her mother.

But he would not let her touch him, so she needed to find another way to ease the pain.

She thought of the many ways in which she used to help her mother and discouraged herself when nothing useful came up. *Things were different, she thought. When I could just lay beside her and stare out the glass as evening fell and our troubles for the day went with it.*

She missed those rare moments of reflection.

*Reflection, she realized, and her thoughts inhaled the idea like fresh air.*

She quickly acquired a mirror from the ground and the following day, she approached Lei Gong with it hefted in her hands. *You need light, she said and pointed to the chisel. You keep missing them because you can't see.*

Lei Gong eyed the polished mirror and shook his head.

*It will work, she insisted and held the mirror up to Tian where the light could catch. Just try, she said and pointed down below.*

Skeptical, Lei Gong beat his drum slowly and pointed his chisel. He searched and waited until, at last, he spotted two thieves that darted out from the shelter

of a nearby hut. They were attempting to sprint through the dark to cover their tracks, and Lei Gong beat his drum louder, warning them of what was to come.

The thieves melted into the darkness, and Lei Gong raised his chisel higher, eyes squinted. Just then, Dianmu shifted the mirror to the side and Lei Gong witnessed a streak of pure light flash to the ground, lighting his way to where the thieves had gone. He threw his chisel, and watched in awe as his aim landed true.

Those who witnessed the sudden flash of light, the defining boom of the chisel, and the bodies of the thieves scorched into the ground were quick to spread the tale across the realm.

*Lightning*, they whispered as more light ripped from Tian and the sound split open the floor.

*Beware of the light and the sound*, people began to say whenever storms brewed overhead and the dissonance of Dianmu and Lei Gong's work made their houses shudder on their legs. *They are direct warnings to avoid corrupt and immoral behavior.*

Today, legend has it that Lei Gong and Dianmu remain together traveling the cosmos, hefting their instruments, and cleansing the middle realm of those who would do it harm. To this day, Dianmu continues to light Lei Gong's way, and this is the tale of why lightning always comes before thunder.

# A Beginner's Guide to Keeping a Ghost

*Elana Walters*  
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romance

**\*Disclaimer:** Most individuals cannot handle having a ghost in their room. Please be advised that if you decide to keep your ghost, it is at your own risk. If you choose to proceed, please use caution with the guidelines below\*

## Ingredients

- Handwritten letters from you to the ghost
- A piece of clothing from the deceased
- Old pictures of the two of you
- Stuffed animal(s) to capture the ghost in a physical object that you can hold
- Magazines to read to pass the time of summoning
- **Note:** A ghost will eventually vanish over time. This guidebook cannot immortalize them into a space. This is just to keep them from slipping away sooner than expected

## **Step 1: Say goodbye within the designated room you'd like the ghost to haunt**

Before the ghost becomes a ghost, be sure to say goodbye within the room, house, or building that you'd like the ghost to continue haunting. Ghosts bind into the space an individual last sees them in, so it is imperative that the first step goes exactly as planned. There are no exact rules or regulations on how to say goodbye; all that matters is that the goodbye is done in the room of your choice, because once it's done, there is no going back.



## **Step 2: Make space for the ghost to bring gifts**

After the ghost is bound to a space, it will attempt to bring you gifts to convince you to set it free. The gifts will arrive in brown paper bags on your doorstep or stuffed into your mailbox. Most individuals report that the ghost's gifts often hold some significance to their relationship with the deceased before they became a ghost. Examples may include old clothes, homemade birthday cards, picture framed photos, items you thought you lost months ago, and in extreme cases, your underwear.

Remember, even if you want to set the ghost free, it cannot leave the room once it's bound to it. It does not matter if you keep the gifts or toss them away but please be advised: the gift-giving phase will not last forever and once the ghost realizes you won't set it free, the hauntings will begin.

## **Step 3: Prepare for the night terrors**

For the first few weeks, the ghost will find ways to keep you up at night. Some symptoms may include crying into your pillow, finding their smell on dirty clothes, vivid memories of the deceased, and the urge to directly contact the ghost through other methods of communication. In many cases, individuals will feel the ghost's phantom arm wrapped around their waist when they go to sleep or the whiff of the ghost's breath as if their head is on their shoulder. Reports show that the ghost will resort to entering dreams as well, so have tissues and melatonin at your bedside to quell the worst of the symptoms.

## **Step 4: Keep the ingredients out in the open**

The urge to throw away the ingredients will intensify the longer the terrors continue but understand that the ghost builds strength through the ingredients. Despite how painful it might be to continue looking at or being close to the ingredients, in order for the ghost to remain alive, the ingredients must stay out in the open where you can see them.

**Note:** If the hauntings become too intense, a common method to speed up the process of the ghost's vanishing is to put the ingredients in a cardboard box and slide them under your bed. With this method, the night terrors will minimize, but you will still feel the ghost's presence when you open the box up and view the ingredients at a later point. Be advised that there may come a day when you open the box and feel nothing because of how long it's been. There is a finality to putting everything away and it may lead to never feeling the ghost again.

## **Step 5: Prepare for strange changes to your day-to-day life**

Not only will the ghost affect your sleep schedule, but many individuals also report losing their appetite, taking long walks, or staring at walls as part of being haunted. These are common symptoms, and many individuals also re-

ported more personalized changes to their lives including (but not limited to): an inability to focus on work, excessive partying/drinking, spells of depression, extreme weight loss, and more. Be advised that each individual experiences different symptoms while being haunted, but if the symptoms are becoming too intense, it may be useful to call on a friend for company.

### **Step 6: Don't panic if you see the ghost walking around outside the haunted room**

Every individual that has ever been haunted will eventually encounter the ghost outside of the room, house, or building they are bound to, but the most important thing to remember is not to panic when this eventually occurs. Whether this happens days, weeks, or months after you say goodbye, understand that this is normal and that it will hurt regardless.

In most cases, you and the ghost will walk right by one another as if you don't know each other. Some individuals will go as far as talking to the ghost, or in worse cases, some individuals will see the ghost interacting with someone else. No matter what the ghost ends up doing, it's best to leave that person in the past where they belong. They're already dead anyways, so there's no point in holding onto the vision of them that appears before you.

### **Step 7: Remember that the ghost will still fade away no matter what you do**

Each ghost lingers for a varied amount of time. Some reports claim it can be as long as years while others will feel the ghost fade away after a couple months. Whatever the designated amount of time, don't be surprised if the ghost fades away while you're not looking. It is common to feel as if the pain of being haunted stopped suddenly, even if it was a gradual change.

**Note:** For those of you who are still clinging to your ghosts, please be advised that it does get better. In time, the memory of you and the ghost will no longer be considered a haunting but a natural part of day-to-day life. It is normal to feel that this day will never come, but it will. It will come whether you want it to or not, and that's the worst part of being haunted by someone who's already gone: all of it, even the memories, must come to an end eventually.

# Agave

*Caitlin Heidgerken*  
University of Iowa  
mythos

*TW: grief, death of a relative, gore*

**Y**ou open your eyes to blood. Blood, thick and rich, that in your dreams was only wine. You see clearly now. Him.

Your son.

Your son's severed head lies upon the mosaic tiles, stinking sweetly of grapes, and it is all your fault. Jealous, foolish girl. Bitter, hardened woman. You do not hear your father's somber talk of justice. There is no such thing.

A crowd has gathered, watching in shock, but one pair of eyes stands out to you. The god who cursed your family—the god who *is* your family—steps forward, dark eyes solemn, in the guise of man. You catch for a moment, your mind clearer than it has ever been, a flash of his true form, gruesome features, many rows of teeth, mouth dripping stickily with wine. And he is a young man, just a little older than your son, again—how sick you were at the sight of Semele's round stomach—and he walks up to stand beside your father, dwarfing him with grandeur.

"Your king is dead."

You do not know why you continue to think, to breathe. Life should have ended with your son, all the flowers wilting in some mimicry of Demeter's grief. Faintly, you feel Autonoe and Ino behind you, grasping your arms, helping you to your feet. Patient middle daughters, who would never dream of being greater than you, the eldest. You lean against them, sobbing, and resume your mournful wail. Your son, your only son.

Your grief cuts off with a choke, your open mouth flooding with sweetest wine. You heave, dark purple splattering across the tiles, slurring with the blood

already there. The god's smile is sharp. He will not allow you even this.

He preaches about divine retribution. You watch the crowd edge away from your family; sullied as you are, it still stings.

Your sister Semele is perfect. She is the youngest of the king's daughters, a dark haired beauty, gentle and curious like the wind through the grasses. You don't hate her, not at first.

Semele is sweet and easy to love. She gets into trouble and blinks those wide dark eyes, and she slips away from the consequences. Even you are guilty of this. Semele, five years old, a stolen fig in her hand, the juices running down her arm. You smiled, shook your head, and hurried her away from the scene.

She is spoiled, you realize later, coddled and deified. Perfect, perfect daughter. Visitors' gazes pass over the three eldest princesses, landing on the only son, and the only daughter who matters. Prettiest, kindest, smartest; all the poets' praise her.

It's too much. You cut her off, poisoning Autonoe and Ino against her, and she just looks at you with those doe eyes as though she cannot fathom what is wrong.

Then, finally, you seem to win. You are married first, a dutiful wife, and all you can think the whole time is how you have beaten your little sister to it. The thought is thick and envious, choking your joy until it drowns, leaving only bitter satisfaction. You do not love your husband. The thought is ridiculous. You love Autonoe and Ino.

"I'm in love," Semele confides, a little while later, her sisters on the floor before her like servants. She turns to you, "You know what that's like."

You hate her. Foolish, naive girl.

She spins a tale of the great god and a romance for the ages. You laugh. Pointedly. Until Autonoe and Ino, ever dutiful, join you.

She is the first to become pregnant, beating you to it by a single cycle. Because she must beat you to everything.

And then she goes and dies, and you hate her for that more than anything.

The path is steep, the sun beating down on you and your sisters as you trudge away from the only home you have ever known.

"Exile," your god nephew had declared. You hadn't protested. Your son is dead. Semele's son is holy. There is no reason to stay.

Autonoe and Ino tear their hair for grief, murmuring soft comforts to each other. You have not spoken since the god cut off your voice with wine. You do not have the words.

If you did, you wouldn't waste your words on your nephew.

*Are you happy, sister?* You would scream to the sky, to the ground, to whatever would listen and whatever would not. *Now that you've taken*

*everything? Now that your legacy is preserved? Are you happy that you have left us for a god?*

You will learn later of Semele's ascent to Olympus.

Still, there will never be an answer to your prayers.

You avoid wine the rest of your bitter, long life. Every time you speak you can feel it flooding your mouth, drowning your senses in sticky ecstasy. Your tears run down thick and purple. Sober, but you have never felt less aware. The image of your son's bloody head haunts your vision. Of your parents' disappointment. Of Semele's burnt, torn corpse. *Your fault your fault your fault.*

# First Love (Strings of the Past and Other Skeletal Things)

Adeline Bradley  
University of Iowa

*TW: alcohol content, light swearing*

“**H**e said it was because he heard my violin!”

“Get *outta* here!” Loretta laughs and puts her head on my shoulder. She’s a touchy drunk, but I lean into her.

“It’s true!” I protest. I’m smiling, and their laughter flows through the dining hall, and they are picking at the grapes, and the lights are on low, and Cory takes another sip from the horrible \$6 merlot he bought at Walmart before coming here, and I’m being carried with them into a warmth from everywhere.

Finn chimes in, furrowing his brows and shaking his head in his own protest. “I love ghost stories, Clara, but have you ever *actually* been in love? You know, with a *real* person.” Michael and Paige snicker and make eyes at each other. The edges of my thoughts are too hazy to pay them mind.

“Believe me or not, but he *was* my first love. And I can prove it.” The words escape me, and I’m not sure why I said it because I could never actually prove it, and he hadn’t shown up to listen to my violin since I was a little girl. But it catches their attention. Cary sets the bottle down, and Loretta tilts her head up ever so slightly.

“If you prove to us, tonight, that a u-u-uhh—what, like four-story-tall?—*skeleton* was your first love, then I will change my name to Chrysanthemum and move to Nicaragua. Tomorrow.” This was Finn again. Always the smartass.

I look at my empty plate. There are grape stems, a pile of drying hummus I ran out of carrots for, and the black crumbs of a well-devoured cake. “You’ve got a deal, then,” I say and get up from the table. “I’ll be right back.” They

howl and yell light-hearted insults at my back as I go as if we are seventeen years old and the whole apartment block was ours to rule with unforgiving noise.

I feel through the dark halls and trace the peeling wallpaper of the old apartment. In the day, it would be a faded blue with a floral pattern from the 20s and, lately, packed with boxes to be carried away in the coming days. In the dark, everything is black, and I feel like a child again, a little afraid and a little curious. Would he be there when I opened my window? If I played my violin, would he arch his spine and peer inside and whistle the wind through his bony teeth in harmony?

I reach the end of the hallway and open the door. I don't look into the room at first. I'm feeling silly and belligerent and not at my most sober. Slowly, I move my eyes from my feet, then to the packing boxes littering the room, then to the nightstand and finally, finally to my window. It's open, and the night rolls in, deep and blue and damp. Streetlights from below reach their glow up to the window ledge and illuminate a corner of the wall. And he is not there. Which is, of course, expected, because he had been gone for a long, long while. And I had checked the window like this enough times now that it only stung a little now.

I grab my violin case from under my bed and return to the yellow warmth of the dining room, where Paige is trying to balance her plate on top of Michael's head and Michael is making stupid faces and Finn and Loretta are cackling and Cory is observing with a smile and it seems like everything in the world is a peaceful kind of ordinary.

Loretta notices me and gasps. "Oh! You're going to play your violin!" Her face is beaming red, and I'm flattered.

"Just a short little song. My grandma used to play this song on her record player." I unclip the violin from its case. "She had a whole collection of Dvořák. I guess I'd always ask for this one. It's called *Humoresques No. 7*. Poco Lento e Grazioso. Grandma said it was supposed to be about taking life slow, but I'm not sure that's actually true since a humoresque is technically supposed to be a short musical piece. Anyway. Long story short, this was also the Skeleton's favourite song. He used to come every time I played it."

"It summons him? That's spooky!" Paige chortles.

"It is," I laugh. "So better pay attention when I'm playing. Maybe you'll see him."

Michael reaches over to his phone that's playing the Beatles' "Please Mister Postman" over the speaker and turns it off. The rest are still, settling into their chairs. I stand in the corner of the small room and lift the violin to my chin and breathe in, just once. I pull the bow across the G string. It's a short note, and then it leaps to the next, and the next. The song is slow, maybe as slow as life. But the notes are whole and solid things. They build from somewhere deep in the wood, pouring themselves out to be revealed like a struck match.

I am still quite out of it, and sometimes I don't rest the bow as lightly on the strings as I would have liked. But the song takes its form, and my mind begins to slip into the dark as the lightness of the first minute thickens from a puddle to a well. I feel submerged in it, and I see them watching me, and I have to close my eyes and turn away. I let myself blend into the wall so that it isn't me standing there; it's only the violin and the song in the room, and then not even the violin.

For a moment, the only thing in the universe is Dvořák's *Humoresque No. 7*.

For a moment, everything and everyone is gone, and I am a child again, in the lowlight of my room, practising the piece over and over. It's so heavily unpolished and I feel silly, and my arms hurt and there's that part I just can't seem to get.

The bridge slows the song even more. I want to rush here, I always want to play it *faster, faster*. I breathe in, and let my limbs go as loose as the wind. The wind spins around the room, lifting my arms and pulling them in the right direction at the right time. It is not perfect, but it is eternally beautiful.

"What are you playing, little girl?"

I turn to the window and see a skeleton as large as a house twisting its neck downward, inching closer and closer until it blocks most of the streetlight from below. By now I see one giant, peering eye staring straight at me. Eye is the wrong word. Eye socket. And staring is wrong, too, because he has no eyes. Somehow, impossibly, I knew he saw me. And somehow, impossibly, I saw him, too. In the moment, it made sense that we were the only two in the world who could truly see the other.

"Dvořák," I reply.

"Ah..." he says, and the sound is a low rumble through the street. "I think... I have heard him once... a long time ago." He makes no rush in his speech. A giant skeleton would have no need to fear Time, I suppose.

"Do you like Dvořák?"

"I think... that is why... I am here now."

I set the bow on my nightstand and step closer to the window to put a hand on the bone. It's rough like a cat tongue, and my fingers tickle as I trace it. I try to see past the skull onto the street, but I am face to face with an all-encompassing black void of an eye.

"Wait here," I say. He does not reply and is as still as the night.

I grab my bow again and cradle the violin in the crook of my arm as I make my way into the bathroom. Lifting up the bathroom window, I slide out onto the fire escape and onto the roof, quietly, because grandma would have a fit if she knew.

I walk to the edge and observe the strange sight of the skeleton—far taller than my apartment building, even slouched over. His spine is stacked upon itself into the sky, and, looking down, I see his arms drag along the road.



He is still bent over, skull turned toward my window.

"You can get up now, if you want," I call, and slowly, like a fern unfurling, the skeleton unfolds himself and stands upright. There is no noise. He doesn't make so much as a creak. He just straightens himself, and casts his gaze down onto me from the heavens like some God.

"You are... a small thing."

"I'm Clara."

He leans closer, examining, silent and still and, after an entire minute, says, "Claaara..."

"Do *you* have a name?"

He hums thoughtfully, and it feels like the long yawn of a cello wrapping and unwrapping itself around the world. "I... do not..."

He hums again, just as I am about to speak. "I am a part of things..." he wonders aloud. "When people call out... to the ocean... When people laugh... When the fox catches the little field mouse... I am within these moments... Between them... That is who I am... I think..." The skeleton is looking at the moon now, and I feel untethered. "I am... all of this, and I do not think... I fully exist."

"But you like Dvořák, so that's enough."

The skeleton produces some sort of low reverberation that seems something like a laugh and mumbles, "I do like Dvořák."

I hoist the violin to my shoulders and rest my head on it. "Then I'll keep playing him for you."

I played for the Skeleton countless times through the years. I still play for him every time I touch the instrument. I think he is in there, in the wooden frame and the hairs of the bow and the melody escaping from me. He's at the base of every thought, roaming free in strange moments like this.

I put down the violin.

My company in the dining room returns, drawing the oxygen from the atmosphere in gasps and genuine applause. I smile and give an exaggerated curtsy to the audience as I try to recover my breath.

"That was... I see why you liked it so much. I mean it was—"

"It was lovely, Clara."

"What the shit? Where's that been hiding?"

Their words clamber over each other as I retake my place at the table. I spot a half drunken glass of prosecco and declare it mine, bringing it to my lips.

"It really was incredible," Finn jumps in, "but it didn't prove that your first love was a skeleton."

I grin at him and pinch his cheek. "It sure did. He was here the entire time. You just didn't notice."

# Carrying the Tune

*Georgia Aduddell*  
Johns Hopkins University  
magical realism

**T**he ghost train comes only once a year.

We're waiting, waddling and padded up in heavy layers like overspooled cotton candy. The air is thick, the blistering chill licking my chapped lips and drying my eyes into a blurry focus.

There are about thirty of us. We're not talking, and I'm not sure what we *would* talk about if we did. We're a thoughtful silence, interrupted only by the occasional cough or snuffle.

It's better this way. It gives me time to think.

The thought of time has me reaching for my watch, my eyes dancing around the arrows. Only a few more minutes, now. Soon we'll be able to hear it.

A young mother stands to the left of me. I can tell she's a mother because she looks like one. She's fretting, her hands pulling at strings that don't exist, and her eyes carefully peering over each of us. There's an anxiety deep in her twitching feet, an anticipation that is only perceivable through shared sentiment.

I wonder distantly who she's planning on visiting.

I wonder even more distantly if I'm allowed to care.

There's a businessman to my right. I can tell he's a businessman because he acts like one. His arms are crossed in a perfect facade, but he's impatiently tapping his foot. It's eating him, the waiting. It's eating all of us.

I check my watch again.

The station we're occupying is rather small, the overhang barely covering us from the occasional drift of snow, requiring us to huddle as closely as we dare. 'Tis the season for togetherness, after all.

Someone in front of me peeks their balding head out far near the tracks, looking curiously through the fog. His shadow is stretched by the solo lamppost lighting the tracks. What he doesn't see causes an elongated sigh and a collective irritated shove of hands into coats.

That's when the sound starts.

It's quiet at first, distant in a way that makes sense. The whistle sounds out, and the running wheels spark just enough for our eyes to spot them.

I've been dreading this moment since I got the letter. I've been dreading this moment since I had the date to count down to, since I recognized what the day would represent.

Because when I received information that my presence was requested on the ghost train, I suddenly had only one job.

To take the ride.

The businessman cuts his path out of the overhang's safety towards where the doors will open, coated in an air that I couldn't taste if I tried. He holds himself high, his posture astute and presentable. Maybe this should clue me in on who he is planning to see, but I don't let myself think about it.

Right now, all I can think about is seeing you.

Soon, my watch says, despite the visual proof chugging forth only mere ticks away.

Too soon.

It's hard not to feel doubt. Everywhere I look, every gaze that I avoid, I am reminded of just *who* I am surrounded by. The lonely people.

People like me. People in need of closure, in need of a proper ending. The train called us here to say goodbye.

As it finally pulls up to the station, its windows frosted over and ominously shut, everyone steps forward.

I stare at my feet. There are muddled newspapers by my shoes, wet and smeared, their surface plastered in the icy concrete of the platform. I watch as the feet of my fellow hopeless make their way to the now-opened door; I watch as we cohesively realize that we haven't got a choice. We all got a ticket, and we all have to ride. Simple.

I feel ready until I step onto the train.

It's cluttered, every seat filled with people. Every seat filled with an expression, a story, a reason *why*. What's my reason? What was *yours*?

The train itself is nothing special, and we all recognize that. The train isn't the stories: it holds them. It holds them and writes them until they are something new.

No, it's in the aisles where it begins. Not the aisles themselves, the *people* in them, the people sat. The people looking and staring and observing me.

I see the mother, her arms buried into a smaller set, a little boy with a pink face and a golden tuft of hair. I see the businessman, his lips embedded with a

passionate-looking woman carrying an urgency I would only expect from bad television. More tragic stories unfold everywhere I turn, and each one chills me through my stuffy attire.

I shiver as I make my way down, carefully peering at every watching face. Searching, pleading.

And then I get to you.

Your head is turned around, and I can only see the back of your coat, but it's enough to know. Your long, auburn hair is knotty and tousled, the tip of your visible ear red.

I make a split decision and reach out, my hand settling on your shoulder. It's solid, of course it is, the train an example in itself of the impossible. I feel the fabric of your knitted sweater, the material strangely rough like the bad mittens your mother used to knit.

When you don't turn around, I resort to a more practical measure.

"Hadley?" I ask, my voice peaky and rough. I clear my throat somewhat abashedly, my hand still firmly on your shoulder in reassurance. This is real, I remind myself. Here's the proof.

Again, I say, "Hadley." This time my voice is less unsure. I know it's you, and you know it's me. It's time to deal with it.

It's only when you turn your eyes to mine that I start to wish we didn't have to.

You don't trace my appearance, taking stock of my changes and of the time I have eaten. No, you simply squint, your lips curled into displeased disapproval.

"God," you say, turning away. "I wish you would stop pretending to know who I am."

The train lurches slightly, fed up with my lack of attentiveness, so I sit in the booth across from yours. You turn your chin up, looking out the window as the trek begins.

"You're not happy about this," I observe, clearing my throat once more. This is definitely worse than the waiting.

You spit out, your tone venom and your eyes slippery, "Maybe you *do* know a few things after all."

And, well.

What did I ever *do* to hurt you this bad? Who were you expecting to show up if not me?

I look straight down the aisle again, conflicting thoughts racing through my head. I spot two older women, engaged in a tearful conversation. One of them extends up and wipes tear-marks from the other's cheek. I reach up and pull my hat off, my gloves following. You ignore me, even as I make crinkling noises while shrugging off my coat. The hardest part is still ahead.

"I missed you, you know," I remark simply. You don't even blink, but your hands move to fold up on the table. "I'm *going* to miss you. Always."

You pin me down with another glance, eyebrows drawn into a challenge.

"Oh really?" You ask, your breath ghosting out in sharp puffs despite the warmth. "What about me will you miss?"

I roll my eyes.

"I miss *this*, for one. You always just, I don't know, you—"

You cut me off, "That's right, you *don't* know."

"I know enough!" I yell back, my volume a little louder than I intended. I glance around, making sure no one is paying us any attention before I continue. "I know enough. I know that you hate the holidays, you hate taking the train, and that you—well, you *hate* me."

"I never hated anyone."

"Would that make me nobody?" I quiz gruffly, sniffing in indignation before letting out a sigh. "Because really, you don't seem to *like* me."

But if I'm the only one here, maybe you just don't like anyone. Maybe you never did.

"Okay, I hated the holidays and taking the train. What did I *like*?"

I glance at your folded hands, now slightly clenched into fists.

I'm contemplative as I respond, "You like lots of things. Long movies, sad songs, the color green." I take a deep breath, my eyes meeting yours.

"Okay, you know things that I liked. That doesn't mean you *knew* me."

But I *do*. I *do* know you. Because what are we, fundamentally as humans, if not a collection of the things that we like? We're defined by actions, by the things we do and think and feel, and the way we express that is who we are. Right? I want to be right about this, because I don't know who I'll be if I'm wrong. If I don't know you, who *do* I know?

If I don't know you, then who does? And how do they?

And what did I do so *wrong* to be the one who doesn't?

You're staring at me as my thoughts drift, and I focus distinctly on the crinkles on the corner of your eyes. I take note of your smile lines, of your large nose and beauty marks. I focus on these things because they're the things that make you human, something that I really should've thought about when you actually were.

I take another breath before offering, "I know you cry when you're angry." You pause. "I know you pretend to hate overplayed songs. I know you still think about that thing your dad said about your temper, and how you're so *scared* to grow up and become just like him. I know you pretend to not look in every mirror you pass—"

"Okay."

"I know you don't want me to know who you are because that scares you. But it's too late. Well, it's too late for anything, now. It's too late for this to matter at all."

"Then what are you trying to prove?" You demand, putting an end to our back and forth.

I huff, my heart heavy and panging against my chest as I whisper, "That you weren't alone, after all. That you never were."

"Is this really how you want to spend our time?" You wonder, your tone lighter. I flush. "Whatever. This is for you, not for me."

I glance up once again at the people surrounding us. Lively, happy people. All embracing their final chances with the ones they loved.

Softly, I admit, "I thought this was about getting closure."

That changes something, as you stare down at the table with a softer expression. I wonder what, if anything, could prove that I actually *did* care. That I still *do*.

I wish I could understand. You turn to face the doors.

A few moments pass. Moments of no tangible recognition, of absolutely zero understanding or sympathy. Moments of empty that pass between us.

"Well," I say finally, evenly. I draw a breath as I slip my coat back over my shoulders. "I guess I should go. I'll just—I'll go."

I stand up then, a decisive manner in my actions as I reach out to get my gloves and hat.

Only to have your hand intercept me, stopping me with a grab of my wrist.

I watch, wary and cautious, as you awkwardly avoid my gaze. Your fingers tangle around my bracelet.

"Can we... Can we wait for the sun?"

I pause. The train jostles a little suddenly another time. I don't think as I sit down again, as you scoot farther down your end of the booth to make room for us. You let go of my arm like it burned you, but you don't wander away from my close proximity. It feels stilted. I don't know where to go from here.

A few minutes pass of you peering out the window, and I bite at my tongue in thought. I have a few theories, my words manifesting somewhat as I ask, "Did you, or, well, is this like a *thing*? Like, if I leave the train, will you leave as well?"

You don't answer. I huff, moving to sit up again.

You drag me back down, your arm linked with mine.

"Yes," you say finally, not looking at me. "It's just that, well, I want to see it one last time. Just one last time."

Everything sounds different now, more somber. The anger and tension and fight have all left your body and voice. You sound how I feel: desperate.

"The sunrise?" I prompt, trying to pry for dialogue. "You want to see the sunrise?"

You turn away from the window, your eyes tracing mine. It feels like you can see through me. I narrow my vision, trying to achieve the same sentinace.

"Please."

I peek down at my watch, a little uncertain.

“Well—”

But you look at me. You look at me, and you see me, and you know me.

“Beth, please,” you beg in a way that I have never heard from you before. You beg like you think I’ll say no.

“We can wait,” I say, hesitantly.

And so, we do.

I’m acutely aware of the hours passing as we share the silence, a soft air of something alike to companionship just narrowly missing us and sailing right by. I wonder, remotely, if this will mean anything to you tomorrow.

I wonder, again, if you even *have* tomorrows anymore. If anyone stuck on this train does.

By the time my watch announces that two hours have passed, the other passengers have started to drift off to sleep. A few of them curl into one another, desperate for one last companion-filled night. Others sleep at a distance, still graced with smiles and close if not grazing limbs.

You and I, however, are wide awake. Wide awake and not talking, at least, not properly.

“Do you remember when—”

“You said it would rise,” you shut me out, turning away from the glass that you fogged up with your breath, carrying an accusatory huff.

“I *didn’t*, but I don’t know why it wouldn’t,” I respond. You nod, hardly listening. “Hadley,” I prod again, gently this time. “Was I not the person you expected to see?”

You turn and look at me, your eyebrows drawn together in a confused little dip.

“Who else if not you?” you ask.

I choke on my next words, clearing my throat as I dive a little further, “Then why—”

“I don’t want to be a sad story. I want to be remembered as the hateful girl, as the girl who ended things on her own terms. I was bitter with the world, Beth. I don’t want to be known, and I wish you would stop proving me *wrong*.”

Because it doesn’t matter now. Because it’s too late.

“Would you do it all over if you could?” I ask, a fresh set of tears smearing my face.

You reach out and smudge the water from my features, but you say nothing else.

It goes quiet once again, and more time slips from my uncoordinated fingers.

I’m out of focus until I feel you move, until you eventually place your head on my shoulder, your eyes never leaving the object of your sudden affection: the darkened window.

I look around again, noticing the people completely unaware of us and still in various states of bliss. I feel another weird pang in my chest as I stare down at your ruffled hair.

Where *do* us lonely people go?

You grab for my watch, and I blink blankly at the time displayed. My tired, droning eyes scanning for a reprieve. Not much longer to go.

And then, as the fog starts to drift and dance and clear its way for viewing, I feel the draw of sleep taking me over. You're still on my arm, your eyes heavy and hardly opening. It feels like an impossible feat.

It's hard to think of *why* I'm doing this, of why I even allowed you to convince me in the first place. It's also hard to think of why we're both here, together, of all the places and people who could replace us.

The hard press of the seat I'm in makes itself known as I stretch, a yawn on my lips and a tugging weight settling over my chest deeper than where you lay.

It feels like a mistake, I think, letting myself find comfort in allowing you such a thing.

One last touch. One last wish. One last sunrise.

And as the pull and tug refuse to let me resurface, I think disconnectedly about trains and ghosts and why people *have* to die and why you were one of the ones who *had* to.

I think about trains and ghosts, yes, but I also think about how a sunrise taught me more about you than anything did before. Because I didn't know you, not really, and now I never will.

Time and more time later, I open my eyes to a collective murmur and a quiet ticking.

I sniff, turning around in my seat and glancing at the other lonely people, their hands grasping at air and wishes and lost hours.

Squinting, I scan for all of the faces that I know are gone, that I recognize we will never see again. Faces like the little boy, faces like the overly-passionate woman, and faces like yours.

And through the glass of the train windows, I recognize that the cold bite is warmed only by the distant morning glow of the sun.



# Feeding the Beast

*Charlotte Hagen*  
University of Iowa  
horror

When the dog died last year, we weren't quite sure what to do with all of her things. The blankets could be cleaned and taken to a shelter, the toys could meet the same fate or be pawned off to friends' or neighbors' pets. More sentimental items could be hoarded until we figured out a better method for storing them.

For some reason, we decided to keep the dog bowl outside with some water for the neighborhood cats.

Our house is set back far from the street, close enough that our driveway doesn't count as its own separate street but far enough solicitors rarely, if ever, will brave the trek to our door. So when we put the bowl out, we knew the animals who would take an interest wouldn't be random household dogs out on walks.

To our surprise, the bowl was quickly depleted every day. When I went outside it became common practice to bring a water bottle just for filling the bowl back up. Sometimes there'd be a cat waiting there, rubbing up against my legs as if it'd make me pour the water any faster.

I took a liking to my new job almost immediately. Word got around at some point and occasionally a neighbor or two would knock on the door to ask if we had seen their cat, usually with some fresh produce or baked goods as an offering. I had never considered myself a "cat person" before, but it was hard to deny why most people couldn't get enough of them once they were laying out before you, purring like an engine.

About a month into the business, I noticed something began scaring the cats away. It started small, as something only the cats themselves seemed spooked

by. They would watch me fill up the bowl from afar, but never came close. As if something rancid hung around the bowl.

Then the odor appeared. A mixture of sweat and excrement and rot, with nothing visibly around the bowl to explain it. I had to start holding my breath to approach, and eventually sprayed the area with all manner of things in hope it would go away (and to the devastation of my parents, who had finally plucked out all manner of weeds and were left with only plants they were far too attached to).

As it only seemed to get worse, I posted myself by the windows at night. My father's bird-watching obsession had long passed, meaning his night-vision goggles for owls were mine for the taking.

A fox? A wolf? A coyote? My mind ran through the options. It would make sense if a bigger creature had decided to mark its territory, maybe washing its last kill down. I never seemed to see blood in the water, though, and no wild animal would care to be that particular.

And then *it* arrived.

A deer, I think, with its antlers twisted around each other, stalked over to the bowl. I couldn't tell where it had come from, not there one second and within sight the next. I just knew that from the way its legs swayed, from the way its head sank to the bowl, made it seem anything but healthy.

Even in complete darkness, it was hard to make out any detail with the binoculars, everything seeming to fuzz. What I thought was a tail seemed to hang longer than what a deer's normally would. The antlers formed a thorny mess, as if they had been fighting for room to grow and threatened to gore the deer's head open. If it was a deer. If it had ever been a deer.

Although I hadn't made any noise or movement, its eyes snapped up to mine, glowing. My head jerked away from the goggles, and with a gasp I fell off my chair.

And by god, I did not dare to look up again.

# A Spirit in the Stall

Charlotte Hagen  
University of Iowa  
magical realism

**W***hrrrrghh*, the bathroom door groaned, stuck in place. It was the first real warm day in a while, at least several weeks' worth of false winter finally giving up before the real frost arrived at our doorsteps. Most people celebrated the occasion by wearing whatever summer clothes hadn't been shoved to the back of their closet, myself included. All this old building seemed to do was creak with every sudden change in weather.

The university had just switched the heat on across campus, and I sought refuge from slowly boiling in my seat. The bathroom was just drafty enough to cool me down, but the stall doors remained firmly stuck in place. *Rrrrrgh. Mwrgghhh*. Every attempt to open the door shook all the stalls. I was afraid that the walls would be knocked down before I could open the door. *If* I could even open it.

With a loud *sqishunk* the door slammed open, nearly sending me sprawling head-first into the toilet. I grabbed the walls, however unsanitary, to keep myself upright, and the door came slamming back into my side. With a groan of my own and a hand on my side, I sat on the toilet and threw the door back closed, finally getting it shut by kicking it.

*Whrrrrrelcome*, the stall thundered. A few moments passed before I realized no one else was in the room. My foot was still on the door.

*Another pilgrimmm*, the voice rumbled on, *a new face*.

"Uh, hello?" I squeaked. "Who are you?"

*A spirit, of sorrrts*, it creaked on. *Be not afraid, and all that*.

I glanced around behind me to check for what speaker or hole the voice

could be coming from. It seemed to echo around me, though the bathroom itself was as cramped as the school could make it. "I thought only angels said that one."

*I find it still helps. What do you requirrre?*

"I didn't know you took requests?"

*Oh, just little things in my power.*

I narrowed my eyes. It seemed to sense my disbelief, because after a moment I swore I heard the stall take a breath.

*I came into being not that long ago. The building's old as can beeee, but to gain any power it needs its ritualssss. What are you doing now, if not a ritual?*

My foot dropped back to the ground and I inched forward on the toilet seat, attempting to touch as little of it as possible. "That's a horrible way to phrase it, man."

*Decades' worth of people came through here. Wrrrote notes on the walls and prayed for their next test to go well. It was only a matterrrr of time before I arrived.*

If it wasn't clear to me before, the graffiti etched, scraped, or otherwise written on the stall doors came into focus. Declarations of love, affirmations, snide remarks and crude drawings alike had been preserved. Whatever written in pen, pencil, or marker could be rubbed out, so the messages scratched into the stall were more meticulous, and a lot older. Maybe they came from people who had a lot of time to kill trying to skip out on classes, or so impassioned by what they wanted to write out every cut drove into the wall came easier.

The bathroom itself was not a quiet place, either. When the stall itself died down from its creaking, I could hear the persistent, low roar of the ventilation and the fluorescent lights with their never ending, high buzz. Noise leaked in from other classes, though muffled, and simultaneously I was listening in on a recorded performance of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and a discussion about someone's new poem.

People wandered around on the floor above, the ceiling squeaking out their steps, and below I could hear desks being shuffled around, screaming against the tiled floor.

Sound leaked through the window, the glass clouded and cracked with age and humidity. Passing students, the insects, the birds, the wind, all of it, just an arm's reach away from the brick-and-mortar building.

And everything about it, all of it, felt alive. Not just the birds outside or the students shouting, but the pipes inside the walls sang, the air hummed, and even the toilet's tank behind me hissed in mere anticipation. For what?

*Do you have a requestssst?* the stall thrummed.

And I finally gave it an answer.

The worst part about the bathroom is washing up. The dryer is incredibly weak, but you wouldn't know it from its deafening roar. All it manages to do is push the water from my hands onto my shirt. Resigning

myself to looking like a splattered mess, I leave as unceremoniously as I walked in.

There's something different about the hallways now. Things don't feel as tense, as uncomfortable as they were a few minutes ago. Entering the classroom, I sneak back to my desk without the professor so much as glancing at me. The sweat on his forehead doesn't gleam as brightly, and the students in front of me have drier shirts.

It's almost as if things have finally cooled down. Maybe the windows caught a good breeze, or the heat isn't blasting as hard as it was before.

It's a miracle, albeit a small one, but in my thoughts I send a quick thanks to the bathroom stall, and all the people that gave it life.

# Dexy Banyan (Times Three)

*Hannah Cargo*  
University of Iowa  
magical realism

“**T**ruth or dare,” I asked Linzie Buckeye.

We were laying on the floor of the playroom and it was almost midnight. We’d already played Uno, ranked flavors of Lip Smakers from best to worst, and eaten triple-decker parfaits. If we were going to do this no-sleep sleepover right, then we still had plenty of time to kill.

Linzie clapped her phone shut and went “hmmm...” the way she always did when I asked her this. She was a pretty girl, a dryad, and she was about as popular as a tree kid could be at school, so I felt pretty fancy hanging out with her.

Charlie McGuire looked at me in alarm. She hated truth or dare. Probably because her truths were boring and she was afraid of dares. She also looked kind of like a baby wearing her teddy bear pajamas—but she was my friend so I couldn’t tell her that.

“Dare,” said Linzie, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

I was hoping she would say that. “I dare you... to pour pickle juice in your hair.”

“Aw, too easy!” Linzie said. She jumped up to her feet and made a beeline for the fridge.

“And you can’t wash it out all night!” I added.

“Ew, that is so gross. You’re grosser than the boys at lunch,” said Charlie. Shut up, Charlie, I thought.

Linzie immediately found the pickle jar. It took all three of us taking turns to open the lid, and once we did, we emptied the pickles onto the counter. I instructed Linzie to bend backwards over the kitchen sink like I was a real

cosmetologist. Her green hair was so long it almost got caught in the drain. I'd heard the boys at lunch say that when dryads got old, they started growing leaves and acorns in their hair, but Charlie said that was a harmful stereotype. I didn't care; I thought Linzie's hair looked more beautiful than mine would ever be.

"Charlie, hand me the juice," I said.

"Y'all are so gross," she said. "Linzie's gonna smell."

"That's the point," I said, and dumped the pickle juice onto Linzie's scalp. She shivered as it dripped, dripped, dripped down her hair and on the back of her neck. I tried very hard not to get any in her eyes.

Finally, I told Linzie to stand up. Charlie gave her a paper towel so her t-shirt wouldn't get wet, and Linzie did a couple curtsies as if she was a princess and not some girl with stringy wet bangs.

We applauded.

"My turn," said Linzie after a moment. "Ellie, truth or dare."

"Truth," I said.

"What is the most naughty Dexy Banyan story you've heard?" Linzie bit her lip with glee and bounced on her feet while waiting for us to answer.

Charlie and I groaned. We didn't know any good Dexy Banyan stories. Only Linzie knew the good Dexy Banyan stories. In fact, as a dryad, she was the only one here who knew Dexy Banyan stories at all. They didn't exactly spread those rumors at public school, or at human family cookouts.

"I don't know anything about him besides what you've told me," I admitted.

"Yeah," said Charlie. "Me too."

"Do you know our family's Fourth of July story?" Linzie asked. "That one's real messed up."

We shook our heads no, and Linzie yelped with glee. She ran to turn off all the lights and grab a flashlight. She held it lit under her chin all spooky-like. Me and Charlie snuggled together on the sleeping bags.

"Dexy Banyan," Linzie said in a low voice, "is what my cousins call a crack-head legend. He's what my aunts and uncles call a force of nature. He's what my parents call a bad rumor, and he's what the authorities call a myth."

Linzie always started her stories off like this. I got comfy and started to feel the excited shivers run down my spine.

"What's a crackhead?" Charlie peeped, as usual.

"Shh!" I said.

"—But I know he's real," Linzie pressed on, "Because my sister Nyra's seen him with her own eyes. I swear by my own tree."

"Wait," Charlie said. "Is Dexy Banyan a ghost?"

"No, you dingus," I said. I felt that I might throw something at her.

"But you told me last time that Dexy Banyan was a kid in the 1920s. There's no way he can still be alive."

"He's a banyan tree," Linzie explained. "Those things are basically immortal. Their roots are like vines that grow down from the top. So a banyan is like a thick mass of trunks. If you ever tried to cut one down, you'd have to cut down a small forest. And Dexy Banyan is too clever to get old, anyway."

"What'd he do?" I asked.

"Well," Linzie said. "A while ago, before I was born, my family went on a trip to Florida with my older cousin. They went to see Disney World and the beaches. It was great. But everyone knows those swamps are where Dexy Banyan lives. My sister didn't care. She was having fun. Her and Cora—that's our cousin—decided to go out on the boardwalk 'cause it was the Fourth of July and the fireworks were gonna start soon. And 'cause there were lots of cool shops and rides and restaurants. They left our parents and started wandering around. Alone."

"Well that was smart of them," I remarked. Charlie hit me in the face with a pillow.

"Shh," Linzie said. "Listen. Nyra wanted to get ice cream, and Cora wanted a drink. So they planned to meet by the bench next to the palm tree, then they went separate ways. Nyra got her double scoop and spent some time listening to the music and watching the people. Then she realized Cora was taking too long. She began to get worried. She started looking around. That's when Nyra heard the scream."

The world seemed to grow hushed—even the A/C unit clicked off. Charlie's eyes were wide and shining, soft, in the dark.

Linzie's voice went grave. "It was blood-curdling—not just because of how loud or scared the scream was, but because it was Cora's scream. Nyra says she didn't remember what happened. She just ran to the bar, and there was Cora, screaming and crying and holding her foot. Her foot was bare and absolutely covered with sap."

"She was *bleeding*?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah," said Linzie. "Because Dexy Banyan bit her toe off."

"No way," I said.

Linzie's smile went crooked. "Nyra didn't believe her at first either. But she was totally missing her big toe. She asked where Dexy went, and Cora pointed to the back of the bar. Nyra was a little afraid to go look, cuz she was still our age. But she figured she should. Maybe she could grab him until the cops came. So Nyra was getting up to chase him down when she heard a sound like gunfire. There was a blast of heat, and sparks rained from inside the bar. It was fireworks. Someone was shooting fireworks at them. She grabbed Cora's hand and they ran. The bar was on fire. Everything felt like it was blazing and everyone was running. Some people helped them carry Cora and call 911. But before the fire trucks came and put it out, Nyra looked over her shoulders into the flames. There, she saw a figure. It was a dryad man in a tank top with stringy hair like



swamp grass. He was holding fireworks and his face was covered in sap—*my cousin's sap*. He was grinning like a madman and his eyes glinted like nothing she'd ever seen. He looked straight at Nyra and laughed. Then a beam from the ceiling fell, blocking him from view, and she never saw him again."

Linzie clicked the flashlight off and we sat for a moment in the darkness. I felt like I could count every one of my breaths. I was also very aware of how my toes were poking out from under my blanket. It felt chilly.

"Linzie, that's scary," Charlie said at last.

"No it's not," I said immediately. "It's not even real. It's a story."

"It's real," said Linzie.

"What happened to Cora's foot?" Charlie asked.

"She still has a missing toe, but she's alright," said Linzie.

"I dunno," I said. "I bet Nyra made it all up to cover up an accident, or something."

"Nah, she doesn't have the imagination to make things up," said Linzie. "Goodie two-shoes. But I *know* that it was Dexy Banyan. Did you know, people say that if you say Dexy Banyan's name three times while standing outside in the dark, one of his roots comes out of the ground and grabs you? And then you belong to him."

"What does that mean—'you belong to him'?" Charlie asked.

Linzie shrugged—a shapeless motion, in the dark. "I don't really know," she said. "I know Dexy likes to take things that don't belong to him just for the fun of it. He just likes to play, and since he can't die, he plays rough. So it could mean anything."

I had a terrible thought, one that made my insides squish and flip. "Wait," I said. "What if he, like, takes your body to play with? Like he possesses you?"

Charlie let out a little squeak and pulled her blanket up to her eyes.

Linzie thought about this for a second. "I never heard of that," she said. "But he could. Pastor Bristlecone says that Dexy Banyan clawed his way straight from hell, that the devil gave him quite an arsenal."

"The devil's not real," I scoffed.

Nobody really said anything for a bit after that. I felt like I had made a mistake of sorts, but someone had to be the brave one in the group, right? Even if that meant hurting feelings. It didn't make sense to be afraid of something not real.

... Maybe we should forget about Dexy Banyan and watch a movie or something.

Linzie nudged my shoulder, but it felt a little stiff. A little sinister.

"Maybe you should test it out and see," she said. "See if he's not real."

"Yeah," I said at last. "It'll be easy."

I found myself leading the girls down the stairs to the backyard. Nobody turned on any lights, or talked, we just followed the flashlight's yellow circle. Linzie and Charlie positioned me in the middle of the lawn. It was cold outside;

I wished I had brought my jacket. But at least now I could blame my shivering on the temperature.

"Why are you so quiet?" I asked them. "It's not like I'm gonna die."

Charlie muttered something I couldn't quite make out.

I took a moment to look around the dark backyard, as if I was looking for Dexy Banyan. The fences reached pretty high, blotting out large portions of the light-polluted sky. The air was kind of crisp and damp, like there would be dew tomorrow morning, and shadows reached like tigers' stripes across the yard. I couldn't see anything in them, except for the wide branches of a still-maturing oak tree.

It was weird to think about, but I wondered if that tree belonged to a dryad. I wondered if they could tell that sort of thing.

"What are you waiting for?" Linzie said.

"I just had an idea," I said. "If Dexy possesses me, he might use me to hurt you. So I think you should stay inside until I give the all-clear."

"Are you sure?" said Charlie. She looked at me funny. Kind of like the way that ladies from old movies look at their boyfriends when the train starts to move and they're separated forever.

It was a stupid sort of look, I thought.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," I said. "Y'all can watch from the window. And if you want to get prepared in case something happens—which it won't—you can, I guess. You can dial 911 without calling them, right?"

"Probably," said Linzie. "But they might think it's a joke."

"Right," I said. "Well... go on."

I watched until Linzie and Charlie had locked the door behind them. I could see the shadows of their faces pressed against the window. Waiting.

I paused, took a deep breath, then mouthed the words, *Dexy Banyan, Dexy Banyan, Dexy Banyan*.

I didn't dare let a single sound escape my lips.

I waited for a solid two minutes. Maybe that was enough. Maybe the ground would open up and a root would grab my ankle and steal me away anyway. Maybe Dexy would eat my arm and set fire to the house and trap my friends forever. Maybe the devil was real.

I was certain of it.

But then I realized I was still standing there, and nothing had made a sound.

I knocked on the door and gave my friends a thumbs up. Linzie unlocked the door and Charlie gave me a blanket. I wasn't shivering anymore—I was shaking.

"He didn't get you?" Charlie said.

"Nope," I said, and flashed them a smile. "Not a single root."

"Thank goodness," said Charlie. "I was worried."

"Me too," said Linzie. "You're lucky, Ellie. And really brave."

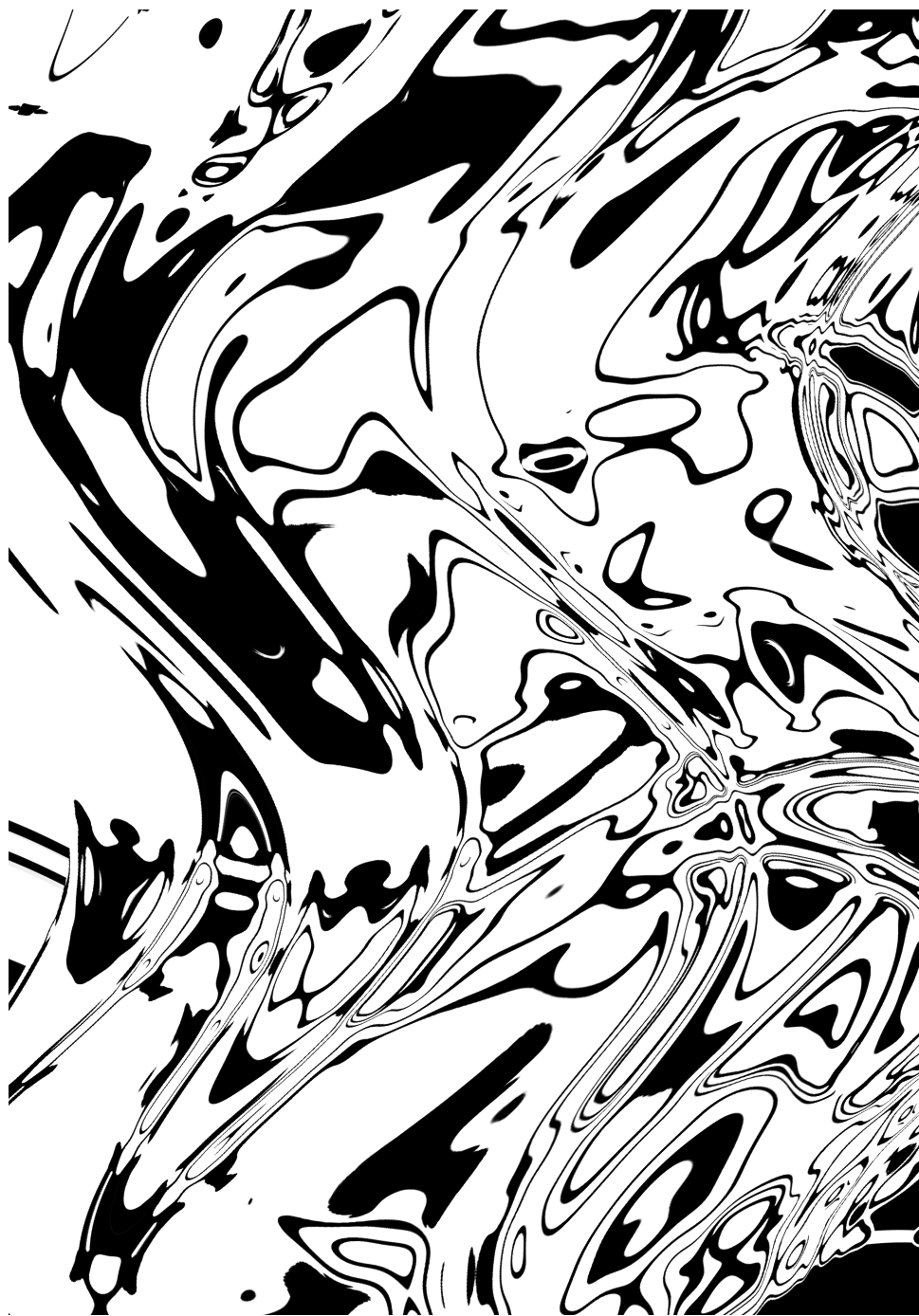
Together we climbed the stairs back to the playroom and turned on all the

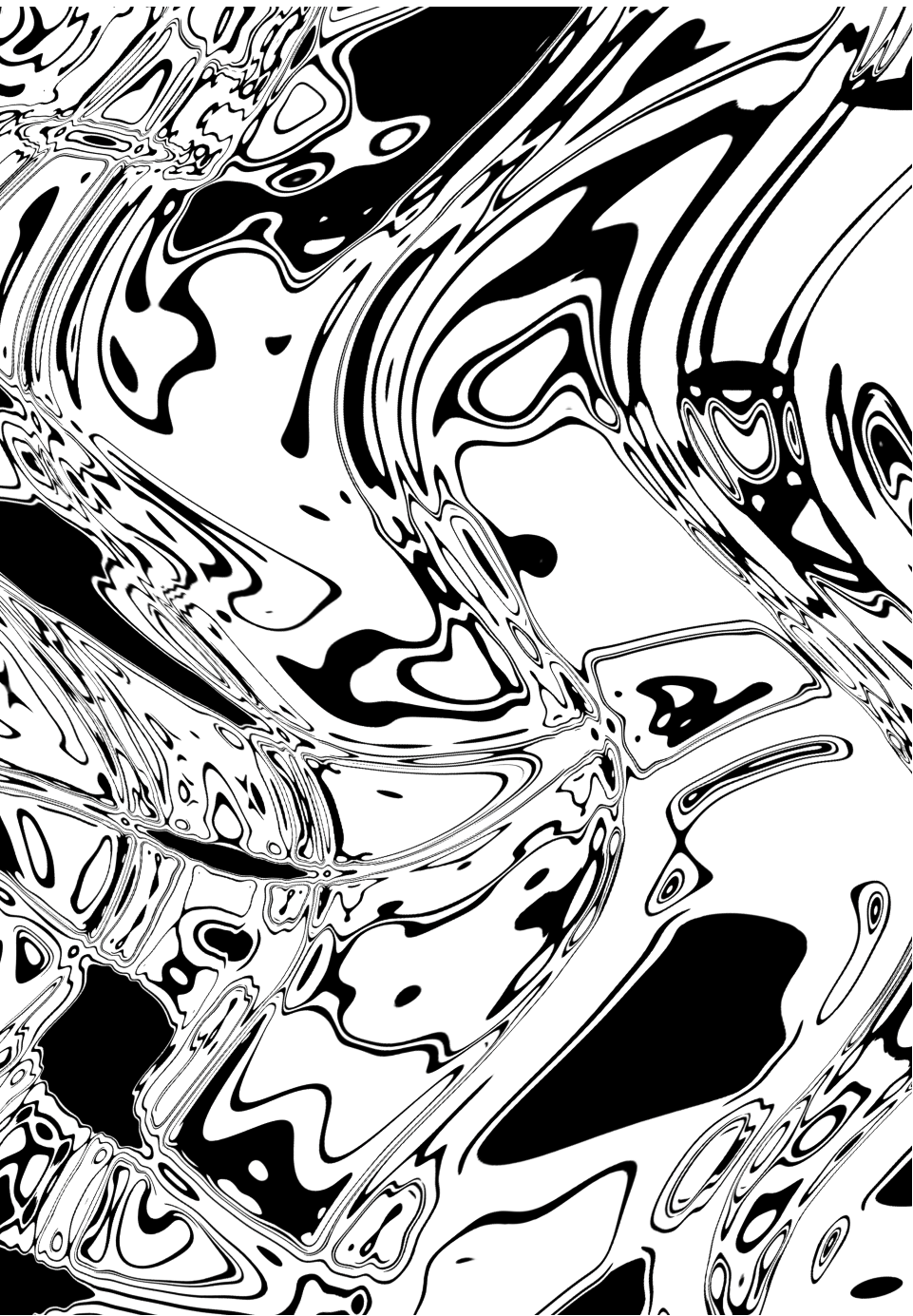
lights. It was 1 o' clock in the morning, and I wished I was tired enough to sleep. We decided to put on an old VCR of *The Little Mermaid* and make hot chocolate. It was nice.

"I wonder why it didn't work," Charlie whispered over the movie.

"I dunno," said Linzie. "Maybe because Ellie's not a dryad? Maybe it's a dryad-only thing."

I took a deep sip of hot chocolate and tried to relax. "Yeah," I said. "Maybe."





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*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 words in the first place.

Cover design by Shea Winters.

Want to get more involved with *Wilder Things*? Follow us on Instagram and Twitter @wilderthingsmag!