

NECKSNAP

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featuring work from

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**SPECIAL THANKS
BULL CITY PRESS
HWA NC
ROSS WHITE**

OUR ISSUE TWO READERS

**MOLOTHRUS A.*
JES MALITORIS*
MIKE ROMANELLI
EMMA ABATE
OSCAR ANDERSON
SRISTI SENGUPTA
LEWIS BRAHAM**

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT
MICHAEL G. WILLIAMS
RICHARD DANSKY
ALL OF OUR KO-FI SUPPORTERS
ALL WHO PURCHASED A COPY OF ISSUE ONE
(OR A STICKER PACK!)**

***SPECIAL THANKS TO
MOLOTHRUS A. FOR ADDITIONAL EDITING AND SECOND-ROUND READING ON ISSUE TWO
JES MALITORIS FOR ADDITIONAL EDITING AND SECOND-ROUND READING ON ISSUE ONE**

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JULIANNE ESTUR

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EDITOR'S NOTE

HERE WE ARE ALREADY: AN ENTIRE YEAR OF NECKSNAP!

WITH TWO ISSUES UNDER OUR BELT, THIS NEWEST ISSUE WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CHART A COURSE FOR THE DIRECTIONS WE'D LIKE TO EXPLORE IN THE FUTURE (SUCH AS POETRY AND WEIRD FICTION). IT WAS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY TO MORE DEEPLY ROOT OURSELVES IN THE INTERESTS WE'VE HELD FROM THE BEGINNING, LIKE SOUTHERN GOTHIC, EXPERIMENTAL HORROR, AND BODY HORROR.

WITH THAT IN MIND, THE STORIES AND POEMS IN THIS ISSUE COVER QUITE A RANGE OF STYLES AND FORMATS. HOWEVER, THEY ALL EVOKE A SIMILAR SPIRIT: A SENSE OF UNEASE, OF THE UNCANNY AND THE UNDEFINABLE. AS THE CHARACTERS HERE NAVIGATE THESE INDECIPHERABLE WORLDS WITH CURIOSITY, WE LEARN ALONGSIDE THEM WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN IN A PLACE SO STRANGE.

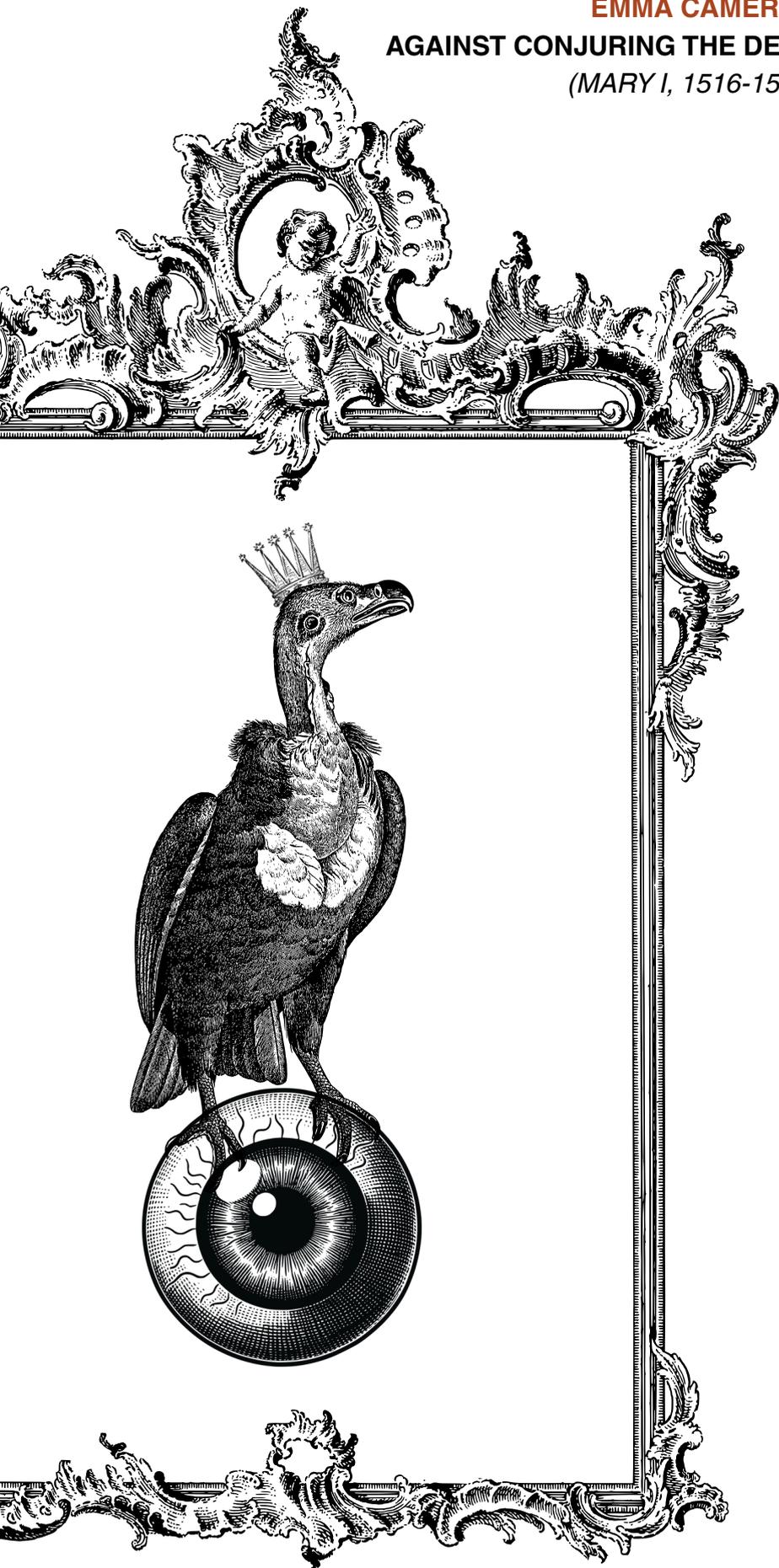
A HEARTFELT THANK YOU TO THE SWATHS OF NEW SUBMITTERS DURING THIS SUBMISSION CALL, AND TO THE REPEAT SUBMITTERS WHO SENT US NEW AND/OR REVISED WORK. I AM TRULY ASTONISHED AND HONORED AT YOUR CONTINUED ENTHUSIASM IN OUR LITTLE HORROR MAGAZINE.

THANK YOU, AS WELL, TO ALL OF OUR FINANCIAL SUPPORTERS: SUPPORTERS ON KO-FI, ANYONE WHO BOUGHT A PRINT COPY OF ISSUE ONE OR A STICKER PACK, AND OUR ISSUE TWO ADVERTISERS MICHAEL G. WILLIAMS AND RICHARD DANSKY. ALL OF YOU HAVE ALLOWED US TO OFFER HONORARIUMS TO CONTRIBUTORS AND GENERALLY EXPAND OUR HORIZONS.

THANK YOU, FINALLY, TO ALL OF YOU READERS AND FRIENDS OF THE MAGAZINE. I HOPE YOU LOVE THE ISSUE.

JOHN HANLEY, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

EMMA CAMERON
AGAINST CONJURING THE DEAD
(MARY I, 1516-1558)



Craned out the mirror, the monarch's long-dead throat will swing left, right, again, again. Swivels of devour—new world plumbing, common porcelain, boar bristle brush. Adjusted, she will perch on your eyes. Yes. A child in the dark has repeated her name and inlaid in another looking glass, her narrow ovoid face. Eyebrows of blond tassel set into prepared sockets. Alabaster, drop pendants cracked like goat's toe for teeth: Part bird, my woman. Neck-up peering past her habitat, otherwise seated. What, child, will you do with all that face coming out your face? Snarl, bite the light on, skip to mom's bed—five years chin pulled down as she follows mirror to mirror to dark water and window, cicatrix mouth lidding the sink. *Look quickly your life.* Is she among the dead you recognize?

MOTHERLAND

RHYS EVANS

Locally sourced. Homegrown.

“I spoke to the trees, and they all agreed, Mother must die,” Lowry whispers to her brother. They watch her sleeping figure at the end of the bed. Her open mouth lacks form and droops to the side like a plastic bag, lazily sucking in damp air. Muttering nonsense about lambs and strange words that sound as though she is reading a bible backwards, she finds little peace, even in sleep.

“Did you get an answer?” Sven asks, entertaining her remark.

Head down, picking at the dirt under her nails, Lowry tuts, “They’re not impressed, the forest is very disappointed with her.”

A damp smell emanates from their Mother, squalid and eager to flee the room. The bedroom is frigid and the stack of dirty cups are growing green hats of mould, frayed curtains wag tongues. This house is very sick, and so is this family.

“It’s still snoring,” adds Lowry. “Not for much longer.”

Lowry inspects the centipede that scurries in the butter tub.

“Are you ready to taste the grass?” she whispers to the insect. “Are you ready to wake the witch and make it scream?”

Sven shakes. “She is going to kill you.”

“No, no. Both of us.”

Pinched between Lowry’s two fingers, the centipede wriggles for freedom. Holding their breath, the children wait for the shrieks as the insect loops through their Mother’s stray hair, across her eyelashes, and burrows into her ear. There’s a brief pause before the blistering yell. Her arms whack the air, cracking the plaster. Spitting. Doubling in size from rage until she reaches the cobwebs in the corner of the ceiling.

“We went too far,” Sven adds, running for the door.

“No. Not far enough,” says Lowry, shaking her head. “One day she will blow up and pop like a balloon. I hope to god she feels every second.”



There’s a disused shepherd’s hut that sits in the field like a rotten tooth. Its wooden door is soft, chewed up from wet decay on the inside out. Their hot breath shudders its foundations as they step over the threshold. Wakey, wakey. Lowry takes a stone from the grass and scribbles runes of

protection over the door.

Sven shakes his head, "We can't stay here."

"It's better than staying near her."

Sour ammonia, wet grass, manure, and dead cats, but no carcass in sight. There's a calendar of dogs falling from its staples, stuck in October 1998. Bags of feed, and enough clutter to fill a charity shop four times over. Lowry picks at the walls. "This is our one-night house. If there is smoke from the chimney before nightfall, we can claim it as ours."

Rolling his eyes: "You just made that up."

She takes a rock from the hearth and swings her arm back, knocking the joint out of place, flinging it far out of sight into the field. "They would chuck an axe from each corner of the house; wherever it landed marked their new land."

"What if the farmer comes back for it?"

"Do you see a farmer in this field? No one uses it."

Who lived here before the twins decided to claim it as their own? Was it just for storing old farming gear and feed? For hiding a body? *If these walls could talk*, Lowry thought, running a hand along its exposed brick— *I'd listen for weeks*.

"This is ours now," she says.

"But the farmer might need it."

"No, they won't. It's not lambing season, it's empty."

The flame of the lighter dances between blue and orange, then back to blue. Lowry craves warmth more than anything. They feed the cold hearth, it sticks, crisp packets, and tarp. They feed the cold hearth sticks, crisp packets, and tarp. It takes a while for the fire to grow, but eventually it takes a deep breath before exhaling decades of neglect.

"Told you I could get it going," she says.

Distant screams rattle at the edge of the wood, forcing the sheep into a tight fist in the corner of the field. "Will she find us here?"

"Not here," adds Lowry, "She can't walk this far."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. The forest won't let that happen."

Rabid. Hungry. Sven shivers next to the fire. There are four years between them, but his frailty and fear age him greatly.

"Can you do this?" she asks, trying to distract him, shaping her hands into a rabbit dancing on the wall. Her fingers move its ears, her untrimmed nails are its fangs.

"No. My hands are too cold."

Their Mother howls again, bending the trees like toothpicks, threatening to take the twins out to the mountains, beyond the reach of salvation. Sven doesn't flinch, but his cold body takes a screenshot, caching the image into the marrow of his bones. Nowhere is off-limits to Mother.

Fig 1:

The clock stopped ticking. Mother is close. I hold my breath, but the sour aroma of vinegar has already begun to seep into the pores of the bedding. The glass of water on the bedside drawer is cold and wearing a coat of fuzzy green mold. Heavy footsteps squeal and bend the floorboards. Her shadow blocks the slip of light under the door. She is listening.

Stitched into the cotton of the bed sheet, the handle slowly bends down under the weight of her hand. The hall lightbulb bursts and I can no longer decipher her shape but she's here. Hiding. Watching. Hunting. She towers in the doorway, blocking the exit with both arms, "Why did you do it?" she hisses.

Mocking what I say, pitching her voice, "Acting brand new won't save you, Lowry."

"I didn't do anything."

"You broke my plates. The good ones on the top shelf."

Smoothing her temper down, "Sven was playing with his ball, he might have knocked it? I told him not to play with that in the house."

Mother barks, "I'll turn you inside out and make you wish you weren't born."

The door slams. Locked. Imprisoned from the outside with a spell. When it's finally time for me to leave, it will be morning, and Mum will have turned the house into a maze. Watching me scurry and beg for help like a rat. It's easy to get lost; I have many times. Corridors are brambles; they bend and twist. Rooms that stretch for miles behind faux walls, doors that lead nowhere. This is the house that fear built.



The church has become Lowry's second home. A soft place where she can hide and feel safe. The vicar is reading a passage about forgiveness, their voice shrill and echoing.

Wooden pews sting her palms. Walls shiver with the damp, and the crooked floorboards fight for space at their borders. She slips between the family of four who never miss a Sunday service. Neat clothes and clean hair. Heads dip in and out of the prayer. Bored, she scans the rows, ticking off the faces she recognizes. These services show habits that are meant to stay hidden—yawns, nose picking, dirty text messages—but just like God, she notices.

“A terrible loss and one we all no doubt feel deeply,” he adds, “let us pray for those that need it most.” They pretend they care behind a veil of sincerity; they didn't know David, they mocked him as he ran for the bus. Eyes closed, she allows the prayers to latch onto her small hoop earrings. These words are familiar and hold some semblance of comfort, but they have lost their pungency. The same prayers, recited on the promise of hope and a different outcome.

It's not that she doesn't believe, it's just that she prefers to get answers from the universe, the land and the river. *Are you always here?* She wonders, *are you not bored and fed up like me?* She pretends to read the Bible, and when she's in school tries to behave, but it's never a fair transaction. *What do I get back, God? You never answer when I call and I'm getting bored.*

Speech bubbles above everyone's head signal prayers. The bald man prays for his wife to return and for his hair to sprout roots next week. To her left, the blue-haired person with the stripey suit begs for forgiveness. The woman in front is praying for her dead wife to stop howling from the garden. Lowry finally closes her eyes, hands clasped like a saint. *Take Mother away, if you're listening.*



The river spits and gargles, weaving through time, gathering secrets and wisdom. Lowry writes a list of vitriol that her mother has committed on a piece of scrap paper. Spells that were used against her, and every time she was locked away. Sven is vigilant.

“Make her go away. Make her suffer as she made us suffer.” Folding the paper away from her and casting the envelope down the river, she adds: “Please take these as an offering of gratitude and respect.” She drops elderberries into the water.

“You're weird,” he scoffs.

Lowry gives him the middle finger and continues to write, “This will work, they told me so.”

“Are you a witch?”

“Would it scare you if I was?”

He doesn't answer.

Keep staring,” she mocks. “I might do a trick.”

“What happens when the police or Mum comes here and collects us? They’ll take us out of school. Mum will get in trouble too, not just us. They might put us in a home.”

“She’s too busy looking for answers in the dregs of her wine to come look for us.”



The procession of people spills out of the church, with numb legs and minds empty, the pastor is quick to question her: “If you ever need someone to talk to, or need help, the church is always here.”

“*Sorry?*”

“I know you have had trouble at home lately and with school. You don’t have to prove yourself, to tick off a box,” he continues. “I’m not here to judge. I know the real Lowry.”

“You’re not a monster for skipping school or playing a prank.”

“You don’t have a clue.”

He holds his palms up to face her. “You’re right, you’re right. I shouldn’t have jumped in. I was just trying to help. I know it’s never easy.” He seems disappointed that she has made up her mind. “The lord can visit us in strange ways.”

“So, you agree it’s made up?”

He struggles to find an answer. “In these circumstances, we must give them space and keep them in our prayers. The chapel is always open for them, and right now, a sense of community goes a long way.”

Lowry stops listening. Will a good thought bring David out of the fox’s belly if she prays hard enough? Will sending flowers to the couple who lost their son in the car wreck erase the image of his flattened torso?

“Will the lord take pity on someone horrible to the core?”

“For what?” asks the vicar.

“Everything they do is cruel and calculated.”

“I don’t follow?”

“Mother is a witch. She does obscene things to people; no one will believe me because she acts like everyone else. She is very good at hiding it. But I see the real her when the doors are closed.”

There’s a silence, and for a moment she gets the impression that he doesn’t fully believe her. She waits for him to form an answer, the cleanest line that will fit neatly somewhere between honesty and pity. “We all hurt each other. It’s unavoidable sometimes, but we must remember to—”

“God hurts people all the time. I think they would get along very well. I think they have allowed far too much, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Everyone can be troubled; we all have our vices—”

“No,” she interjects. “This is a cruel kind of hurt, slow. Savouring. She made the neighbours' lives hell because they wouldn't move their car from our drive. They ended up in the lake.”

He remains silent, unsure how to tackle the questions. “Faith is inside us. The light of the holy spirit never dims – it's there even if we decide we need a break, or if we have a lapse in judgment. It'll be here. Always.”

“Like the sun? Or fire?”

“Precisely.”

He lights the dull votive candles. “You know, we pass energy on.” Held in thought as he takes the lit candle and lights the rest of the pack, one by one with the existing flame, “By sharing the light, we pass on a little of god each time.

“Is hell real?” she asks with no warning.

“Pardon?”

“Is it a fiery pit of eternal anger?”

The pastor pulls a face that suggests this topic is inflicting physical pain, and suggests they discuss this another time. Outside of church.

“I only ask, because that's where Mother will go if she's not careful.”

“These are not thoughts one should worry about, but if you are concerned, would you like me to have a word, perhaps tell someone who may be able to help?”

“I already have, and they're *not* happy.”



Fig 2:

My tooth is wobbly. Front left. Last baby tooth. Creaking like a floorboard. I can't help but play with its loose hinges, pushing it back and forth like a light switch, until I taste blood.

“Shouldn’t be so clumsy,” Mother spits, gliding the blunt knife over the mottled apple, revealing the bruises and pot-marks.

I hold up my bloody tooth to the light. “It’s out Mum, it’s out.”

She does not turn around.

“How much will the tooth fairy give me for this?”

Mother drops the apple. Inspecting the tooth like a penny she found on the floor, she says, “Nothing. I’ll aim for both teeth next time.”





This hut they've called home for the past few days is tiny, no bigger than a garden shed, with a family of mice and a leak above the door. Sven has made a bet on what will kill them first, disease or pneumonia.

It was fine at first, cosy even, it reminded them of rare camping trips; the late nights trying to scare the other kids with ghost stories, but the novelty had worn thin as its plywood walls. The opening in the roof drips infrequently, like their conversations about food, their Mother, the strange men in the village.

"What are you doing?" asks Sven. Trodden cardboard and paper from the calendar litter the floor.

"Building a paper house as an offering."

He ignores her. "I want to go home. We're gonna get in so much trouble."

"Good children get nothing. I thought you would have learnt that by now."

Sven tries to stay out of the mess. He assumes that if he is neutral, he will be spared the punishment, but somewhere beneath that hope, he knows this has never worked in his favour, and this outing will end no differently.

"Leave then. Go. We're close, they told me this morning. Just one more thing to do."

"They told you to make a paper house?"

"Yes. How else will they know which house to burn to the ground?"

"She might not even be there," he says, shaking his head. "All our stuff is in that house, wouldn't you want that back?"

"Material things can be replaced," she says quietly. "Mum will be there. I have asked the trees to make sure the doors are locked. She never leaves that chair in the kitchen, so she can cook like a turkey."

Lowry proudly lifts the crude shell of a semi-detached house fashioned from calendar pages, with a twig figure of a woman in the top window. "Karma is a stove that you feed with actions, and in return she serves what is rightfully yours. Trust me. Mother will be dealt with."

Peering inside the space where the couch should be, she is a fifty-foot woman hungry for mayhem – rattling the building, shaking the figure inside like change in a purse. "You have trapped us for too long... so, now you must pay," she says, striking the lighter. She taunts the lip of the paper with the naked flame, allowing it to curl and smolder. "A good witch is a bonfire, but a bad witch must be burnt. Exorcised from the coven. That is what you taught me."

Fig 3:

I knew Mother was up to no good. A quick surveillance of the room tells me to be cautious. She's burning incense, waving the stick like a baton. Sandalwood and rose, stuffy and cloying. She yaps on the phone, loud enough for us all to hear: "It's a wonder they didn't eat each other in the womb. Had the worst pregnancy with them. Especially the big one."

She offers a soft smile, purple lipstick cracking. No teeth. Coaxing me out from behind the chipped door frame, into the sun trap, "Don't be a creep at the door, Lowry. Get in here. I won't bite."

Thick smoke settles in blankets and eavesdrops on conversations it's not meant to hear. I nod. Taking my spot opposite her, the faux leather couch creaks with every vibration. Trying to regulate an already overdrawn nervous system before it switches sides and kills me before this interaction is over.

"I know you stole from me."

"No, I didn't."

She grabs my wrist and begins to twist before I can speak another word.

Smoke curls from singed flesh as she tightens her grip, "Do not push me, you vile little witch. I will cut these fingers off. Look what happened to poor Hilary. Had to go in the soup, didn't she?"



“The lamb is back again,” says Sven, pulling the corner of his nail off with his teeth. Lowry peers through the over window ledge. Bleating for attention. Legs too long for its fuzzy body. “It won’t survive the winter.”

“Where’s the rest of the flock?” asks Sven.

“They get separated at birth most of the time; it’s very cruel.”

“The poor thing is skin and bone.”

“Not surprised. I doubt the farmer even knows how many they have.”

“Looks like it needs new batteries,” says Sven.

The smell is faint, but it triggers something in Lowry's memory. Burnt plastic, mushrooms, manure.

“Do not open the door. It’s not a lamb, it's Mother playing a trick. No matter how much she begs and pleads, it’s all an act.”

“Hello? This is your Mother.”

Mother laughs, but it catches in her throat like barbed wire, forcing her to cough up tar, “Is anyone home?”

“Why did you both run away? That is very dangerous. This isn't a nice place to stay. So dirty and old. The fox could have eaten you for breakfast. I know he lurks around here, I've seen him.”

“No,” whimpers Sven. “You will hurt us.”

Face pressed against the door, she whispers, “Why would I hurt my babies?”

“Thou shalt not lie,” hisses Lowry.

The lamb swells to a monstrous size, snowy fur gone grey and matted: “Open the door. I am your fucking mother.”

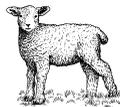
“Get away from the window,” Lowry tells Sven. “Do not open the door, she’ll get bored soon.”

“Can you make up a spell to get rid of it?” asks Sven.

“It doesn't work like that. She doesn't need sage, she needs a bullet.”

Their mother circles one last lap of the hut, cigarette burnt down to the orange filter, brown sunglasses falling from their nest atop her head. “I should have drowned you both when I had the chance.”

Lowry turns from the window and picks up her paper house.



Wide-eyed. Ambulance sirens slice through the night, and neon blue stains the hut. Walls. Skin. Bones. Unable to pry her face from the window, Lowry absorbs every frame.

“I fucking told you.”

“This could be for anyone,” Sven says, picking the sandy grains from the corners of sore eyes. Sven rubs some life back into them before sleep steals it back. “People are always getting into

fights at the pub.”

“No. They whispered to me, they wouldn’t let me down. They were fuming with her.”

Black smoke asphyxiates their house. She can’t contain her excitement. Laughing until tears stream down her face. Choking from sick enjoyment. Has the fire claimed the living room where they watched TV? Has it obliterated all the food in the fridge? Are the solemn faces in their school photos melted past recognition?

They follow the pulse of the lights until they meet the commotion and shouting at the estate, as people scramble to get help. The fire is a wild bull kicking through each room. The staircase is cinders, Lowry knows, even from the outside. Their private den in the dining room—where they played dragons and cops, hide and seek—is a deathtrap. Has their Mother died yet, or is she still inside the blaze? Banging fists against the door?

Blending into the crowd of people in dressing gowns, pyjamas, and odd slippers, Lowry keeps her arms neatly folded, pretending to be shocked. “What happened? Where is our Mum? Please tell me she’s not in there? Why is it on fire?” Shaking the stranger beside her. “Please help! I can’t believe it. Is our Mum out? Please tell me she’s out and safe?”

The house walls swell and scream. Lowry mimics the flames with outstretched arms, fingers waving like smoke. **“Nid Mam i mi yw gwrach ddrwg.”** An evil witch is no Mother of mine.



VERN HOLLAND

r/**AmItheActualDevil** ↩ Crossposted by u/spooky00ky • 3 days ago
Surprised this was only on AITA, this seems more up our alley. Anyone else hear about this story at all?

r/AmITheAsshole? • Posted by u/[deleted] • 1 year ago
AITA for ruining my friends' trip?

Thanks ahead of time to anyone who sticks through this whole thing, I know it's a lot, and I'm sure hard to believe, but trust me when I say it's all true.

TLDR: my witchy friends did a spell on Halloween that gave me a bad trip, and I couldn't stay calm so I ruined everyone else's trips too.
AITA???

Emmy (f 18), Agnes (f 19), and I (ftm 18) are all roommates and freshmen in college. We met on move-in day, let fate decide who we'd be living with. Emmy and Agnes took the double room, and I got the single in the suite. Their idea, because they wanted me to feel safe and comfortable as the sole trans guy stuck in the all-girls hall.

Agnes was raised Catholic, but became a Wiccan when she was in her early teens. Emmy was raised Southern Baptist but she hated the church and started getting into witchy stuff like tarot. With me being into horror and also being a bit of an outsider, we made a strong trio.

One day, the three of us were skipping class and drinking. It was Agnes' idea to day drink, especially because she had, like, so much alcohol somehow. She filled our tumblers with straight vodka. We didn't need mixers for it because Agnes apparently infused it with tea from the herbs around her altar so it tasted like a garden.

Emmy asked me if I had ever done a spell, like a witchcraft spell. I said, "Well, I've never really thought about it, I guess, so no, but I'm open to trying?"

God, I wish I had never said that. But, whatever, it's in the past.

Emmy was worried about a quiz that she had to get ready for the next day and wanted me and Agnes to help with a prosperity spell to make sure she would pass. Innocent, right? Agnes hurried into her room, giggling, and came back out with handfuls of vials and baggies of herbs and stones.

With some direction, I poured salt around us in a large circle. Then, I lit votive candles for each of the bowls, and one bigger candle for us in the middle that we all sat around.

Agnes set out little bowls at five points around us, and one in the center. Each one had a tumbled rock or two, along with some herbs. Then Emmy pulled a pair of scissors from behind her and snipped off a small chunk of hair. She handed Agnes the scissors to do the same. Both of them have long hair, so this didn't feel very fair for me with my short ass hair, but I trimmed a piece off as well. We dropped it all into the bowl and Emmy lit it on fire. It smelled like a Great Clips.

Then Emmy chanted some gibberish, and that was that. Spell over, nothing crazy. We blew out the candles, vacuumed up the salt, and put our den back to the way it was. Emmy, to prove a point, didn't do a lick of studying before that quiz. She definitely didn't know shit, either, she hadn't done any of the textbook readings for that class. But... she passed the quiz.

A week later, Agnes decided she wanted to do a love spell. She spent a lot of time on Tinder, fantasizing, since she didn't have any guys in her DMs at that point. We did a similar ritual with different rocks and herbs and then a little pinch of our hair. That night alone, she matched with a handful of guys on the app, more and more each day after.

By the end of September we were getting strapped for cash (freshmen suck at budgeting lol). I offered to try a money spell. Again, new rocks, new herbs, and a bit of hair. I found a \$50 bill on

the ground the next day, Emmy brought a wallet to a lost-and-found and the owner gave her a small wad of cash as a reward, and Agnes got Venmoed by her parents out of nowhere. These spells were like little foolproof jackpots!

It was Agnes who thought of the friendship spell. For us to bond more, she had explained. This one was a little different than the others, though. She told us that she wanted to use *blood* instead of our hair. What would you do if you'd learned to fuck with fate, you know? The spells *worked*—every time—of course I agreed.

We set out the bowls of rocks and herbs. Emmy held out her right hand, Agnes followed her, and I hesitantly did the same. With her left hand, Emmy pulled a needle from her pocket and held the tip over the fire. I remember scoffing and saying, "A needle? Not, like, a dagger or something?"

Emmy laughed and reassured me that that's just in the movies. They each pricked the tips of their fingers and dripped a few drops of blood into the center bowl. It splashed over the rose quartz and made the sage, basil, and thyme swell like tea leaves. Agnes burned the tip of the needle before handing it to me. I pricked my finger, and added my blood to the mix.

Agnes pulled out more of her herbal vodka. We drank as the final part of the spell. Agnes said it was like we were putting a seal on it, ensuring that the three of us are close forever. She called us a coven. We drank and danced in our little salt circle. There was no denying how close we felt at that moment.

Over the next couple of weeks, I'd come home to find little gifts from the girls in front of my bedroom door. They'd leave notes taped to the front of runes they'd designed, telling me that they were for good luck or protection or depression-healing because, at the end of the day, college is fuckin' hard. They even started leaving flowers they'd gathered in the gardens near campus, or animal bones they'd found on a hiking trail.

It was a little creepy for my tastes, but I didn't want to seem inconsiderate, I guess.

Halloween came around and we had decided to have a little coven party in the gardens. It's close to campus, there's a super steep staircase to get down there fast as long as you're careful. At the bottom, there's an ancient cabin that students usually go to to smoke.

It was a full moon, Agnes said she wanted to do a special ritual. There was a frost warning for that night and we made sure to bring some extra blankets down to snuggle up in. Emmy and I decorated the inside of the cabin with battery-powered string lights, some pumpkins, and some plastic skeletons from CVS. We even set up a lil speaker for ambient spooky lofi.

We all sat down with our cups of Agnes' classic tea-infused vodka. She said this one was infused with yarrow, marshmallow root, mugwort, and some other stuff that I can't remember (I looked these up later, it's a lot to do with, like, opening up your third eye or something). Emmy pulled a slab of folded aluminum foil from her pocket and said, "I figured this would be perfect for the ritual tonight." She unwrapped the foil and lifted her hands for me to see what was inside. Three tiny squares of paper laid before us.

"What is this?" I asked, picking up one of the squares. Each one had a matching dancing skeleton on it, all in pastel rainbow colors. I looked back and forth between the girls to try and get a read on their faces. Agnes had a large grin plastered to her face, and Emmy just looked calm and content. I trusted them, mostly.

Agnes grabbed one herself and placed it onto the top of her tongue. She laughed and said, "Ith juth *athid!*"

Acid. I looked up at Agnes and asked, "What even *is* the ritual we're doing?"

“I want us to commune with the dead!” Agnes exclaimed, after putting her tongue back into her mouth. “Emmy was, like, a genius to think of the acid. Psychedelics can really open you up to the influence of the spirits, especially on nights where the veil is so thin. Just place the tab on your tongue and let it take you away.”

It would take an hour, maybe two until we would feel the effects of the drugs, so we took our time setting up the ritual. Once again, new herbs that matched our vodka, new stones, chunks of our hair. We all moved with muscle memory at that point. Agnes said we would need extra offerings for a spell this potent, and pulled out an actual dagger. Or maybe it was a letter opener? It was sharp, small, but bigger than a needle.

I hadn’t realized until that moment that the speaker had died, and everything was silent save for our breathing and the old wood creaking around us. I dug the side of the knife-thing into my palm after Emmy and Agnes did, then dripped my oozing blood into the bowl too. It felt very... *Little Shop of Horrors*-y, and I just couldn’t get the image out of my head of all of us feeding a little Audrey II, and that’s when I started getting visuals.

The pumpkins around the room, which had not been carved, suddenly began to grow in size until they were as big as a desk chair. They began to rot away, like a sped up timelapse, leaving gaping holes that almost looked like faces. I started hyperventilating at the sight, and when I looked down I saw that our blood, which had only been droplets, began to overflow in the bowl and had morphed to have a face as well.

I looked at the other two, who still looked like themselves, eyes closed and all of us holding hands (I don’t remember when that started). “I think I’m feeling it now,” I said quietly. I didn’t realize that Agnes had been chanting when I spoke. She and Emmy snapped their eyes open and stared me down. Emmy shushed me. Both of their eyes were dilated, practically black and glistening with the string light flickering around us.

My mouth was dry and my skin began to feel like it was tingling all over, like tiny little fires were spreading under my pores. I stayed as quiet as possible and listened to Agnes' chanting.

Then, Emmy and I joined in, but I don't remember Agnes ever telling us what to say. It was like in those horror movies when someone gets possessed and is speaking in tongues, or like mass hysteria with all those people in the dancing plague.

It freaked me out, feeling the words spill out. I don't know if it was Latin or made-up or what. I looked down at the bowl again, and this time I *saw* Audrey II. The lips of the plant began making a kissing motion, hungry and begging. We all lifted our hands once more and offered more blood to the bowl.

My eyes landed on the plastic skeletons. The cat ones came to life and bounced around the room. I couldn't stop staring at the human ones, because they were slowly growing flesh at various speeds. One of the skeletons opened its mouth to speak, muscle growing from its chest first and spreading out onto its limbs slowly, like a fast growing moss.

I was out of control, and I needed to get back to my body. I fought against the trip and pulled my hand away. I tried to stand up, but was so clumsy that I knocked the blood bowl over and tripped, breaking the salt circle. Emmy and Agnes looked *pissed*. Both of them started sputtering, which quickly turned into yelling at me.

I crawled to the corner of the room, away from the nearest pumpkins that had started chomping like those chained up heads in the Mario games. A screech pulled my eyes back to my roommates, who were *floating* and making their way towards me, hair and clothes defying gravity. It was the most insane thing I'd ever seen.

The next thing I know, I'm waking up in the gardens outside of the cabin early the next morning, covered in dirt and dried blood. My whole body was aching, especially my head, and my legs wobbled when I stood. I stumbled home.

When I got to the dorm, I saw Emmy and Agnes in their room, whispering to each other. I felt bad. I knocked on their door and apologized. I told them I was sorry that I couldn't have helped them clean up or anything and asked what had happened when I passed out. Agnes turned first and just stared at me, blankly. Emmy turned, and I saw three long and thin scratches on her neck, coated in dried up blood. She glanced at Agnes, and hurried over to me. She carefully shut the door behind her, where Agnes was still standing, unmoving.

"We couldn't find you after you took off last night," she said, voice hushed.

"I took off?" I asked. She looked white as a ghost and her eyes were bloodshot. She must have been tired.

"Yeah, you did this," she said and pointed at her neck. "Then you ran off to who knows where. I'm glad you're okay though."

"Slept like a baby," I said and tried to touch her shoulder. She flinched away from my hand.

She apologized and said, "I think I'm just a little spooked after last night. You were... a little feral. And Agnes was too. But I just want to be there for her right now, she seems really worried about you having broken the circle last night and all. Something about the spell going wrong? Bad luck or something?"

Emmy asked to give her and Agnes space for a few days. Well, it's been a week now, and the two of them have been acting even weirder. I caught Emmy walking out of my bedroom. She said she was just trying to borrow a pencil for her next class, but she only ever writes notes on her laptop. Then, I woke up in the middle of the night to see Agnes standing in the middle of my room, just staring at me. She didn't blink. Didn't speak. When I asked if she needed anything, she just walked right out of my room and went back into hers.

I tried to confront them yesterday. They were just sitting in their bedroom on a pullout couch under Emmy's lofted bed, watching TV. Emmy's eyes went wide when I walked inside, and the energy in the room shifted.

"I miss you two," I told them. Agnes never turned her head, just stared forward. The TV screen was just black and white fuzz, like the old TVs used to do on unused channels. I added, "Please, tell me what's going on. What can I do?"

Agnes said, voice crackling as if she had a cold, "Just give in already." Emmy and I turned, both surprised that she had spoken.

I was confused. I asked, "Excuse me? To what?"

"You know what. Deep down."

Emmy said nothing, and looked anywhere but at me. She seemed more with-it than Agnes, but it was like she was being controlled by her. Agnes just looked exhausted. Her hair was dull and lifeless and her eyes had dark bags under them.

Agnes spoke once more. Her words crackled still, but they slurred together, and gradually rose to a yell, as if she'd been drinking herself belligerent. "It all went wrong because of you. You ruined it. And now I have to pick up the pieces and try to fix *this shit*."

I didn't say another word, and I left the room. I don't understand this cryptic shit. Agnes hates me and keeps creeping me out. I know I fucked up and I wish I had kept my cool on Halloween, but you all can see how I wasn't, like, in control of myself right? I dunno, I feel like I may not be in the wrong on this one, but maybe I just need someone to explain to me how I'm the asshole here.

Update 1:

First, thank you so much to the people who have messaged me to tell me your thoughts. I know I'm not innocent in this at all, but it's also

nice to hear that I'm not a total asshole. Anyways, let me tell you what's been happening.

It's been another week, and things have been getting creepier by the day. I think I found out why Emmy was in my bedroom. I was sitting at my desk a few days ago, getting some homework done during an all-nighter when I saw a dark spot in the wood. The desk is the school's, and I sure as fuck didn't wanna pay the damage cost, so of course I stopped everything to see what it was. I pushed my laptop aside and pulled out the drawer. It was as if someone had sat at the desk with a pen or something and meticulously carved these symbols. It had to have taken *ages* with how deep and dark they were. There was no buffing them out, that's for sure. It was the same runes, alongside some new ones, that Agnes and Emmy had written notes of weeks ago.

I have this nagging feeling. The day after Halloween, when Emmy told me I'd scratched her so hard that she'd bled (which are turning into gnarly scars btw), I remember looking down at my fingers. There was no dried blood or dead skin under my nails. I don't think I'm the one who scratched her. All of this isn't helped by the fact that I feel, like, bitter and angry, irritable with everything and everyone. My moods were a little off for the first year I was on T, sure, but this is like a whole other beast.

Anyways, I think I want to go back to the cabin. The weather isn't great out, it's been icy every day, but I think I'll take my chances with those stairs. All of our spells *worked* right? So that means supernatural things must exist in some form. Maybe when I had that bad trip I actually saw something? Or, if I fucked up the ritual like Agnes said I did, maybe I let something out?

I feel crazy, but I'll keep updating since so many of you seem invested.

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AutoMOD • 12 hours ago • stickied comment
In case this story gets deleted or removed:

r/AmITheAsshole • posted by u/tboi2005
AITA for ruining my friends' trip?

Thanks ahead of time to anyone who sticks through this... [read more](#)

MrWildernessss • 1 year ago

I don't believe in ghosts or witchcraft or whatever, but it does seem like there are some bad vibes between you and those girls. Maybe leave them be for a few months. And maybe don't dabble in animal bones and blood and the like for your own mental wellbeing.

alphawulf69 • 1 year ago

NTA ig but maybe it belongs on r/horrorfic instead of this lol no way is this real

campfiresongsong • 9 months ago

Bro, u good? Did u ever go to the cabin?

booznboos • 6 months ago

I think OP is missing? I found this

<https://www.news11avl.com/current/student-missing-near-bmu-campus>

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hauntmedaddyuwu • 3 days ago

Yeah someone needs to find this guy and make sure he's not possessed

Gh0sttheory666 • 1 day ago

It took half the night, but I found out more about that cabin. Looks like one of the original settlers of that town made it. His wife and daughter were murdered there. If that link someone posted is true and OP is missing, then maybe he was killed by a spirit or something?

tboi2005-new • 12 hours ago

i'm surprised you found my post, must have been buried in aita lol i'm not dead btw, and not missing either, just deleted my old account. tht news11 article def isn't abt me lol but weird coincidences. here's my last and final update:

i dropped out of school soon after making that post. spent a few months couch surfing and just kinda tried 2 find myself. i didn't really know who i was anymore, bc i had a problem. after that halloween, i started getting high and drinking every day. there was no haunting, just me looking for attention. i reached back out to my family a few weeks ago and i live with them for now. i've been in therapy abt the whole thing and thts helped a lot. i'm getting better.

agnes *was* actually just ignoring me, she was upset about the halloween ritual, and she ended up getting visual snow from the acid. we think it was laced or something. we're good now. not friends, but no hate between us.

emmy still lives with agnes, far as i know. i heard from a friend of a friend that they still do witchcraft rituals and stuff together and that they have a lot of fun with it. they have a bigger coven now in our college town and invite students to join on the reg. it's

kinda cool tbh but i stay away from that stuff now.

sorry it's anticlimactic, but that's the whole story with this post blowing up i'm hoping they don't see it bc i'm a bit embarrassed lmao i *did* try to delete my account, thought my posts would be deleted too. pls, i'd like to be left alone, and i don't need emmy or agnes seeing that i posted about them online. so don't go digging for more out of respect, ok?

uwughosty • 12 hours ago
OMG HE'S ALIVE

111nonbean111 • 11 hours ago

Good on you for getting your shit together. Sometimes we have to go off the rails for a bit to bring us back to reality. Some people are just chronically online and make up these gross parasocial relationships. I believe you, OP. Happy to hear you're doing better.

softgirlcloud6 • 10 hours ago
Glad ur ok tboi <3

winniehunnybee • 9 hours ago

I went back to that old article about a missing student. I'll just summarize it here (bc clearly some of you didn't read the article if you actually believe that guy is OP bc look at how drastically diff his typing is)

A trans student, 18y/o Phoenix Woods, went out one night, a few days before the semester ended, but didn't tell anyone where he was going. He never came back to the dorm, and when cops searched the area they didn't find anything. No sign of Phoenix anywhere. Two girls were interviewed in the article: his two former roommates, named Aubrey (19) and Amelia (18). Amelia

has a nasty scar in the picture too. Amelia did all the talking, and said that Phoenix had been acting 'off' for a few weeks before he went missing, and she told the reporter she thought he was just doing drugs, that he got addicted after they tried acid on halloween. All Aubrey said was "I hope he's found peace." That's it. It's sus.

OP must have gone to the cabin and something happened. He even said himself in his real last update that he hadn't been feeling like himself. I think he let out something nasty when he broke the circle, and it ended up getting him in the end.

watsonxholmesxmoriarty • 7 hours ago

Thank you @winnyhunnybee for your research, because I found even more to back you up!

First, here are more articles from that newspaper that I think are related to Phoenix's disappearance! If he wasn't killed, then why were *multiple fingers* found in the gardens 4 months after he went missing? Also, why have the cops not looked *inside* of the cabin? It looks like someone has been living in that park. Locals are finding food wrappers and feces along the walking trails. Some think it's a small bear or something, some think it's a homeless person, but I bet it's a possessed OP staying in the cabin.

<https://www.news11avl.com/archive/group-of-students-find-traces-of-human-remains>

<https://www.news11avl.com/archive/large-animal-cryptid-or-a-squatter-locals-ask-what-or-who-is-hiding-and-living-in-local-gardens>

Then, I found the jackpot. OP is still missing. I found his mother's

Facebook page, but she used his deadname in the past so it must not have appeared to anyone looking up the name Phoenix Woods. She just made an anniversary post about it (and finally called him her son and used his chosen name so that's how I found him). In the post, she says that there's been no sign of him and there's been little to no help from the police in the investigation, because they said that "trans youth run away all the time." Big yikes. But, it means that this guy in the comments is a fuckin fake. Disgusting behavior.

<https://www.facebook.com/lauriewoods/posts/my-son-went-missing-one-year-ago-today>

Have there been any students who have tried to go into the cabin in the last year or are they all too scared because Phoenix went missing? If there's anyone from that school who reads this, please let me know!

lets gobmu26 • 5 hours ago

I'm a student at BMU. The roommates have, like, a demonic cult. Deadass. The school newspaper talked about it and everything. Do you think maybe Phoenix let out a demon, and then the girls began to work with it? Maybe gave more offerings so it would make them successful, like a deal with the devil???

Here's that article btw

<https://www.bluemountainuni-news.com/local-witchcraft-commune-recruits-bmu-students>

Justice for Phoenix!

liveloughlobotomy • 4 hours ago

I might get uninvited from the next family vacation if they find out I said this, but fuck it. Amelia/Emmy is my cousin and I've

been suspecting she's been doing some weird shit for a hot sec. Amelia and I have always been close, we're the little black sheep in our family bc she's goth and I'm gay :) Aaanywho, last christmas (right after that guy went missing), the whole family got together and she brought her friend, Aubrey. I saw them on the edge of the property where there's a bit of forest. They were drinking from a clear bottle, probably that vodka OP mentioned, and they were talking to someone in some weird language to thin air. I stepped on a twig and they both spun around faster than I could blink, it was freaky. Their eyes were dilated and livid, but Amelia told me to leave them alone and go back to the house, she said that Aubrey just needed a breather. Something spooky there for sure.

iwant2beeleeve • 4 hours ago

I go to blue mountain university too. I saw those witchy girls go to the gardens last semester with a few freshmen. Bad vibes. I hope y'all find out what happened because Phoenix deserves justice. Plus, I'd love to feel safe on campus again <3

Haunted1001 • 3 hours ago

Anyone think this could be related? I know it's just another reddit feed, but it seems like we're not the only ones seeing something's up with that cabin.

https://www.reddit.com/r/hauntings/comments/my_university_is_haunted

They posted this about six months after Phoenix disappeared, saying that weird things had been happening in the gardens. Bodies of small animals started appearing around the grounds, birds started flying into the buildings and trees more often.

They posted an update that said that one night they went out

to get pics of evidence. They snapped one of the cabin, and they saw light coming from inside. They walked up to it, and went to knock on the wall bc they heard humming, but this invisible force shoved them. They landed 10ish feet away on top of their phone. It broke. They didn't get the picture. After that, they had this bad feeling that something bad was going to happen to them if they didn't get away.

backdablue • 3 hours ago

I don't get why this is blowing up suddenly. Possession? Really? The police were right, teens go missing all the time. Especially degenerates like that freak. This is so stupid.

masterreader • 2 hours ago

I *swear* I saw Phoenix Woods in the gardens, and no one believed me. And yes, I'm certain that OP is Phoenix Woods, because we had classes together. I was just studying at a picnic bench and I heard rustling in the bushes. I saw a flash of dirty flesh and grown out, faded dyed hair. His hair was dark red and short a year ago.

Ocrystalkrystal0 • 1 hour ago

This is too crazy of a story to *not* be true at this point #justiceforphoenix!

thyme2cri • 30 minutes ago

I'd be shocked if those witchy girls haven't caught wind of this blowing up by now. Instead of having a circle jerk of "that guy in the comments isn't him!" and your hashtag BS maybe we should be asking, *who* is that impersonator and what the hell did they do to Phoenix?

LUCIEN R. STARCHILD GAS STATION COMMUNION

The fluorescents buzz like flies,
And the clerk's got eyes like shotgun blasts—

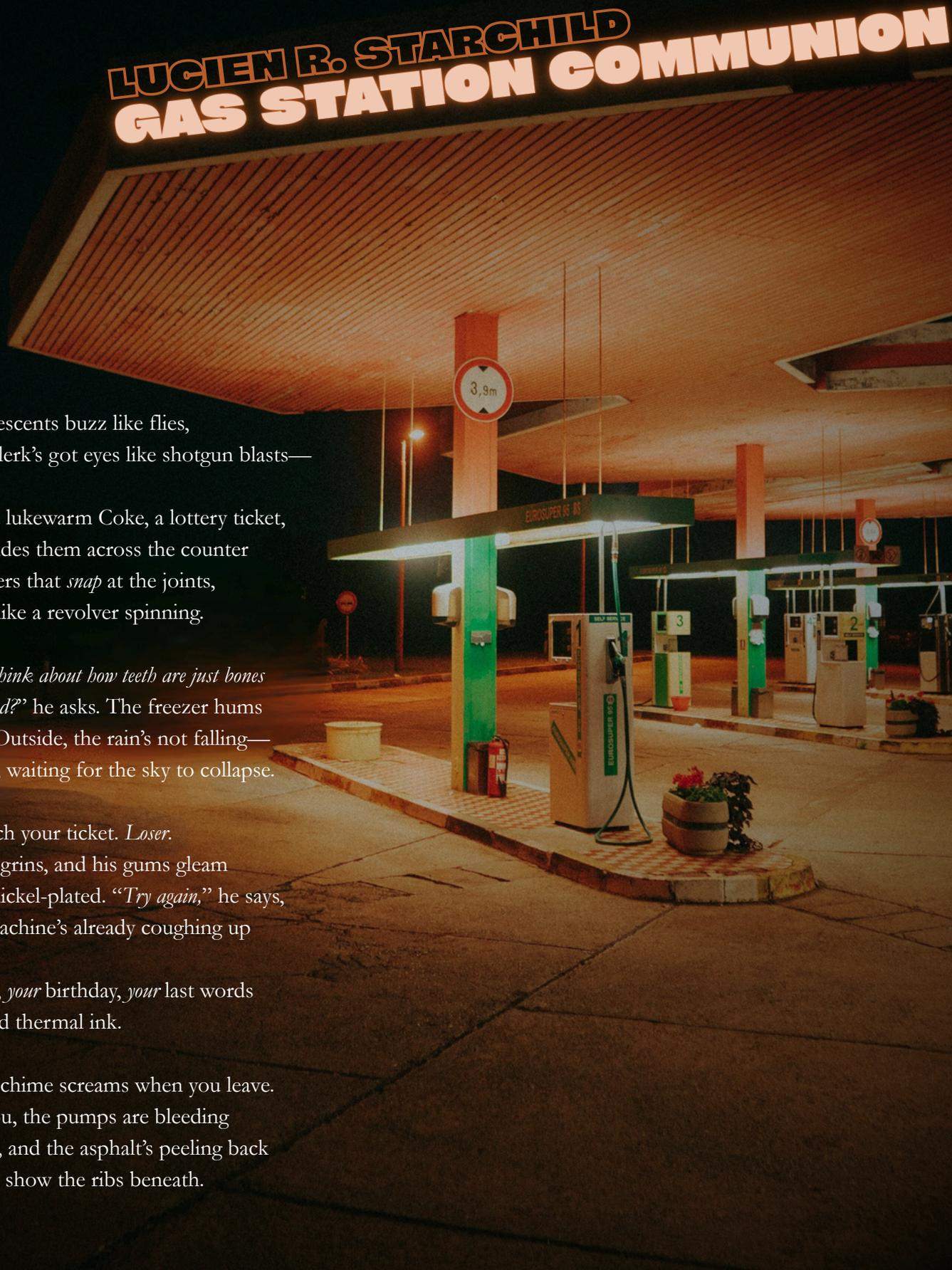
You buy a lukewarm Coke, a lottery ticket,
And he slides them across the counter
With fingers that *snap* at the joints,
click-click, like a revolver spinning.

*"You ever think about how teeth are just bones
That escaped?"* he asks. The freezer hums
A hymn. Outside, the rain's not falling—
It's *leaning*, waiting for the sky to collapse.

You scratch your ticket. *Loser.*
The clerk grins, and his gums gleam
Wet and nickel-plated. *"Try again,"* he says,
But the machine's already coughing up

your name, your birthday, your last words
In smeared thermal ink.

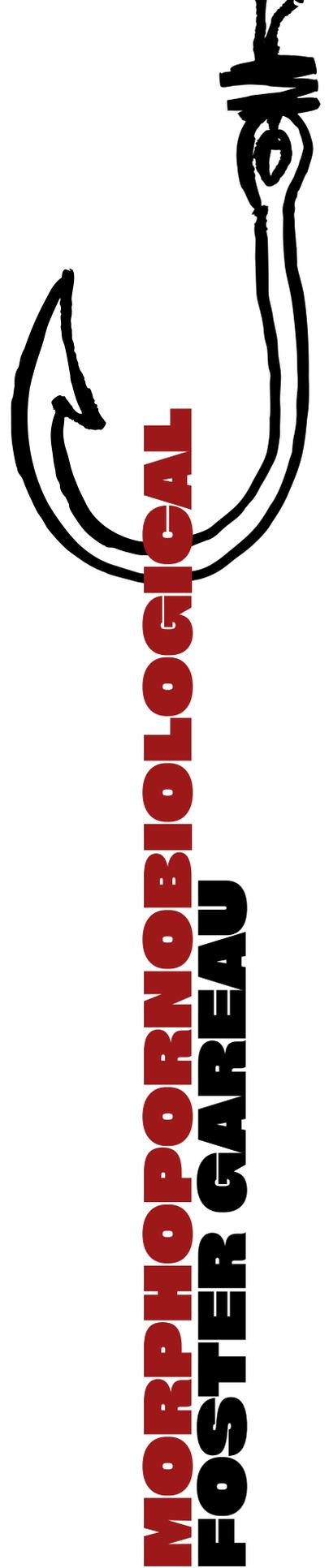
The door chime screams when you leave.
Behind you, the pumps are bleeding
96-octane, and the asphalt's peeling back
Its skin to show the ribs beneath.



you there
procuring spermatozoa by the milliliter
I'm ready to get ironed steamed
dry-cleaned and blown
your stupid pupils
widening to take all of me in
your eyes catch onto my skin like hooks – ouch

unloaded from the trucks
so kind and pink and waiting
eyes throat bones of the throat
tossed over each other like a butcher's display case
whole bodies jerk and twist and shout as one
we deserve to be eaten
boiled alive and served with bread

preservation is a gift and you are ill with it
this your special craving
one of few luxuries you can afford



UNHOLY TRANSITIONS

DELANEY KELLY



It happened first at Truth or Dare. The new girl came and taught us everything she knew, which at 100 years old, was kind of a lot. She had pale skin and dark no-frizz waves and corrective braces that a misguided orthodontist had placed, but still the fangs poked through. She looked like no one else we knew. We wanted to pin her down like a science frog.

The changes, much like the adults warned us they would, happened slowly, then all at once. First came the nocturnal nights, which our parents blamed on hormones and that damn phone. They fed us iron supplements and B12 vitamins to bring the blush back to our cheeks, and we held the pills under our tongues like lies. The nape of a neck in Biology or the curve of a collarbone in Chemistry was enough to make our canines ache, and we secretly rejoiced when the boys caused the amendment of turtlenecks to the dress code.

At slumber parties, our Truths went from “how many boys have you kissed?” to “how many girls have you turned?” For Dares, we forgot all about dialing Daniel from detention. We took turns doing the turning, so that, like our mothers foretold, we would revel in the joy of creation, and we wondered if these were the miraculous changes they’d warned about, too.

We left all but one, a runt called May. She didn’t want to be turned anyway, we told ourselves. She was too pure, she couldn’t handle the lifestyle. We kept her around, restless foxes circling the last hen in a chicken coop.

May stood out the more the changes took hold. When it was her time of the month, we did our best to be polite in her presence, dainty hands pinching our noses, and then between bells those hands would raid the bathroom wastebasket. On Strip Mall Saturdays, we’d beg to stay out past the sun’s dip below the horizon of frozen yogurt shops, jeans stores, and desiccated community spaces, but May had curfew, she said, she had to leave before her mom got mad, because as we all knew, creatures come out at night which could harm a young girl.

The boys stopped wanting us, too. They recoiled from our cold lips, our icy wandering hands. They stopped inviting us to their gameday bonfires and their afterschool ice cream trips. They knew we wouldn’t eat the ice cream anyway.

We watched May get older. First as friends sitting criss-cross applesauce in beanbag chairs, then across rows of metal folding chairs at graduation, then with wings flapping outside her bedroom window. We followed her to the big city, got turned away at bars where she walked right in. When she moved back to the suburbs, we built a nest there, too. She grew old and fat. She wears the child she had on her hips. Her hair's gone flat and the ends are gray. She's stopped trying to dye it. She does not know how little time she has. We watch her bedtime ritual, the step into her nightgown, the brush of her flat crooked teeth, the application of cold creams which will make her appear more youthful, but never more youthful than us. We resented the day she stopped praying to her deathless gods.



POP! STELLA VALLON

i grew my fingernails from scratch and dug them into my eyeballs/pressure popping/chunks of innervated jelly slide loose/relevant to abandon the ruins of my rubbed raw sockets/

i grew my fingernails from scratch and dug them into my eyeballs/blood and plasma sweat down my neck/crusting behind my ears like immolated slugs/nipping me fiercely/left then right then center/

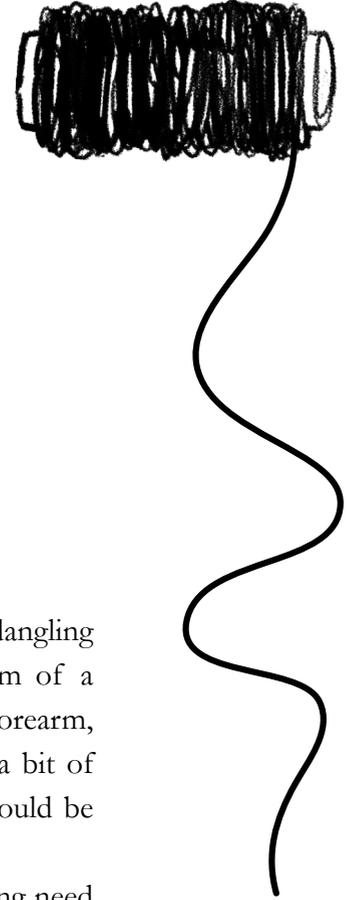
i grew my fingernails from scratch and dug them into my eyeballs/convulsing/my arms flail/strobe into otherworldly shapes/bending and breaking/i am transported into a flashing pinkish elsewhere/a place that is gummy and bright/

i grew my fingernails from scratch and dug them into my eyeballs/my fluttering rib cage carries/an unborn idea waiting to be ripped from between bones/

i must know myself/i must make choices/i must paint my fingertips with poison and sit on them/

THREAD & THRUM

MADDISON O'DONNELL



The thread appears on a Monday afternoon.

It is innocuous in the way spare threads often are, but instead of dangling idly from a frayed denim pocket or shedding from the scalloped hem of a woolly jumper, it lies quite contentedly beneath the skin of Freya's left forearm, buried. The thin black line of it could be an accidental pen mark or a bit of smudged mascara transferred from eye to arm with a tired swipe. It could be anything.

The longer Freya stares at it, the more her mind fixates on the tugging need to rid her body of the thing that doesn't belong. Root it out. Exhume it. She rubs it away in vain. Its presence itches inside her consciousness in the same way she might obsess over a splinter lodged in the space between nailbed and fingernail. It's as easy to ignore as a stubborn wart on the sole of her foot or the nib of an isolated chin hair aching to be plucked.

The foreign thing *must* come out.

She recalls videos from doomscrolling late at night: dermatologists rating explosive pimple poppings and ingrown hair purgings and cyst drainings; dentists advising on tonsil stone evictions; audiologists mulling over earwax removals. In all the videos, the offending object is dug out, squeezed, or eradicated with cotton buds and tweezers and scalpels and suction. Freya can't quite explain the searing anxiety these videos cause her, nor the replacement of initial anxiety by palpable, vicarious relief when the bodily intruder has been removed. Watching them has become part entertainment and part edification, but mostly a guilty pleasure.

Her own foreign object isn't easily accessible, at first. She tries scratching through the top layer of skin with the blunted edge of a lunar fingernail, but it's no use: the black mark sits embedded beneath a few layers of dermis, protected by a complex network of muscle and sinew and vein. She stops. Studies it. Turns her arm back and forth in the midday light. Strange, how like a spindly spider's leg it is. She imagines an arachnid amputee seething at her from some dark corner of the room, plagued with phantom tingles of what it has lost – what she has ostensibly gained.

She shakes away the image. The black mark is not a spider appendage, she tells herself. So, if not that, then what? Her mind hopscotches between possibilities: the slow healing remnants of an old scratch, a deep-set ingrown hair, an elongated blood blister, the filamented beginnings of a mole. And then, worse: a worm, a fungus, a bacterium, a parasite. She aches to free it. She must. Auntie Pam's sewing box will do.

She locates a good, sharp needle inside the wicker basket, which punctures the skin easily, slipping through her flesh like a fish hook to a weakened gill. A few stabs of it – jab and lift, jab and lift – frees a tiny piece of the filament so that she can pinch it in between forefinger and thumb. A pair of tweezers helps to pull it out further, bit by bit, leaving behind a single bulb of blood blossoming on her skin.

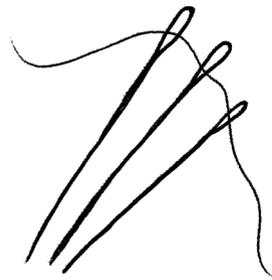
Freya shudders with relief at feeling the thing freed from her. She dabs away the bead of blood with a tissue, watching it soak through the powdery white crosshatch. On closer inspection, it is, indeed, just a thread. Only a quarter of an inch long and black as night, pulled forth from Freya's arm in the shape of a demented helix. She stares at it, holding it up to the light until her tweezers wink, and studies the tiny bits of translucent flesh tissue still clinging to her invader. A sigh of satisfaction escapes her lips as she determines that this piece of thread is, in fact, not a living worm burrowing through her insides, or a rogue spider leg separated from the rest of its body, or a mysterious mycelium emboldened and embedded.



A week and a half later, after a shower, Freya, with hair still dripping, takes her needle to the side of her breast where a tuft of white threads collects in a tight mesh. This time, she is quick to use the instrument, quick to ignore the pinpricks of shooting pain, quick to wipe away the blood as she excavates deeper into her yielding flesh with the tool's tip. The fibres come away piece by piece, stained pink, each one longer than last week's black thread. In the silence of her room, she thinks she can hear small tearing sounds each time she pulls away a bit more fluff, like the sound of someone shredding cloth bandages or tearing through a mosquito net.

One determined, forceful tug drags a tuft of white threads out from the side of her breast like a dandelion gone to seed. As she yanks, they cling to her insides, woven into layers of tissue. They've taken root. A narrow trickle of blood protests as it snakes its way down her abdomen in a viscous

trail and pools inside the bowl of her navel.



A month passes this way. Freya's body grows scabbed and pockmarked, itchy. Healing balms burn the exposed and weeping flesh. She covers her limbs with long-sleeved jumpers and high-waisted trousers and knee socks, mummifying herself against the elements and the judgments of others.

In the safety of her home, she pulls navy blue threads from the thin skin between her toes, red fibres from the sandy tip of her elbow, frayed black yarns from the forgotten fold where her buttocks meet her thighs, indigo strings from the curve of her shoulders. She collects them in a pill box until they begin to stink of dried blood and jerkied flesh, and then she calls her sister, who tells her to call her doctor, and so that's what Freya does.



The doctor appears, gloved and bespectacled, and the chair squeals and sags beneath the heft of his bottom as he squints at the computer screen. "Freya, is it?"

She nods. The fresh scab at the base of her head pops open again. She had been scratching at it in the waiting room, pulling an inch-long piece of grey thread from her neck – smelling the waft of copper as a mother ushered her children across the waiting room, away from her. She reaches back now and presses the pad of her finger against it, dipping into its raw centre.

"I can see in the notes here that you're having some trouble with itching?" says the doctor. His exhaled breath smells of tuna, egg, and cress, and Freya can see the plentiful hairs inside his nose shifting as he inhales.

"Um, well," she begins, removing her finger from the scab and allowing its runoff to seep down into the collar of her shirt. "I know this must sound terribly strange, but... I've been pulling these thread-type things from my skin."

Freya lifts the sleeves of her jumper. Red sores litter her arms – she has given up on bandaging them. The fingers of her left hand automatically begin to scratch and tear at her opposing wrist, where a crust of dotted scabs gleam like a ruby bracelet. She searches the doctor's face, but sees only pursed lips as his eyes rake over her ulcerated flesh. Her confidence wilts. "Wait, there's more."

She produces the pill box from her handbag, opens the lid, and pushes it towards the doctor. He peers inside before accepting the offered box, holding it up towards the fluorescents. Satisfied, he snaps the lid shut, places it down on his desk, and turns towards his computer to type something Freya can't see.

She fights the urge to interrupt, to demand answers – or at the very least – his attention.

“How long have the symptoms presented?” he asks.

“Let’s see. I suppose it’s been two – almost three – months now.”

More click-clacks on his keyboard. He chortles a gruff cough, then clears his throat. “And you find one of these threads... how often?”

“Once, maybe twice a day.”

More typing, more scratching. Freya details how she extracts the threads, how she stores them in the pill box, how they keep coming back with renewed ferocity. How she loses sleep. How her work suffers: how she finds it hard to focus, how basic words elude her, how she can’t perform mental equations anymore. How she spends a fortune on bandages and topical medicines and anti-itching lotions and surgical spirit. How most of her waking thoughts are consumed by the threads growing through her flesh like ferocious weeds in a tightly tended garden.

“Right,” starts the doctor, drilling his fingers against the tabletop as he ponders. Finally, he offers: “What we’re looking at here is something called Morgellons Disease.”

“*Disease?*”

“It’s characterised by dermal threads of this type, and usually presents with psychological symptoms of disturbance. It’s usually found to... disproportionately affect female patients.”

He pauses, staring at Freya over the rim of his bifocals. When she doesn’t answer, he turns back to his laptop screen and types a few quick lines.

“I don’t understand. A disease? Is it something to do with my hormones or something? Is it chronic?” Freya asks, stomach souring.

“Treatments are available. I’ll prescribe an antihistamine today. It will help to control the itching and ease your anxiety. If you’re having trouble sleeping, it will help with that, too.”

“But what should I do about the threads?”

“The antihistamine will help.”

Freya stares at him, expectation flaring in her eyes, but he offers no further explanation.

“Sorry, but I really don’t understand,” Freya says. “Don’t we need to run any tests to confirm the diagnosis? I mean, where do the threads even come from?”

“Well, the best hypothesis I have – that the greater medical community has – is that it could be something as simple as pulling a top or a pair of trousers over a fresh abrasion. The threads of the fabric dry into the wound, eventually being subsumed by the process of coagulation and scabbing. The wound heals over, and *voilà*, a filament is found to have been absorbed into the skin. It causes an itching sensation which is relieved when the thread is removed.”

“But... I didn’t have any abrasions when this started. A thread just appeared inside my arm.”

“The lesions can be microscopic, unseen to the naked eye.”

Freya pauses and waits for an additional explanation, but is met with silence. “If this is what you say it is...” she begins, noting the sudden downturn of the doctor’s mouth. “Then can you at

least tell me if it's genetic? Contagious?"

"Like anything else, it is a disease that will need to be treated in stages. We will start with the antihistamine, and I must also insist that you stop digging into your skin. But if you must continue, then I urge you to use antiseptic every time on both your flesh and your instruments. Gloves are also a necessity. You realise, of course, that if you allow this habit to overcome you, the risk of sepsis increases exponentially. Not to mention the lasting keloids that will inevitably develop. The aesthetic effect of those, as you might imagine, can be particularly distressing to female patients."

Freya scoffs, which only produces a raised eyebrow of silent chastisement from the doctor. Then, she nods, more to fulfill social expectation than to communicate understanding. The doctor turns away from her to type additional notes on his computer, the screen of which Freya can see reflected in the mirror top of her pill box. She squints, trying to make out letters and paragraphs. The only thing she can see is a large, bold word at the bottom of the screen: SISONGAID

It takes a long moment for her brain to read and process the word backwards, eventually spitting out DIAGNOSIS.

Beside it, she sees: SISOTISARAP LANOISULED

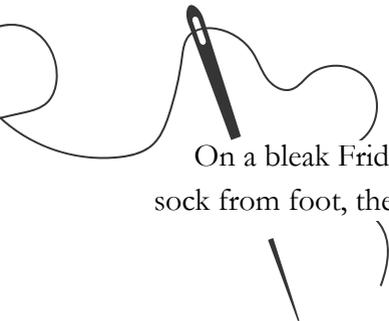


The prescribed antihistamines do nothing but make Freya nap for four extra hours per day, dry out her mouth, and render her unable to drive her car. When, in her daze, she puts her clothes on inside-out and swigs curdled milk from the fridge, she empties the rest of her prescription into the toilet, pees on top of the pills, and flushes the mess away for good.

The itching remains; the weeping lesions multiply and refuse to heal. She loses her job and any semblance of a regular sleep cycle. She rotates through a dermatologist, allergist, psychiatrist, and endocrinologist repeatedly, and still, the threads keep sprouting. She loses money, time, patience.

As her indignation grows, so do the accusations. The doctors deny diagnoses, instead throwing words like *anxiety* and *paranoia* and *hallucination* and *delusion* and even *hysteria* towards Freya, expecting her to catch. Her pill box full of flesh threads concerns no one. Meanwhile, the male patient next door is offered sympathy and biscuits before being sent on his way for a panel of tests to identify what exactly is causing his hair to thin and his breasts to grow, as they are determined to be highly disruptive to his quality of life.

On a bleak Friday evening, Freya feels an itch inside the tip of her middle toe. She yanks purled sock from foot, then grasps at the offending appendage, seeing, as anticipated, a small dot



hovering beneath the skin.

Not to worry – she has a kit now. No longer Auntie Pam’s sewing box, it is now Freya’s Morgellons basket, complete with implements sharp and pretty. Out comes the surgical spirit swab, then the quilting needle, then the slant-tip tweezers. She excavates a bit of blue thread from the toe tip and tugs... but this time, it’s different.

The thread pulls, and pulls, until a four-inch-long bloodied strand trails from the tip of Freya’s toe and stains her beige carpet with gore. The longer she pulls, the more she feels a tugging somewhere deep within her leg, winding from toe to foot, from ankle to calf, from knee to thigh. It tickles before it starts to hurt, a sizzling pressure blossoming inside her blood vessels. She grits her teeth and carries on: nearly ten inches of thread out now with no end in sight.

Fingers trembling, Freya nips her scissors from the basket and pulls the thread firmly, excavating another two inches before she cries out in pain, eyes tearing and throat locked tight. The thread is tearing through her muscle now, slicing fibres as it comes. She pulls it taut at her toe tip and snips, nearly wetting herself as the pain shoots up her leg and swiftly into her groin. It takes fifteen full minutes before Freya can move again.

Twelve inches of blue thread pool on the rug. The pill box won’t do this time – it’s full to the brim, so Freya dips into the basket once more and finds a flimsy plastic bobbin, yellowed with age. Carefully, she winds the thread, dirty as used floss, around the bobbin’s spine. She recalls the doctor’s diagnostic note, screaming out in all capitals across his computer screen.

“Delusion, my ass,” she whispers to herself.

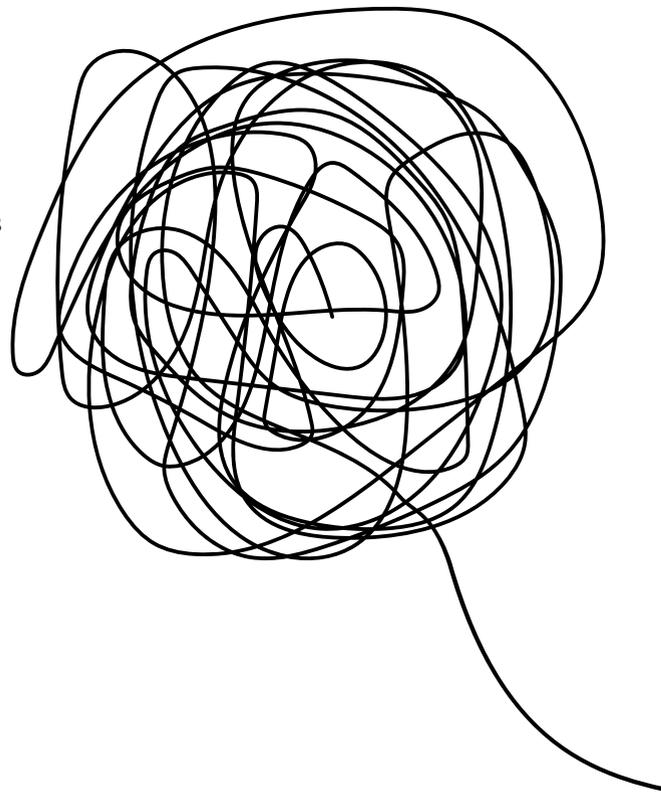


Her sister visits a week later, after Freya pulls a twenty-one-inch-long thread from her armpit, only snipping it off when she feels it wrap itself around one of her ribs. The site of the surgery doesn’t heal, only scabs over and begins to necrotise until Freya sloughs off the clot and begins again.

“They can’t deny you care for this,” says her sister, examining the wound and blotting the seeping blood away from the band of Freya’s bra. “This is on its way to sepsis city.”

“I went to the urgent clinic this time. They disinfected it, bandaged me up, and sent me on my way with a prescription for an antibiotic.”

“They did not!”



“They did indeed.”

“Did you call your consultants? Any chance of a follow-up?”

“The receptionists know me by now. They’re not stupid enough to schedule anything beyond a referral to a psych ward.”

They fret, they drink boiling coffee, they inspect the pill box threads and the bobbin threads, they disinfect the implements in the Morgellons basket, they research specialist hospitals in the States where Freya could go if only the money were there for the trip. They put on more coffee, they Google natural remedies, they reference dated women’s health manuals and new age crystal healing blogs. They plummet down a rabbit hole of folklore and mythology until the sun sets and her sister needs to be getting on.

“This is a really, *really* stupid question, considering... well, everything,” she starts, hand hesitating on the doorknob. “But what happens if you just... don’t remove the threads? What if you could just leave them there?”

The thought sends tingles across Freya’s flesh. She begins to scratch at the side of her thigh, then at the scarred flesh of her chest.

“I’ve tried. At most, I last a day or two before the itching becomes so intense that I genuinely consider taking a butcher’s knife to myself instead of a needle.” Her sister pulls a face, then folds Freya into a gentle hug, careful not to scrape her car keys against the tender armpit flesh where the sweet smell of cellular decay seeps through the scab.

“You just hang in there and stay away from the butcher’s... anything. We’ll find an answer. We will.”

Freya closes the door and scratches the fresh armpit scab clean off.



A bald patch appears on the side of Freya’s head where a tuft of threads sprouts in between her itching hair follicles. She tries to pluck them out as she would an errant grey hair, but does not feel the pinprick release of strand exiting scalp. Instead, she shaves away the first layer of tuft with a disposable leg razor and tweezes each thread out, one by one, until they match the length of her shoulder bob. They hang long, limp, and wet against Freya’s cheek.

The skin of her scalp throbs in time with her heartbeat. Freya pops two extra-strength Panadol before cleansing the burning flesh, where a purpling bruise has already begun to blossom. She inspects herself in the mirror: dark pockets beneath her bloodshot eyes, lips chapped and cracked, skin sinking and sallow.

She is a fading ragdoll with disintegrating yarn hair.

She is a sun-bleached daisy with half her petals plucked clean off.

She is digging through her Morgellons basket to locate an old spare button, leftover from

Auntie Pam's good peacoat.

She is threading the needle, button flat and cold against her bruised, balding scalp. She is sewing over the bald patch with her own homegrown brand of embroidery.



Freya feels the fever. She's two stone down and vomiting up any antibiotics and painkillers she ingests. Her sister is now doing the work of campaigning for Freya's doctors to see her, but the efforts are met with curt receptionists informing her that the average wait time for a follow-up appointment for a nonurgent case is eight months. She is ordering a wig made from real human hair for Freya to wear to hide the bruising and the button clamped to her scalp. She is starting a GoFundMe page to help raise money for Freya to travel to the States to see a Morgellons specialist, but Freya knows she is too far gone to fly.

Freya dreams and wakes. She rings her doctor's office in vain, pleading for an appointment, a cancellation. She can't remember how many times she has called, or at what time of day, but today is the last straw – the receptionist warns Freya that she has become a nuisance and will be reported if she calls back again. Against her better judgment, Freya tries to call back an hour later, to plead for a prescription for an anti-nausea medication, at the very least... but finds that her number has been blocked, and she can't get through. When the vomiting slows and she's feeling stronger, she pulls threads from wherever they hang now: elbow, jaw, kneecap, armpit, ear. They curl around her bones and plait themselves inside her muscles. She can rip and tear all she wants, but each time she does, the threads take small pieces of Freya with them – pieces that aren't growing back.



A Wednesday evening falls with sombre delight as Freya picks up the phone. She reassures her sister that yes, she is alright, and she's hanging in there as much as she can. No, she doesn't want to be admitted to a facility – it's *not* a mental health disorder – I thought we agreed on this?

Her sister sighs in defeat and Freya clicks the call away, seething. Her only ally has abandoned all hope.

She remembers how, years ago, her sister cut her wedding cake with a piece of string, pulled taut and wielded sharp as any knife's blade. The precision with which the string sliced through the yielding sponge had always fascinated Freya. Who would have thought a bit of parcel twine had that much potential?

One of the cake slices, jammy with fresh plums, had been delivered to her on a pastel fondant plate, juices dripping from where the twine had disrupted the fruit filling. She can still recall how its

Now it is June, three years after that wedding day, and Freya is curled into an armchair with two blankets, a hot water bottle, and a woolly jumper. Her fingers have gone so cold that she fears the sting of her own touch on bits of skin still body-warmed.

Her chest is lethargic these days, lurching through what remains. Four days ago, a dark thread began pushing through the flesh in between Freya's breasts like a worm burrowing up through the earthy warmth of a flowerpot on a rainy day. She tries to ignore it, but the itching forces her to dig her fingernails into the yielding flesh. A gentle prod of the thread sends Freya into a violent coughing fit.

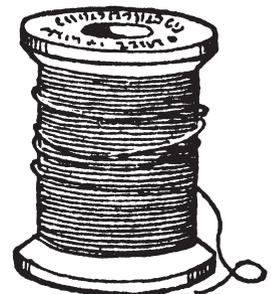
This is what strangulation feels like.

She takes a rattling breath, pulls the thread again, and feels the tug inside her chest, squelching the wet muscle now awakened, thrumming quick and sharp. The pain is electrical, like a bolt of lightning striking the trunk of a tree in a swampy summer storm, deep and venous. She feels her cells sing with its surge.

The thread comes away in resistant increments, coated in iron-rich molasses. Her heart cannot thrum on much longer this way, knotted and strangled.

With each tug, the muscle glugs thick with panic. With each tug, Freya counts the black spots fireworking inside her eyeballs. With each tug, she feels the threat of her end looming. With each tug, she is closer to release.

Her final pull is a cake slice.



DOES THE CAT HAVE LEGS?



RACHEL RODMAN

I say, “Of course, he does. They are tucked beneath him. That is what he does when he is resting; you’ve seen his legs before. For goodness’ sake, Emily, you saw them 10 minutes ago.”

“But do you see them *now*?” she asks.



See?



When I pick him up, he is lighter than I remember. Until I remember. *This* cat has survived a car collision and two cancers. And he carries the scars.

Four stumps.

Dear Kitty!

This is a venerable cat—a famous and beloved survivor. I had, somehow, momentarily forgotten.

This evidence of my own senility chills me.

Still worse?

I must apologize to Ellen.



Erwin Schrödinger, 1935, was the first to propose an experiment that intertwined zoology and quantum physics.

But Erwin—no ambiguity—is long dead. In the aftermath, five generations of investigators have extended his early suggestion. These investigators – investigators like Eva – have pioneered a myriad of new experiments, which dispense with the primitive equipment that Erwin first proposed.

No more boxes.



Legs, yes. *Of course* he has legs, and it is only now that I have picked him up in order to prove this to Erma that I realize what a terrible idea this is.

(Why had I forgotten?)

The cat is a shelter rescue. He is, at best, only one third tame. Erma smirks. The cat yowls. And I discover—again—that these same legs are tipped with claws.

I am unhappy. The cat is unhappy.

Erma is the only one who is happy.



“No,” I report to Evangeline.



Sometimes, though, I feel as if *I* am the one being experimented on.

I—never Esmeralda—am the one who picks up the cat.

Me.



But also “Yes.”



Legs?

It is a bizarre question. All the same, Elise goads me into investigating it. Nudging the animal with my head, I manage to overturn it, enough to see...

The cat slithers away. At the same time, I begin to understand that I have been pranked. And I admit to myself—though not to Elise—that I would not have been able to recognize what I was supposedly looking for.

Mythical modifications of a fish’s fins, which play fanciful roles in children’s stories? A sometimes-trope in a certain kind of science fiction story?

Legs?

When I turn my head, Elise’s tongue flicks mischievously.

I hiss her name. Then, rhythmically twitching myself, I race after her across the floor.

But she is faster.



See?



990-something...990-something....

999 legs?

No.

My face gets hot.

Just before a thousand, I always seem to falter.

“Start again,” Eudora suggests.



The fire always makes me sleepy.

Erica is explaining her research to me. Not only, she says, has she been able to access realities that are immediately adjacent to ours, but also realities that are staggeringly distant.

I nod. Fading...

I wake suddenly, to a sharp pain in my ribs and a high-pitched bleating. The pain is Erica, of course. But the sounds are being emitted by a writhing being, which is inexplicably emerging from our fire—an infinite tangle of alien appendages.

(But are they legs?)

“Would you mind looking at something?” Erica asks.



“Many experiments,” Elizabeth says, “enable us to explore this question from many angles.”
“That’s too many cats,” I crackle, from inside the grate.



I *miss* the earlier experiments—the way science was done, in The Golden Age of Physics. Tidy walls, which separated the experimenter and the experiment.

I miss the boxes.

“Eve,” I beg.

“Just look,” she says.



Above us, the ceiling fan whirs.

“Too many wildebeests,” I say to Esther.



Legs?

“Eight!” I shout.

What else could it have been?



“Too many Komodo dragons,” I say, as I spin above Eden, forcing the air to circle, as my blades do.

Around, around, around.



See?



The cat is bleeding out. Dear little life, and I can’t stop it, can’t hold it in, and I try to press it down, I try, stop, stop, stop, but instead I am flooded: warmth, too much, Kitty! Kitty!; smell of iron, smell of cold, hold on, I tell him, hold on, my furry little heart, but I can’t push anything back; I can’t stop it for him: flood and cold and no no no; *Don’t go cold, Kitty! Don’t go cold!*

Evelyn...

“*Why?*” I scream. “*Why would you cut off his legs?*”



Enid and I are litter mates. Beside us, the fire is exquisitely warm.

I am feeling enigmatic today. And perhaps a little belligerent. What is tucked beneath me—or not—will remain my secret.

Or so I imagine.

Enid grooms herself.

(This is never a good sign.)

I experience a sudden chill, together with a shadow. Between me and the fire, something large and incomprehensibly different now looms. It has no whiskers, no muzzle, and no tail.

“Count them,” Enid purrs.



“Too many Giant Pacific octopuses,” I say to Eunice.



The cats has two legs—long and human, exactly like mine. With shoes.

My shoes.

But who, then, has the cat’s legs?

“Look down,” says Eliana.



See?



Yes, no.

I am in a strange mood.

My smile feels both familiar and unfamiliar. My face, reflected in the glass that fronts the fire, is slightly disquieting. Even terrifying. It is as if...

Odd.

I am, at the same time, certain that I have never been so alive, so curious, or so committed to the resolution of an outstanding scientific question.

Have I ever felt so wonderful?

“But do you see them *now*?” I say to Margaret.





**ANGUS STEWART THE
CHEESHIRE
PLAIN**

My footprints in the grass, coffee creamer sky. A world to win. A bite of my apple. Waiting after it, boxed bramble berries needing eaten and peanut butter and jam wedged between bread and the fifteenth of too many fruit and nut bars to bear on my back without feeling the fool but I'm doing it. I'm loping through wild grass; scattering dew that falls to soak into mud mingled with memories of sheepshit, and I can't deny that I've had too much sugar, nor that I'm hoarding it. Everything suggests everything will run out eventually. The silver and forks are flogged and nothing suggests resurrection, and inside I'm smiling but outside poker-faced and bending along a curve (matching the maps in my head) to stay five metres flush with a flat treeline that doesn't peter out, suggesting manmade, suggesting concealment. A red sign further down the line confirms it. **PRIVATE**. Then smaller scrappy metal writing underneath that saying much the same but with threats. Including a fine. A fine. Can you imagine? So it's all guarding what? Unclear because can't tell how far back the wood extends, and there's a barbed wire fence in there – I can just make it out. Some stretches are down; others look patched with only half a heart.

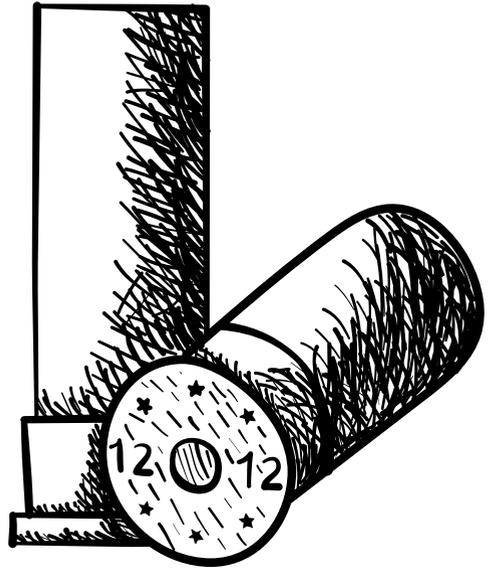
It's to be expected. You can't traverse the Golden Triangle safely if you think nobody owns it. (Gold is for the covetous, land is the lock.) I've found between Plumley and Puddinglake it's easiest to be a ghost, and the easiest way to be a ghost is to believe or at least entertain the idea that you are so. Already dead, little ahead. Transparent, indifferent. Can't stay, won't leave. God could be up there in the sky, judging, but even if he is it doesn't affect me. There's no fate or destination in my glorious encirclement campaign, which is more helix than circle really because to stay in one piece, revisions are necessary. Even today's venture has been shifting. There's a stream ahead in a fallow field...

(small but honestly quite beautiful, where sometimes you see frogs watching, and they're multiplying presently, and there are more birds, more birds in every acre too, but I expect the animals' fortunes will reverse when our shops complete the final restock, because then it's the animals we'll be eating, but in time they'll rebound and exponentialise when the human headcount starts to plummet – the lawns and hedgerows will all join up into an animal paradise when the fences come down; if you peer and close your eyes and think, if you cast far enough forward, you can discern the hazy shape of these event chains unspooling as if through glass, and you can't tell me that you can't)

...and after the stream, there's an active farm, with unchained dogs. I mentioned that every venture is shifting. Well, the farms – you need to go around them now. You don't get yelled at, you get mauled and shot. Right of way revoked, rescinded. Retrograde. Involution is the state at rest. And on telly and your phone it's reform on reform on reform on reform but don't you notice the only form is splinters, splintering into splinters splintering beneath the skin into poison pools like a nail-deep sunshine blister. But under the cream sky that might be disguising the watchers in heaven and powered by my stride I can afford to say it's all beautiful, all my new paths are beautiful because I have my wits and my will and it's fun to solve problems and to carve out roads for life in the world. It's lucid. Blacking out, one foot forward, then the next and so on. Blacking out. Hallucinating. And I'm me. Finally I'm me.

Thinking about that sign again. **PRIVATE**. Bleached red metal. Pointed wording in a fine serif. Not calligraphic but not mass produced either. Care and deliberation – sadly when you see them it's best to run. England's pathologies ferment out here. I start thinking about how I'd make an approach but can't because suddenly they're here and it's like I conjured them: a fanned-out party coming up from the slight curve in the slope that blocked my line of sight on the far end of the field. Another bite of my apple and I count a canopied quad bike with driver and riders, flanked by humans and a palette of labradors. And then a second with just one driver. A lot of women a bit like they've been collecting them, but everyone's clean and no hands are tied. All boots and wellies and a mixture of jackets. Shiny hair. Maybe they'll wave me on and for a long while it seems they will. On that other plane we walk past each other and nod. But on this plane apparently I'm a fox. Apparently this is what I deserve: cold countryware stares, and a shotgun pointing at me. Tasteful pine green. A shotgun pointing at me. A shotgun pointing at me. Two hours ago I was sat on a boulder counting my apples and daydreaming about one pint of ale. Only one. Now, a shotgun, pointing at me. Tasteful pine green jackets. Bits of Golden Delicious in my molars. Straining through my own earwax to catch words fired down the barrel.

The man yelling, turning puce. Yes, I'd like to kick his head. Just a tap. Just a few toe pokes would fulfill me. But in the same way that one ale would fill me. It's just raw desire and it passes through you. And now it's moot. Very very moot. I won't be booting anybody just yet. Need to smile and comply. Walk over. Kneel. Still smiling. Can't matter. Won't die, not today. Trapped in Cheshire, wandering in circles. Can't stay, won't leave. Explaining using mostly the truth that I'm doing a walk I memorised from a PDF five years ago. It's an old favourite that brings me peace and joy. Sharp images but by memory only 1.2mb large, so compressed quite effectively –

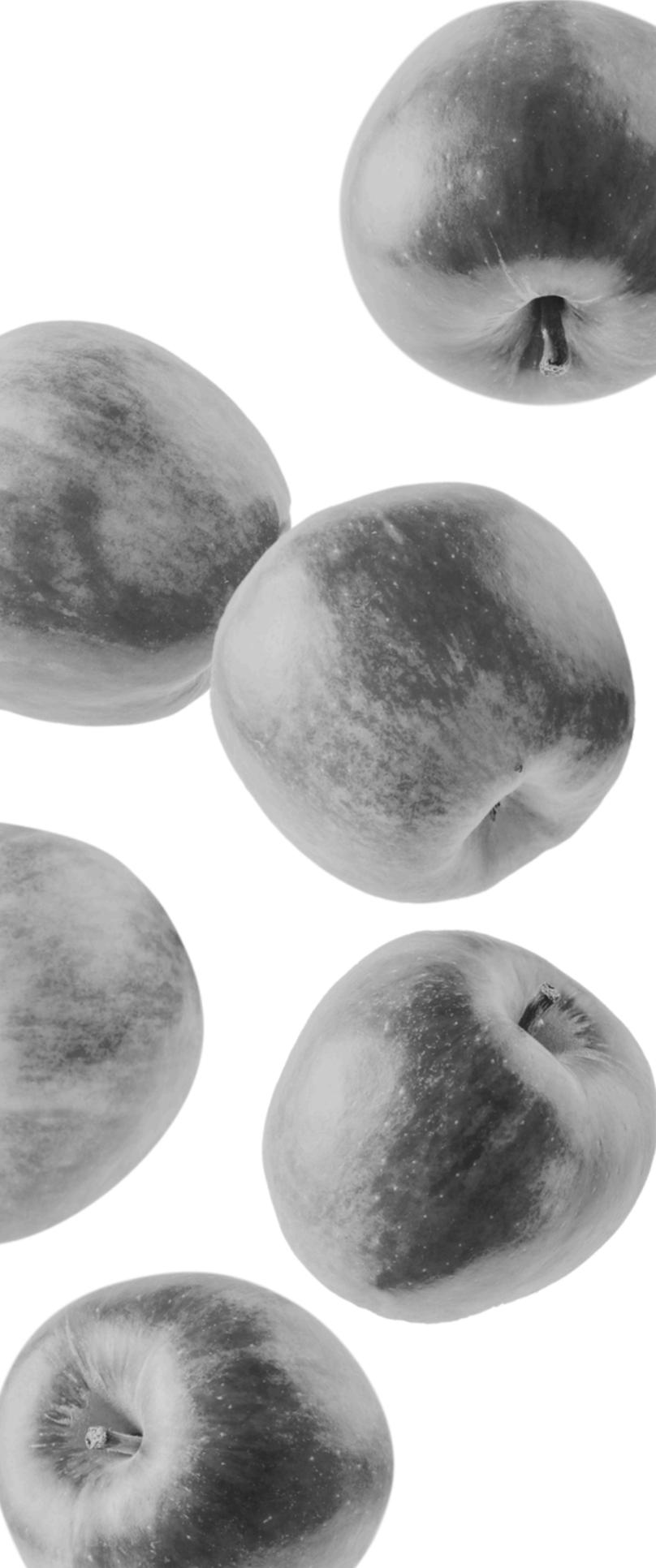


No I'm not up to anything. Certainly not lost. No I don't have a phone. It's getting harder and harder to charge them, isn't it, so instead of a phone for a brain I use my head. As a hard drive. Solid state. Drop proof. Not military tested but aren't we all tested now, tested nonetheless, tested every day by –

Fist to my face but the aim is poor so they don't wipe the smile off – it's just the apple that goes flying. Soft hands rummaging in my rucksack. Hands of a financier. Comments about my clothes. Laughing at me. So laugh back. It's my life. Laugh back through blood because I'm me. It's my world; I'm the empty space in the centre, I'm the coffee creamer. Fist in face again. This second blow's weaker but so am I so I spit out blood and fruit flecks and choke a little. My head's solid state silicon, I blether, and stay blethering along this line – but really I'm making a show of not looking at who's moving into view, because there's fresh shimmying down the field where the grass is longer. Not long enough to hide them – some mob in balaclavas. Not easy to tell if it's lads or veterans or who. Then just like that they're up and sprinting. Whether it's feud or a hunt who knows, and they go straight for the pine green shotgun mob and that works well enough that the shotgun fires just once before it's grappled and only three balaclavas go down and from that two get up again, and most of the labradors break running and at that blessing I'm loose and on the ground spasming through dew and dandelions, trying to play commando, imagining a blade clamped in my jaws. Funny how it's fragrant down here. Funny how you see the beetles making a break for it. Funny to see my apple lying to rot as I rise swaying.

Funniest of all to slough the bally from the dead boy and rove with his comrades into the treeline. After a second and third wave overtaking me I'm counting twenty plus of these warriors. Not more than forty. A writer born in Shanghai said something I heard once along the lines of: look around you, because all of this can be wiped away in five minutes. But then follow that idea logically. Consider that five minutes later, wipeout can come again. And again after that. You can keep on dynamiting but you'll never convert a particle into a wave, and a scrambled signal is still a signal. And reform and reform and reform. Splinter and dynamite and sprint headlong. What life will make of life is what you live. Can't stay, won't leave.

Funny to prance and bellow until we hit a path out of the woods and accelerate. Fast enough that some trip and fall flat. Fancy emerging to face a four-storey home, fortified, and there's noise suggesting another shotgun. It's not a manor but the half-hundred metres up the driveway over loose gravel would make you start questioning the definition, and we're keeping low and I'm glad the marcher lords of Cheshire have parked up so many cars modern and vintage because they're all decent cover, especially the four wheel drives, and you can dodge between them. I don't slam into the white ramparts first, I'm miles behind, so there's already a huge crack in the living room window when I get there, and I'm at the breach grinning then slinking through without a cut but there's apple in my molars right where I don't want it and I rummage and grumble and deeper in the house there's fracas loud enough to suggest there's a primed phalanx of wives and investors waiting. Hint of a twitching balaclava in the hallway; one boy sent to heaven. Then another, sliding backward down the vanished staircase. But here in the living room, focusing on the immediate, shutting out the warzone, there's an ornate painting of a lady impaled by candlelight and an arch fit for an elephant leading to the next room. Two chambers linked. No, it's a mirror. I'm standing inside it. Enchantment. Rapture. Apoptotic electricity telling me to spring and sprint, whether into the mirror or battle, whichever. But I can't stay. But I won't leave. Thundering cuckoo clock and a Persian rug hiding who knows what. Sliding door, sweetie jar and a skull cabinet and here and there a brown bottle with beetles floating preserved but this aspect I may be exaggerating in my state of cellular arousal. Swivel eyes land on a lidless tin balanced on the edge of a study desk so laden with familiar ephemera that it aches – how could clutter in a random scatter seem purposed to recall an era in miniature, a museum for dusty tamagotchi and camcorders with their tape hanging loose, rotten? Years ago I was a boy in school collecting pebbles. Months ago, I had something passing for a job, and my own bed inside a building. Now in my happy ramblings I've pranced into this mess. Can't stay, won't leave. I stick a hand out in the hallway. There are still gunshots. Fancied risking a finger. Gunshots, but no bullets. No shrapnel scarring the queer sunflower wallpaper out there, stalks bending improbably and a too much black ratioed against the yellow, and I can't see anyone but I hear burbling pipes and slamming doors and more. They must all be slaughtering



each other upstairs. But why is there the head of an owl carved into the ceiling's radial centre, and where are its eyes, and who would install a spout fountain in a hallway that can barely hold the arc, and is the thudding iron clock counting down even on nonsense like this, and why don't I run for the next door, small and ajar to darkness to suggest the refuge and plunder of a cellar?

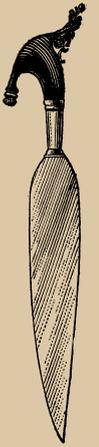
Darting for the door and spitting more blood and appleflesh. Then turning. Actually, this is not me. Outside is me. I want the open air. I want to see the sky, and in fifteen paces and a push through the ivyclad entranceway I have it and in another fifteen I reckon, wrongly, that I'm safe. Back to the foot of the white ramparts, gasping in gorgeous pints of air. Distant branches in the wind, singing, and I think I can hear grinding wheels on the Mid-Cheshire line. The trains still run – they do – but it's well known they often have to stop and wait for cows, sheep, and deer. And fractures in the metal. Struck hard by a memory of drinks before Plumley Station, surfacing now of all times. I am in the open air among strangers. Sitting in the sun, alone on a beer garden bench, ignoring all the families and children desperate for a good time between the last crisis and the next, and me sodden with sweat, justified by my salary not to kill the limited resource of time but surrender it like a balloon to the air. Freedom. Justified by not thinking about where everything was going but knowing beneath my skin I was ready to orbit and wander and stroll and march to be free in a new way. Planting a seed no doubt that would grow to see me orbit Plumley and the like in a new way. Present circumstances suggesting a way newer still:

forking paths to new worlds depending on my next string of choices but evidently the possibilities prove too enchanting because I don't see what hits me harder than anything ever before, than anything in my life, in the head, and I'm down crawling again and then not even that, pouring spit and foam. Hard drive fracture; stuttering CPU. Coughing blood again through the foam and this time there's pips.

You'd grow the strangest tree. And I'm choking hard. But still crawling, crawling toward sunlight. Water glimmering on a canal-way path. Peering up gardens with jetties into other lives, wondering if they are still lives of security and satisfaction – wondering if those residents hear the churn and tick of the great iron clock. Down a curving tarmac hill past a holy well. Skirting a chapel. Dodging cameras and staggering around vehicles but it's a better life than I've ever known and the perversity of admitting this is sour, sweet, bitter, it stings, but like traversing the grass in sunlight the feeling cannot be shared. Hiking boots, stolen, fitting perfectly, and the cool aluminium shield of a cherry bakewell in one's palm cannot really be summarised. It's the transition between imagined planets. Considering light playing on water, loaded decades ago into a green plastic gun. Craving, but not anything. Just craving. You want it to last forever. How long? How long can I sustain it? How long can I keep on playing? How deep can you swim in oil? How deep can you swim in ash? I want to play and frolic and I don't want to die and I am not blind – I can see what's happening but I want to stay and play. But you can't stay. But you won't leave. But how long until neither the land nor the people can take it any more? And the stone floor falls away? And the grass is cinder and there's starvation not just in Northwich but in Knutsford too and with it a caste of leaders we can kill and how long until the last bastion of heaven lies abandoned and burning and we stare and ask if there remains any means to measure the extent of world left to win?

Stuttering CPU. Wheezing out splinters of stalk and core. Rising again. Back somehow in the hallway, alone, and I'm rising to cross it to reach the little door that I rightly suspected would open to a cellar stairway. Closing it behind me. Proceeding downward, feeling the wall. Feeling it all the way down. Shaky steps but they grow sturdier, down into night, into what I feared might have been abyss but after half an hour my feet reach evidence of a field. Dry dirt and grass. Damp on my skin, but no dew. No sun but light, somehow, cast in nonspecific splinters. All the grass and fences and black bramble branches shifting in the wind, and the threads of oxidised iron are cold when I cross them. The distant moaning of beasts; surely livestock. All in a vast plain, beneath Cheshire.





“Papa, someone got shot!”

Quick as anything, Papa is already slinging on his bolo and putting on his boots—a mismatched pair, their respective partners claimed by bad luck. I bolt out of the house, down the mountain slope, and into the thick of the forest, knowing without looking back that he will be right behind me.

Even now, I count the trees with lichen growing on their trunks, because Papa told me their presence means the air is good. Even now, I listen for the call of the birds, because Papa told me their songs carry the voice of the reserve. A celebration. A change. A calamity.

Even now, I remember all of Papa’s teachings, because one day I will be the protector.

I stop when we reach our destination: a patch of the forest where the bigger, more sought-after trees grow. Papa pulls out his bolo, a dull piece of metal that can only intimidate from afar instead of inflict any real harm.

But there is no one else here. The air is still; the birds are silent.

There are, however, five bullet casings on the ground, smudged by time and the elements, yet nonetheless visible.

I gather them into my hands, careful not to disturb the fading prints of a pair of mismatching boots, and hold them up like flowers for Papa to see.

“You did it, Papa. They didn’t cut down any trees.”

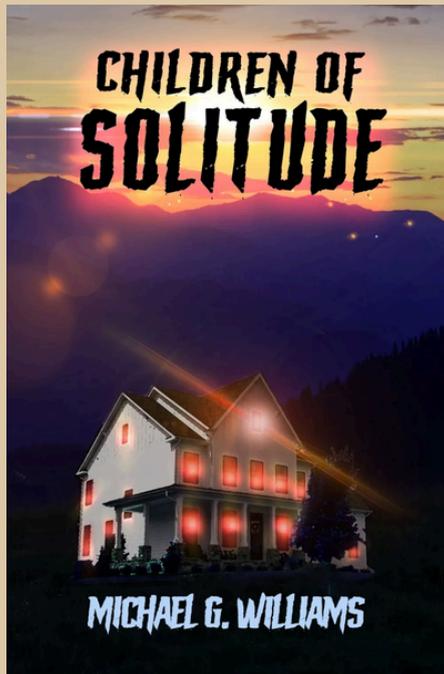
He looks down at them, and slowly, a smile forms on his lips—just as five blooms of crimson form on the front of his shirt.

Soon, he disappears like morning fog.

I put the bullets back where I found them. They are like seeds. They are like nails.

I think Papa will come back again. He has been coming back for a while now. I will be ready for him.

And when he finally does not come back, I will be ready for that, too.



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PRAISE FOR *CHILDREN OF SOLITUDE*

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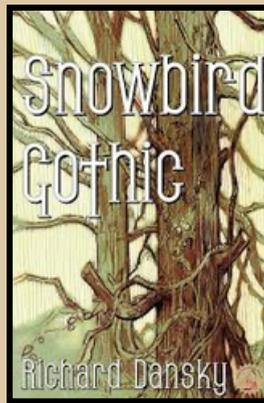
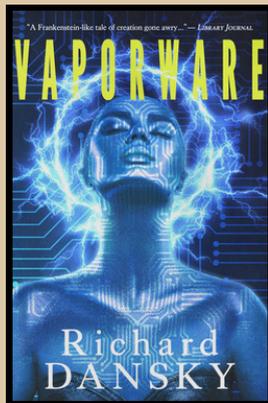
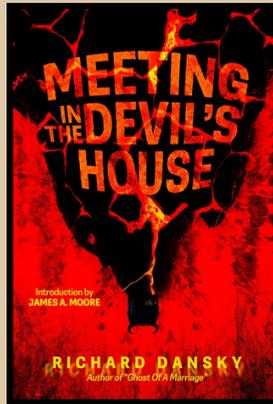
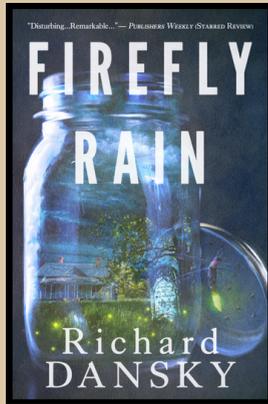
Michael co-hosts *Arcane Carolinas* and *Data@Rest*, studied Performance Studies at UNC Chapel Hill and Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University, and is a brother in St. Anthony Hall and Mu Beta Psi. He lives in North Carolina with his husband and a variety of animals.



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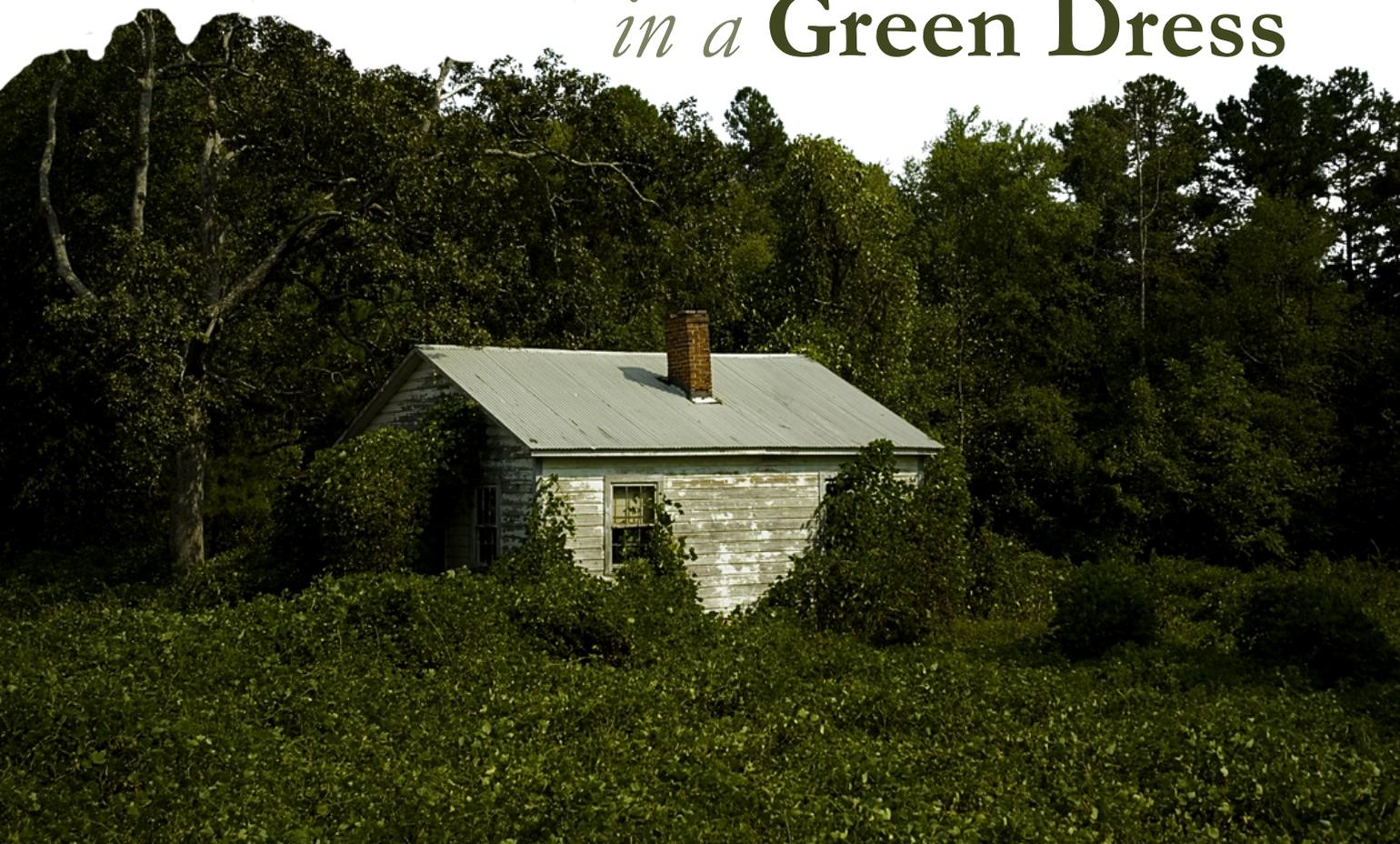
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MATTHEW HAND
HOTHOUSE BLOSSOM
in a Green Dress



The kudzu had been there longer than the house, scaling the porch rail, coiling tight around each post, dense with leaves and blossoms that smelled faintly of old peaches and sweet sweat. Out by the chicken coop—what was left of it—the vines had swallowed the rusted wire whole, tangling the door in a net of green so thick even the hens no longer tried to roost. The bees still hovered like drunk zeppelins above the pale green blooms, heavy with the sun and slow as syrup.

Letha, thirteen, sat in the shade of a proud oak. Her dusty bare feet were drawn beneath her, *Jane Eyre* open in her lap; soft and curled at the corners, smelling of stale pipe smoke and the lavender pressed flowers she used as a bookmark. The book was a prop for her daydreaming while her mother shifted sounds from inside the house, boiling bark and bitter root into mason jars that she would label *For Cough*, *For Bleeding*, *For the Restless Mind*.

Letha read the same paragraph three times without moving her eyes.

From the open kitchen window came the clatter of jars and the low hum of a hymn, one her mother sang only while working with herbs that stung the skin. Something about sparrows and blood.

There was no car in the yard. There hadn't been one since the mule died and her father followed six months later, pinned under the crumbled chimney during a storm that had left the fields unfit for cotton. The road that passed their place was red clay, wide enough for a truck but mostly used by deer. The mailbox leaned like it was ashamed.

There had once been brothers—twins—but both were born too early and buried under the walnut tree without names. Letha had a memory of white cloth and red clay and the sound of her mother digging through frozen earth with a spade.

Her mother called her blessed. Said the Lord had spared her from the world so she could grow straight and unbruised. "A hothouse blossom," she'd said once, smoothing Letha's hair. "Best kept from frost and foul hands."

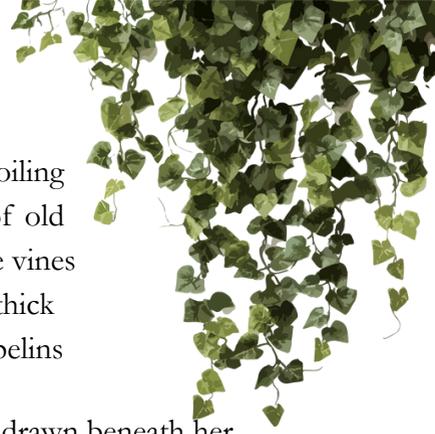
Letha had learned not to ask questions. But in secret, she wrote them down. In verse, mostly, because rhyme soothed the burn. She kept the poems in a blue flour tin under the porch steps. A few were about her mother. More were about hands and mouths and the feeling of teeth just before a kiss. She didn't know where those poems came from. They showed up in dreams and woke her flushed and frightened.

A sweat bee buzzed past her cheek, and she slapped at it without looking up.

In the distance, a trail of dust rose up from the road, just a whisper at first, then thickening into a cloud of smoke. Letha blinked, squinting into the light. No one came down this way in summer. Not unless they were lost or selling something.

She shut the book, marked the page with pressed lavender, and listened to the screen door creak open behind her.

Her mother's voice, sharp and low. "Someone's comin'. Go fetch the jug and stand tall."



The truck rattled once, backfired, and coughed into the yard like a dying thing given one last breath. It was a pale yellow Ford with a dented door, busted fender, and no license plate, the paint sun-faded to the color of old bones. Kudzu vines clung to the undercarriage like they'd tried to stop it from leaving wherever it had come from.

The man behind the wheel stepped out slow—deliberate—like someone used to being watched. He wore a linen suit the color of wet ash and white shoes that should've been ruined by the dust. His shirt collar was open, revealing a throat gone ruddy with sun, and he had a preacher's haircut—slicked down and squared at the sides. Under one arm he carried a scuffed metal suitcase. Etched on the lid in flaking gold paint were the words:

 *RELIQUARIES & DEVOTIONS* 
Binding Ceremonies Performed

He smiled when he saw Letha. Not wide. Just enough to show the suggestion of teeth and a curious kind of reverence.

“Ma’am,” he said, nodding toward the porch where her mother now stood, arms crossed and expression hard as cast iron.

Her mother didn't smile. “Don't want none,” she said, but didn't go back inside.

“That's the beauty of it,” the man said, tapping the suitcase gently. “A gift. No cost but commitment.”

He turned to Letha then. Held her gaze like a lantern held up to a dark room.

“You're the girl in the green dress,” he said softly.

Letha looked down. She wore her plain cotton shift, pale mint, faded and damp with sweat under the arms. No one had ever called it a dress before. No one had ever noticed it at all.

“She ain't interested,” her mother said, stepping down onto the porch, jar still in hand.

But the man didn't break his gaze. “I offer a ceremony. A sacred binding. For the chosen.”

“What kind of binding?” Letha asked, the words surprising her own tongue.

The man smiled like he'd been waiting for her voice.

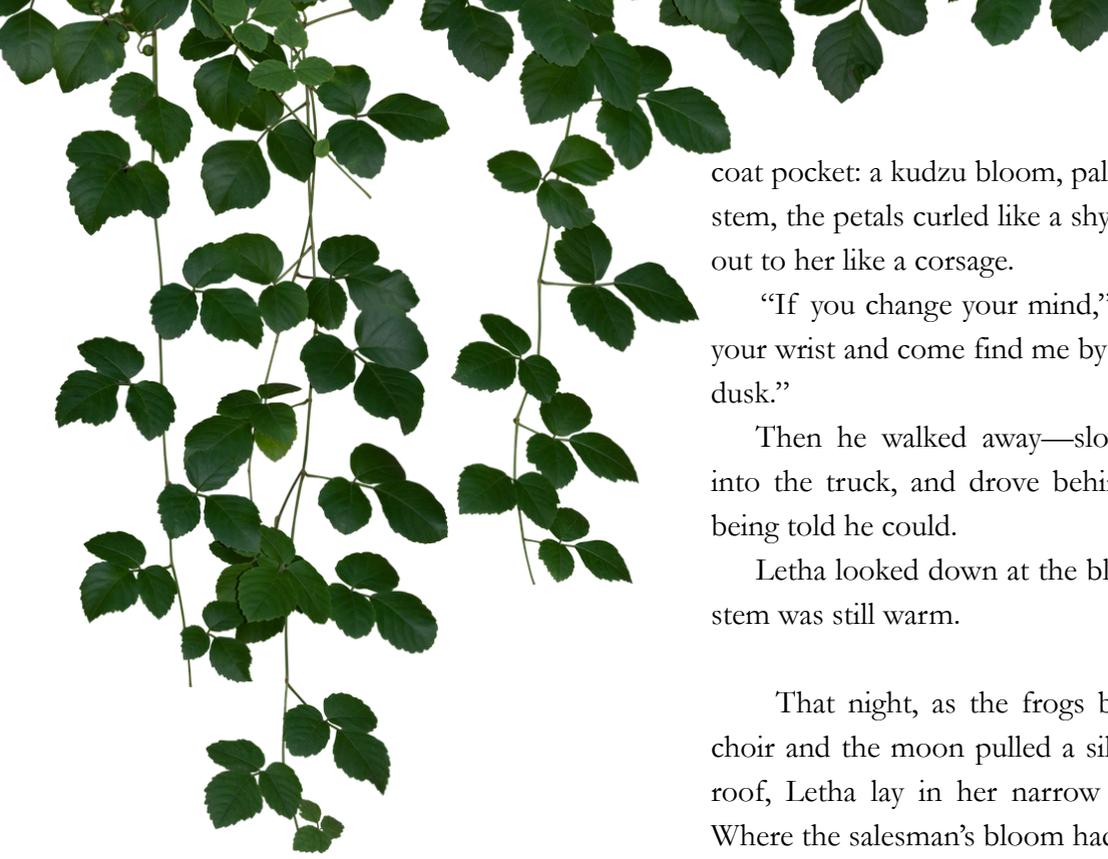
“A devotion,” he said. “You bind something of yours—something true—and it blooms. I've performed the rite in Macon, in Rome, down by the prison farms. Girls who had no voice now sing. Some call it healing. I call it harvest.”

Her mother made a noise like a scoff and stepped between them. “You'll get off this land before I get my gun. No such thing as magic in a root.”

The man didn't flinch. He bowed slightly, but it felt more like a curtain call than an apology.

“I mean no harm. I offer no threat.” He looked again to Letha. “Only invitation.”

He observed the desolate landscape, the earth-worn habitat in which the daughter and mother dwelled, chuckled mildly, then turned to leave, but not before pulling something from his



coat pocket: a kudzu bloom, pale green, still wet at the stem, the petals curled like a shy girl's hand. He held it out to her like a corsage.

"If you change your mind," he said, "wear this at your wrist and come find me by the broken coop after dusk."

Then he walked away—slow, assured—got back into the truck, and drove behind the house without being told he could.

Letha looked down at the bloom in her hand. The stem was still warm.

That night, as the frogs began their long, slow choir and the moon pulled a silver line across the tin roof, Letha lay in her narrow bed, wrist throbbing.

Where the salesman's bloom had touched her skin, a faint green mark now curved like a bracelet just beneath the surface. It wasn't a bruise—it shimmered faintly when she held it to the lamplight, like something still alive. The skin was hot to the touch, but not tender and not unpleasant. When she pressed her thumb against it, she felt something pulse back.

She didn't tell her mother. When asked why she'd left her supper untouched, she said she had a touch of heat sickness. Her mother narrowed her eyes and muttered something about "the devil living in shade and silence."

That night Letha dreamed in color: green lace undulating like underwater seaweed, mouths opening within leaves, vines curling in shapes that looked almost like flesh. She awoke before dawn with damp thighs and the taste of something wild and coppery on her tongue.

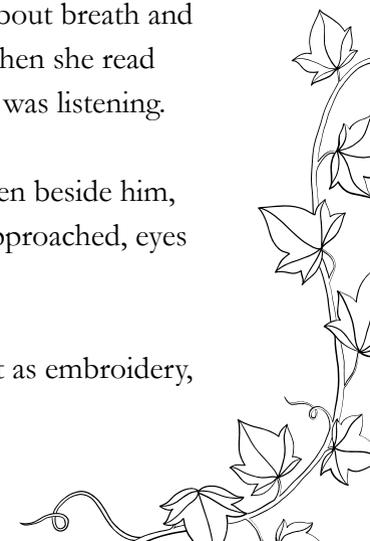
The poems came different after that. She didn't write them in the flour tin anymore. She couldn't. Her hands shook when she held a pen, and the words rushed out too fast for ink. Instead, she carved them with a pocketknife into the underside of the porch slats—lines about breath and binding, about flowers with teeth, about a man whose mouth was full of roots. When she read them aloud, quietly, under her breath, the kudzu outside the window stirred like it was listening.

Three days passed. Then the salesman returned.

She found him seated on the broken door of the chicken coop, his suitcase open beside him, the inside lined with purple velvet and delicate compartments. He smiled as she approached, eyes slipping to her wrist as if he already knew what he'd find.

"Let's see it," he said softly.

She hesitated, then held her arm out. The imprint had deepened—now distinct as embroidery,



the green winding tighter than a bracelet. A single tendril had split from the ring and begun to snake up her forearm.

“You’re blooming,” he said, voice rich as honey. “A vessel opening. Do you feel it?”

Letha nodded, though she wasn’t sure what she felt, only that she wanted more of it.

He reached into the suitcase and removed a small glass jar, sealed with wax and tied with red thread. Inside, a sap the color of muddled mint swirled thickly. He held it to the light. It caught the sun in a way that made her mouth water.

“This is pure,” he said. “Pressed from the oldest roots. It knows what to do.”

“What is it?”

“A quickening. A sacrament. Let it run through you, and the words won’t just come—you’ll become them. The body and the voice, indivisible.”

He held the jar toward her like communion.

Letha reached for it with her marked hand. As her fingers touched the glass, a jolt passed through her like someone had struck a tuning fork in her spine. She gasped, then laughed—too loudly—and pressed the jar against her chest, afraid it might disappear.

Behind them, the vines on the coop shifted, not in the breeze—there was no breeze—but like something stretching in anticipation.

“I can give you more,” the salesman said. “But only if you promise to finish what you started.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Letha whispered.

He leaned close, his lips nearly at her ear, the humidity of his breath experienced.

“Yes, you do.”



By the following week the green bracelet had thickened into a living braid. Flesh on either side puckered black-purple, as though frost-bitten, yet the vine itself thrummed with warmth. Tiny shoots—pale as newborn fingernails—sprouted from the wound and unfurled minuscule leaves that tickled when they touched her skin.

At dawn Letha crept to the pump, braced her arm against the wood block her mother used for splitting kindling, and pressed the kitchen paring knife to the vine. The blade slid in—but the cut only parted for a heartbeat before knitting closed again, a bead of milky sap sealing it fast. When she tried sawing deeper, the knife rang like it had struck wire; a pain shot to her shoulder, electric and scalding. She dropped the blade, choking back a scream. Where steel had touched, the vine blossomed—three delicate buds popping open, exhaling a breath of sugar-rot perfume.

That night, thunder rolled low and distant. It had been a week since he came and let his presence be known, but the itinerant salesman returned as the first drops began to fall. Ashen and weathered, he played upon Letha's mother's sympathies, claiming he'd been caught between towns

and feared the road would wash out. Her mother, after a hard stare and a mumbled scripture, acquiesced. Letha lay awake until the house settled, then slipped outside, wrist pulsing in time with the cricket choir.

The barn smelled of moldy hay and rain-soaked creosote. Lightning licked the sky, illuminating the salesman's silhouette on a pile of feed sacks—hat pulled low, suitcase beside him like a guard dog. When his breathing deepened into a rough-edged snore, Letha eased the latches.

Inside, quilted velvet cradled its prizes. The first layer held two small feet—girl's feet—skin parchment dry, nails painted bubble-gum pink, each ankle wrapped in a halo of kudzu that had rooted through the flesh like embroidery thread. Beneath them, a man's hand severed mid-forearm, wedding band still on, vines braided around the ring finger like a lover's grip. Lower still: a row of children's hands, palms turned upward as if begging alms, green tendrils sprouting between the knuckles.

A wet sound gathered at the back of her throat. She tried to step away, but her own vine tightened, drawing her closer. In the case's deepest well lay a single arm—pale, nearly her size, severed clean at the shoulder. From the stump burst a spray of kudzu blossoms the exact shade of her dress.

Lightning flashed again. In that stark white glare the flowers seemed to move—petals breathing, seeds trembling, as though waiting for her to speak the right word.

Behind her, the salesman whispered, voice silked with delight.

“I knew you'd come looking, Letha. All the best disciples do.”



She spun, the suitcase clanging shut. He stepped forward, barefoot, shirtless, torso crisscrossed with scars that looked suspiciously like grafted vines. His eyes glowed a fever-bright green.

“Now,” he said, opening his arms as though to embrace her, “let us finish the harvest.”



The next morning, the rain still falling in soft, steady sheets, Ruth found her daughter kneeling in the red mud behind the barn. Letha’s nightdress clung to her like wet tissue, the sleeve torn clean away. Her left arm, from wrist to shoulder, was no longer wholly human. The skin had split in places, veins replaced with rootlines, bark-thick and pulsing. Tiny green leaves unfurled from her elbow like epaulets. The kudzu bloom at her shoulder had opened wide, dripping sap that smelled like bruised lilies and rust.

Letha looked up, her face slack with fever and something deeper—rapture, maybe. “He says I’m almost ready,” she whispered. “One more night and I’ll be whole.”

Ruth didn’t speak. She went back into the house, opened the apothecary chest, and drew a small bottle marked *Digitalis – For Strong Hearts*. Then she took her father’s hammer from under the sink and walked back into the rain.

The salesman stood barefoot in the barn doorway, shirt hanging open. When he saw her approach, he smiled.

“Sister,” he said. “A vessel is a holy thing. The vine only fills what’s offered.”

Ruth’s voice came low and clear. “You brought this rot to my girl.”

He didn’t deny it. Instead, he lifted his arms and let the shirt fall away. From between his shoulder blades, vines sprouted—twisting ropes that curved upward, heavy with blossoms, like the false wings of a saint in a carnival pageant. The kudzu moved faintly, breathing with him.

“Don’t you see?” he murmured. “She chose this. She’s flowering.”

Ruth uncorked the bottle and stepped close. “And you’ll be with her to the end. That’s scripture.”

She threw the contents in his face. The foxglove tincture sizzled on his skin like acid. He staggered backward, eyes rolling, vines spasming like struck snakes. She swung the hammer once, hard, and he dropped.

She didn’t check if he was dead. She ran.

Letha had collapsed beside the coop, whispering to something only she could see. Her breath came in short bursts, her skin glowing green at the edges, her left eye milky with sap. The vine had reached her collarbone.

Ruth carried her inside, laid her on the kitchen table, and strapped her down with leather belts used for birthing seizures. Letha didn’t resist. She smiled, dreamy, lips forming half-verses:

“Split me, break me, let the light...
through root and bone, I rise tonight...”

The arm was no longer hers. Ruth knew that. It twitched on its own, fingers writhing like worms. She fetched the cleaver from the butcher block, kissed Letha's forehead, and whispered, "God forgive me."

The blade came down.

A scream split the air, high and inhuman—but not from Letha's mouth. From the wound burst a mass of green: slick tendrils, pulsing shoots, white blossoms opening midair. They spilled across the table in a wet hiss, crawling toward the light like newborn things.

Letha convulsed, eyes wide, back arched. She gasped a string of words that were neither prayer nor poetry, but something older—words Ruth didn't know but somehow understood. Then she went still.

The vines twitched once more, then curled into themselves and stopped.

Ruth sank to her knees beside the table, cleaver clattering to the floor. Her hands shook. Her breath came shallow.

Letha's severed arm lay beside the sink, still blooming.



The rain thickened as morning came on, falling in rhythmic pulses against the tin roof, soft as a lullaby and just as cruel. The light through the window was bruised gray, and the smell in the kitchen—copper, earth, and honeysuckle rot—clung to every surface.

Ruth knelt beside the table, her apron soaked through with her daughter's blood, her knees aching against the warped wood floor. Her hands were clasped in prayer, but the words had gone thin and cracked in her throat. She wept without sound, head bowed to the ruined world she had tried to save.

Above her, Letha lay still—arm gone, chest rising in shallow waves, the stump wrapped in bloodied linens already darkening with spreading green. Around her, the vines lay slack, curling gently like sleeping serpents. A few blossoms clung to the corners of the table; most had begun to fall, silent and slow, dropping one by one like pale green petals onto the floor.

The air shifted.

Ruth's eyes snapped open.

Letha stirred. Her breath caught, then exhaled in a long, whispering sigh. She opened her eyes.

The irises were gone—replaced by a flat, luminous white that pulsed faintly, like a cloud-lit moon. She looked at her mother, and for a moment Ruth thought she smiled.

The stump on her shoulder flexed.

It moved: the bandaged wound rose and fell in a steady cadence, as if it were breathing on its own. Beneath the gauze, something throbbed, a wet and eager life just under the skin.

Then Letha's mouth parted.



From the back of her throat came a rustling, dry and soft, like leaves dragging across the floor. A trickle of tiny seeds spilled over her tongue—green-flecked, glistening, each the size of a teardrop. They poured slowly at first, then faster, peppering the wood with tiny wet clicks as they rolled from her lips and over the edge of the table.

Ruth did not move.

The seeds pattered onto her lap. Onto her hands. One caught in the crevice between her palms, nestled like a pearl.

She looked up at her daughter, whose eyes still shone that pale, holy white.

And Ruth whispered, hoarse and shaking, “Lord, make something good of her.”

Outside, the kudzu stirred on the hills, listening.



CAMILLE BARRICHELLO

THE CORDON



*One of the first things you learn out here is that the ghost ships aren't what you think they are.
Not even close.*

Everyone I know thinks I am dead now. As far as I know, I might be dead at any moment.



It had been just over a week since Julien crossed the cordon.

At first, one side looked just like the other, if you didn't count the warning signs nailed to the trees and the chain Julien had to duck under. They wondered, idly, why there was no greater physical barrier, if it was so dangerous out here. It was just more forest, more ferns, more rocks, more fir and hemlock needles underfoot, more drizzle dripping off the salal leaves. Birds still called, at first. Underbrush still rustled as small mammals got out of the way of the heavy footsteps of a human.

By design, the cordon was about a day's walk from the coast. It had not been morning anymore by the time Julien reached it, so they had made camp in the woods that first night, not reaching the water. They slept well enough, but it seemed quieter—or maybe that was just their imagination. Or maybe it was just because it was nighttime, or just because it was early morning. Whatever the reason, the sudden caw of a crow startled Julien enough that they dropped their coffee cup, spilling its contents into the moss.

Don't be an idiot, they told themselves. You've been camping before, for god's sake. But they were on edge, and after they packed up their campsite and started walking again, it seemed like everything was a sign. Animal sounds lessening. The breeze kicking up, or dying out. The mist thickening, rather than thinning, as the day went on.

Julien could see ahead as far as a few more trees, until they couldn't. They worried for a moment that they had steered wrong, had left what remained of an old trail, and were about to step off a cliff, but the dirt and leaf rot and brown tree needles underfoot suddenly changed to pebbles, and they knew they had reached the beach. A couple steps more, and the mist cleared.

The beach looked like any other beach around there. Mostly rocks instead of sand, slowly rotting logs, tide pools. The ocean, unbroken by waves on this still day, reflecting what the sky would have looked like if it was blue. Headlands curved to both sides, although as far as Julien recalled, the cordoned area extended beyond them for some miles in either direction. And then, ahead, nothing. Just the sea, thousands and thousands of miles of it.

On the other side of the ocean were other countries. Some were rich and some were poor, and some were pleasant to live in and some were not, and some were so difficult to live in that the people there were willing to risk a long and arduous sea journey to leave them. A few boats arrived on this side, and the people on the boats were whisked away under cover of night, to start new lives that they hoped would someday improve on the ones they left behind.

Politicians, of course, made hay of this. *Immigration Scandal!* shouted the headlines. *An Invasion on the Coast!* But the real problem was not the few hundred people who landed, moved to the cities, and started working at miserable, low-paying jobs to pay off their voyage. The real problem was that many more ships had landed. The real problem was that no one on them was alive.



At first, the cordon was described in the press as a necessary measure to keep the water border secure. Strictly an immigration thing. The cordoned area was remote, anyway, and the regular citizen wouldn't know that there weren't actually police or officials stationed along it.

Hell, Julien considered himself to be something of an expert on the cordon—their friends might have said an obsessive—and even they hadn't realized it was just a chain strung between trees and a bunch of signs. But word started to get out eventually that it wasn't just to catch people coming off the boats.

No one was sure how. Who had been out there and lived? Everyone agreed, at least, that nothing was getting *out*, so as long as no one went in, either, everyone stayed safe. But somehow, everyone knew, and eventually the government had to admit it. Yes, they said, there had been several ship landings where no living passengers were on board. A terrible tragedy. For everyone's safety, the area has been closed off. Disease could be a factor and we wouldn't want anyone getting sick. Chemicals, perhaps. Environmental concerns. And surely the remains of the boats—they never went as far as saying “ghost ships”—were unsafe as well. Better to keep the public well away.

Julien wasn't the public. Julien was—

“—an *idiot*,” they muttered to themselves. “What am I *doing* out here?” Their hand was bleeding, a scrape against a barnacle-covered rock, and that wouldn't normally have been enough to elicit this kind of vitriol at their own stupidity, but things were different after a week beyond the cordon.

They pressed the cut against the side of their sweater, hoping it would soak up the blood. Hoping no errant drops had fallen on the ground. Hoping the cut being exposed to the very air wasn't going to cause anything.

They had learned by hard experience not to be sure of anything, out here.

Got cut again. Don't think anything got out this time. Managed to bandage it up back at camp pretty quick, but now I'm worrying: did anything get in?

It's later tonight. Ok. Now I'm pretty sure. Something did get in, and I don't know how to get it out. Short of standing out in the rain with my hand out, the only water to wash with is the ocean, and I'm not touching that again. But this is different than the last time. I can't describe it on paper. But it's the difference between outside and inside.

Their journal entries were getting shorter and more cryptic. In the first couple of days, they had been writing long paragraphs describing their whole day, what they saw, what they felt, what they thought might be connected to what. But as the days went on, they wrote less, and what they wrote was recursive, in reminders and references.

That night, in the tent, Julien writhed, hallucinating and in pain, but they did their best to keep silent. They had seen what happened if they yelled.

It had been the second or third day. The mist had lifted, for once, and it wasn't raining, or just finished raining, or was about to rain. Julien was clambering over the boulders at the base of the southern headland, hoping they could get around it at low tide and not have to climb up the cliff or take a long detour through the forest.

So far, they hadn't met with anything more unusual than a surprising lack of birds and animals, and, that morning, the sight of a ghost ship bobbing, listing over on its side, just beyond the end of the bluff. It was startling, but not surprising: it was what they came to see, after all.

They hoped they could get a closer look from around the point. They didn't quite dare to hope they could get on board.

This was what they were doing when their foot slipped.

Like anyone would, they let out an exclamation of alarm; they didn't think anything of it, and scrambled back to the top of the boulder. Danger averted! They hadn't fallen, or twisted an ankle, or knocked their head on the side of a rock. But this was a misunderstanding of the nature of the situation.

It came more quickly than Julien could have anticipated, although they didn't know what to anticipate. They had barely regained their footing on top of the rock when a strong gust of wind knocked them on their ass.

"Where'd that come from?" they grumbled to themselves, as they picked themselves up. But as soon

they were upright, another blast of wind seared through and knocked them down again. “Okay, what is this?”

They tried a tentative foot on the rock. No wind. Planted the opposite knee. Still nothing. Pushed up to a standing position—and there it was. Right back down.

“Okay,” they said. “So you want me to sit down. So I’m sitting down. What now?” They felt a bit stupid talking to the wind, or to nothing, but it wasn’t worse than talking to themselves, they figured.

Another gust, less strong. Icy cold. Julien spotted movement out ahead and realized that the ship had righted itself, more or less, and come most of the way past the headland. They knew, in the way that you know that fire is hot, that the wind had done that, too.

Suddenly, Julien was rummaging in their layers for the binoculars they had strung around their neck. Something was moving on that ship. Something was moving!

Julien’s mind leapt from possibility to possibility, rejecting them all. No one could still be alive on that boat. Look at it. It had been here for months. No one else could have come out here and climbed aboard, there would have been signs of some other human being, a car out by the cordon, footprints, anything. Maybe a seal, or something? But how— never mind. It wasn’t a seal, or anyone living, and they knew that in their bones. Their bones, which were starting to thrum as if they were standing next to the speakers at a concert.

Finally they got the binoculars disentangled from their lanyard and out from under their jacket and were able to peer through them. When they got them focused and aimed properly, they nearly dropped them again.

It was people on the ship after all. Not, however, living people.

The people were in various states of decay. They shouldn’t have been able to stand upright, but they were. The motion Julien had noticed was all of them suddenly turning their heads, in unison, to stare directly at Julien. Their eyes were red, but not the red of blood. Julien knew they had been spotted, that the corpses on the ship could see them, even from that far away. The corpses didn’t move, now that their heads were turned to face Julian—some at unnatural, impossible angles, as if their bodies were frozen still and only their heads could move. Julien didn’t want to test this theory, though, and scrambled back down the rock and away back over the beach to their campsite, blessedly unpursued by wind or ship.

Don’t yell. Don’t draw attention to yourself. This had been the first lesson.



After this, Julien was much more careful. They hadn't attracted the attention of a ghost ship before—and they did think of it as catching the *ship's* attention, rather than that of the bodies on it—but they did their best to keep quiet, even back near camp.

They started seeing more ships. They drifted across the bay, all looking as if they were one big wave from sinking, but they never did, even on choppy days. The first time one of these ships hove into sight, Julien froze. They stayed stock-still until it floated past the headland and out of sight. The next time, though, Julien was in the middle of fixing breakfast, struggling to keep the camp stove lit in the persistent drizzle, and didn't notice until they looked up and saw the ship, huge, hulking, rusted clear through in some places, the deck canted to one side. Skeins of mist trailed from its uprights and antennae. It was close. Julien wasn't sure how it could get that close and still get back out. Was it going to beach itself right in front of Julien's tent? Julien held their breath for what seemed like about twenty minutes, but somehow the ship drifted back out into the current and along the coast.

No one had looked at them this time. Julien wasn't even sure if there had been anyone on board. So it seemed like moving around was all right.

It wasn't long before Julien learned what wasn't.

Fucked up real bad. It was yesterday and I still don't want to think about it, but I have to get it down on paper so I can know for sure later that I didn't imagine it. Ugh. Here goes.

Let's be honest: I was doing something stupid. I should not have tried to get so close. But there was another boat in the bay, and the last one hadn't bothered me, so I thought maybe the problem was where I was going, and maybe this would be different. Writing it down now, it sounds even stupider. But why am I out here, if not to find out as much as I can?

I inflated my little dinghy, and god help me, I went out in the water. Paddled out towards the ship, and I got about halfway there—it was farther than it looked—and the scab on my hand opened up, the one from the cut I got the last time I was out at the farm with Laura. She always laughs at me for being such a soft-handed city person, and I guess she was right after all.

Anyway. Rowing is rough on the hands, it turns out, and I knocked the scab off, and at first I couldn't tell because both of my hands hurt already, but my right started slipping on the oar and I noticed the blood. It was just on the oar handle, but I pulled them into the boat and let go to look at my hand, and a

little blood dripped out and fell in the water.

You would have thought a bomb went off down there. Not a minute after the drop fell in, the water leapt upwards, like a huge cylindrical wave, nearly capsized my dinghy, and where the spray landed on my bare skin it burned.

I got the idea, or I thought I did, and turned around and paddled for shore. I felt like I was being chased the whole way, but other than waves pushing me, I didn't see anything. Barely remembered to pull the dinghy up past the tide line and dove into the tent.

It sounded like the ocean was about to wash over the tent, and when I looked out, there was a huge wave, tall as a house, racing towards me. The dinghy was already adrift and I was next. But it stopped. I can't explain it. That's not how waves work, but it **stopped**.

And it started speaking. Long strings of syllables, not any language that I knew. It was the ocean, or something huge in the ocean, I'm sure of it. And I didn't know the language but I could understand what it was saying.

It said "I have drunk. I have been fed."

Julien didn't write down the way the voice simultaneously rumbled and rustled, both a susurruration and a roar. They didn't write down the way they sat on the smooth stones of the beach for hours afterwards, staring unseeing into the sea, trying to understand what it had meant.

This was the second lesson: don't bleed.



And now they had broken that rule for a second time. They had thought they would be safe if they didn't feed the ocean with their blood, but in between the spasms of pain and the nightmares, both waking and sleeping, they realized that the damage had already been done. It didn't matter if they didn't give the ocean, or whoever was in it, anything else. It was biding its time, waiting for an opening, and now Julien had given it one. And now it was taking what it had claimed.

“Nightmares” may not be the best way to describe them. “Visions” might be better. “Messages” might be better still.

Julien was certain that what they were seeing had actually happened. Every nightmare, or whatever they were, took place on board a ship, among people crowded into a space meant for cargo. Crying babies, adults puking from seasickness, children scared into silence. People with guns. They all started the same way: a storm at sea, someone getting too scared or too out of line and being killed by the armed crew. And then, carnage.

The first few hallucinations, Julien couldn’t focus on anything but the horrors they were seeing. Blood. Screams. Corpses. Faces mangled to barely look human. A baby with a broken leg, alone and howling.

But as they continued, Julien started noticing more than just the gore and terror. They were ashamed that they could, as it were, look away—but they realized: some of the killing and maiming was done by the crew. But more of it was not. Indeed, the crew was also being slaughtered, and not usually by the refugees fighting back. Something else was killing everyone on board these ships, both passenger and crew alike.

Saying “it was the ocean” sounded too facile. They were killed by something, someone, more direct and deliberate than a wave or a storm. Something took form and walked among them, murdering and maiming. Something that hungered. Something that was slaking that hunger on anything that might be offered to it.

Something that was here, too, and something that had tasted Julien’s blood.

Something that had gotten in.

Even once the pain and visions subsided, one thought kept chasing its tail around inside Julien’s skull. *It sees me. It knows me.*



Morning came, gradually. It was less of a dawn than a lightening of the shade of the mist. Some of it would burn off later, but not all of it; wisps and steams of it would linger in shaded corners all day. Julien woke as their tent became warm with their breath, and unzipped the flap. They sat there, in the doorway, with their sock feet resting on top of their boots, feeling the slight chill in the morning air.

They watched the sea. Calm today, for now. Grey. Julien felt better after the agonizing night. In fact, they felt great. Surely it was just the effect of relief, right? Surely they just felt great by comparison. It wouldn’t make sense otherwise. But there was a lot not making sense out here, after all.

They jammed their feet into their boots, laced them up quick, one, two, three and around the ankles and tied in front. Stood up. They felt like they could run straight up the cliff, but instead they ran down the beach and stopped, just short of the water, and paced back and forth frantically, across the pebbles and the broken mussel shells. They felt like they had to get this energy out or else explode.

What they really wanted was to go into the water. But that was madness.

The tide was in, but as it receded, so did the feeling. Mostly.

The rest of the day passed normally—a couple of ships hove into view, and then bobbed back out, with no attendant symptoms in Julien other than a quickening of breath. They took more notes in their journal. They ate lunch. They sat on a log and watched the pulse of the ocean. When the tide came back in, they felt their own pulse quicken again, but managed to hold themselves in this time.

A ship was nosing around the end of the southern headland. Julien stood up, a wild hope flaring in their heart—but they gave their head a shake and sat back down. A hope for what? Why would the sight of a ship, the site of all the horrors they bore witness to all night, kindle any kind of joy? They rubbed their eyes. But they knew, deep down.

They wanted the voice to come back.

The voice did not come back. Not until Julien had gone to sleep, exhausted at last, and slipped into dreams, did they hear it again.

This time, it was different.

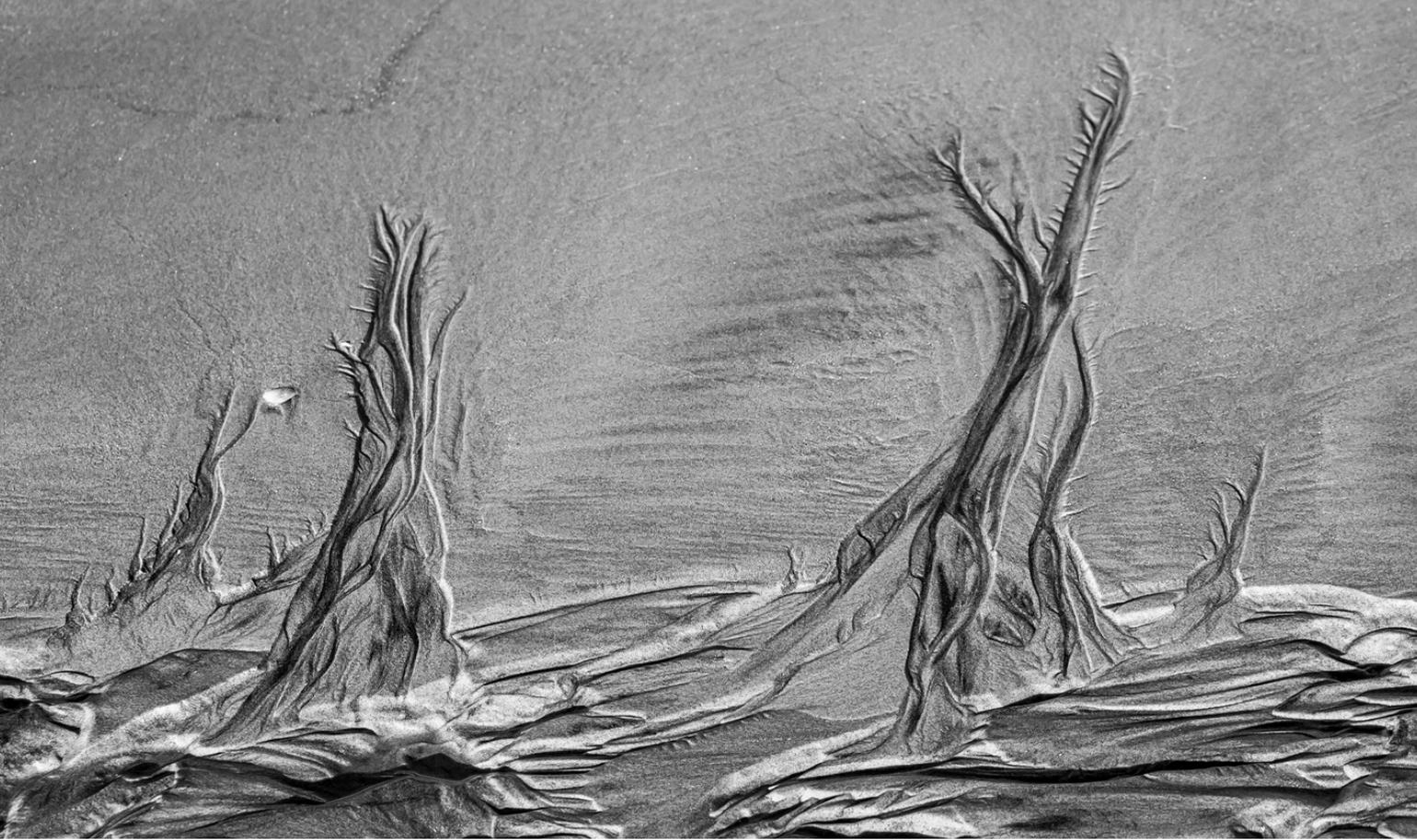
When they woke up, they knew what they needed to do.



The climb up the bluff that made up the headland wasn't easy, but it wasn't as vertical as it looked, and with some effort, Julien reached the top, sweating and dirt-smudged. From here, they could see all the ghost ships bobbing along the coast, easily a dozen of them, maybe more.

They took a deep breath. Up here, their head cleared a bit; down at the waterline, the mist felt like it had a weight, and the constant dripping of water off of branches formed an arrhythmic soundtrack to every moment. Here, Julien could almost remember what the world outside the cordon was like.

Then, a gust of wind blew in off the sea, and the memories dissolved; one long exhale, and then they were running off the edge, arms and legs windmilling through nothing, air whistling past their ears, a yell ripping from their throat, and then the impact.



Water rushed up into their nose and mouth, stabbing hot into their sinuses, setting off every internal alarm bell that something is wrong; their skin searing from striking the surface, and every bone screaming in pain as the surface of the water slammed against them. Julien wanted to gasp for air but could not.

They felt a pull and opened their eyes.

They were moving. They were moving faster than they could swim, faster than a ship could travel, not under their own power but definitely under some power.

Almost immediately they were out of the cloud of sand and silt kicked up by their impact. Kelp flew past. Fish, small at first, then bigger. The water got colder, which Julien noticed but did not really feel.

Slowly, they became aware of something else in the water. Not a fish. Bigger. Not a shark or a seal or a squid or even a whale. So big that at first it only tugged at the edges of Julien's awareness, like a shadow from a cloud, or the slope of a seamount. But it wasn't either of those things. It was moving. It was—they were sure—alive. It was aware, and specifically it was aware of *them*.

It couldn't be seen, not really. The water seemed a bit darker and thicker, but that could have been anything. Julien felt, rather than saw, its millions of arms reaching out towards them, enfolding their body, pressing their bones back into place. There was not a swarm of seals and sea lions and walrus wreathing the being, nor did it have, momentarily, the head of a polar bear, but Julien sensed these things anyway.

Flecks of ice froze into being and then melted just as quickly. The water whirled around them; Julien remained still. The thing, the being, the Sea, whatever it was, was whispering to Julien through its limbs, which remained wrapped around Julien's body. Julien felt a fathomless strength rising up through their body, and a vast and ancient knowledge suffusing their brain.



The mist laid thick on the stones of the beach that afternoon, the silence nearly total. The only sound was the quiet breath of the ocean as small waves washed against the shore. The grey of the sky bled into the grey of the mist, and from there into the grey of the rocks and the water. A lanky figure stretched out on the beach, limbs at unholy angles.

Presently, it stirred. It dragged itself slowly up past the tideline and into the waiting tent.



Some time later, the tent stood empty, its open flap hanging limp in the still air. Time and weather had taken their toll, and the seams were starting to fray. A crab scuttled out, having found nothing of interest in there. Within, the pages of a journal laid open, thickened and corrugated with the damp.

If anyone had flipped through the journal, if indeed the pages could still be turned, they would have seen the handwriting devolve over time; they would have seen the text becoming less and less comprehensible. And before the blank pages at the end, before the writing turned completely to scribbles and then scrawls and then pages colored in all black, the violent strokes of the pen having left rips in the paper, just before that, they would have seen pages covered in the repeated phrase:

*I HAVE DRUNK I HAVE BEEN FED I HAVE DRUNK I HAVE BEEN FED I HAVE
DRUNK I HAVE BEEN FED I HAVE DRUNK I HAVE BEEN FED I HAVE DRUNK I
HAVE BEEN FED I HAVE DRUNK I HAVE BEEN FED*

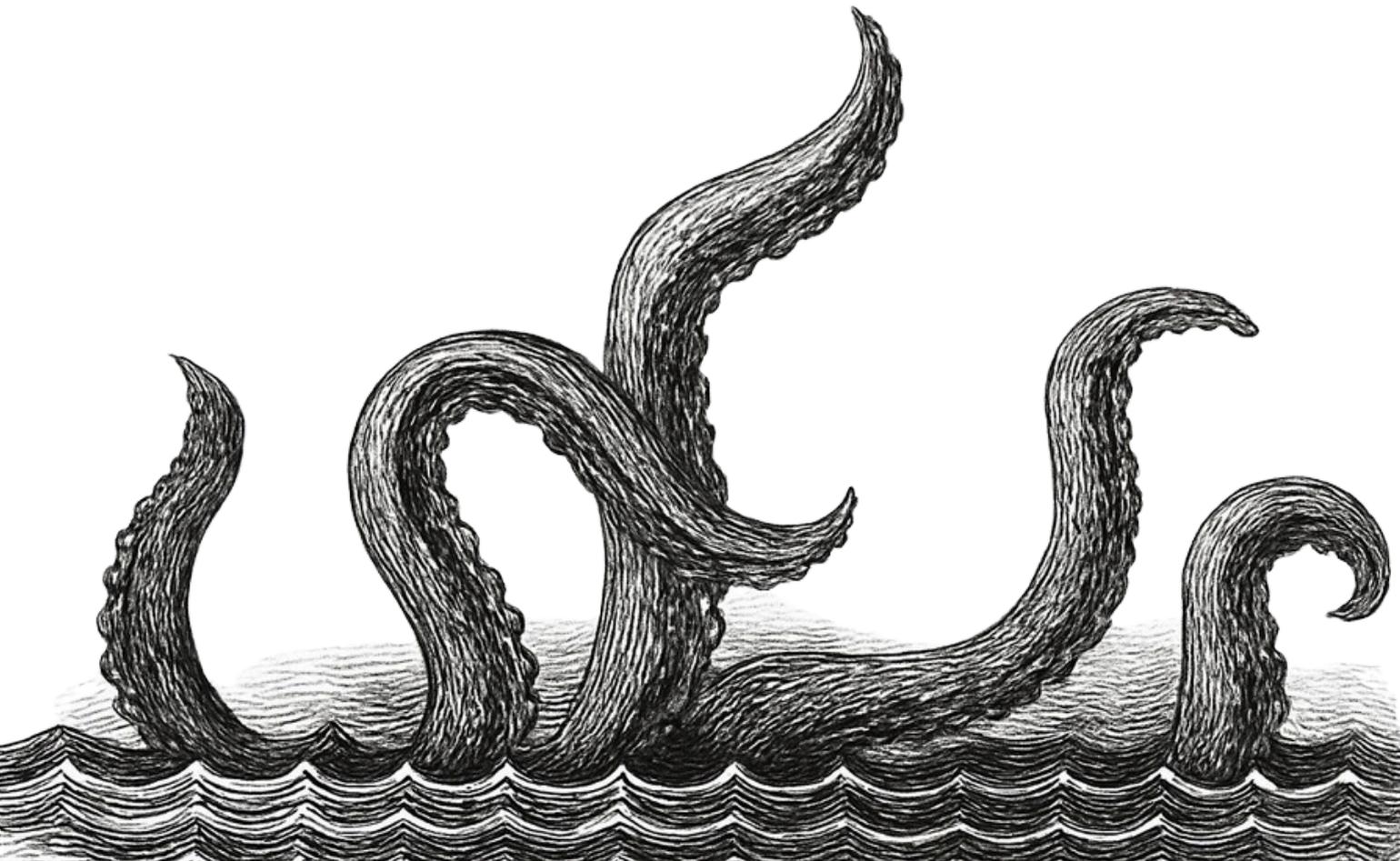


If anyone had been driving down the remote stretch of road alongside the cordon, on the right day, at the right time, they may have seen movement out of the corner of their eye. They would probably have dismissed it as wildlife, or their imagination. They would have pressed a little more firmly on the accelerator; they've heard stories about this place.

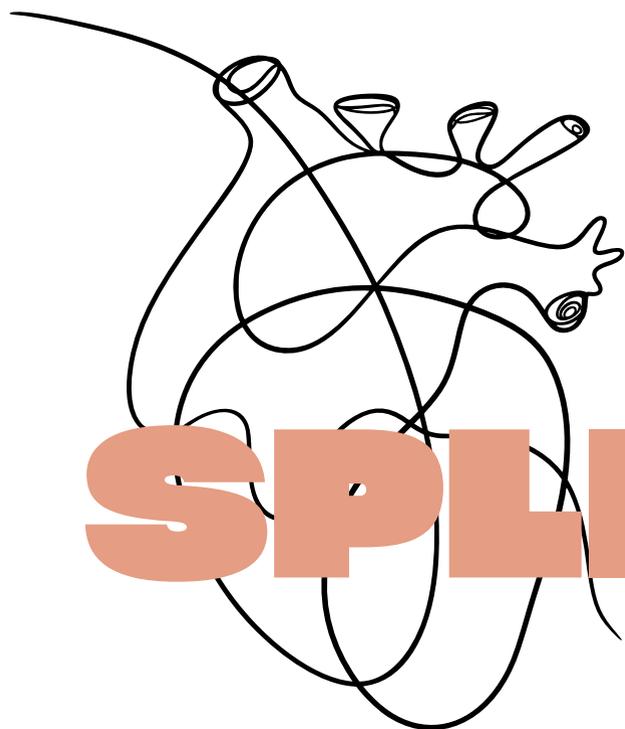
But if they had stopped, they might have seen something. Something walking, human-formed,

but wrong. Something, *someone*, every limb broken and jutting, head lolling back with every shambling step. Their hair was lank and dripping. Shreds of kelp and green string lettuce clung to their shoulders and boots.

Their eyes were red, but not the red of blood.



**JULIANNE
ESTUR**



SPLIN

TER



She was going to dance with Jesus tonight. Well, not exactly. She was going to dance with the boy who played Jesus in the Stations of the Cross play. He wasn't her date. Her mother had a strict policy against boys — even the boy who had been the star of the soccer team since the fifth grade and rolled his uniform shirt's sleeves to his elbows so one could see his great-great-great-grandfather's watch on his right wrist at all times. Etched into the bottom of the clock face, the part which ceaselessly touched his skin, were his grandfather's initials. What they were, she could only imagine, until she earned the right to coax it off of him.

His family home was full of heirlooms like this, dating as far back as the quaint Georgia town's founding in 1898, or so she's heard. Each object was another root planted in the ground here. She didn't have any century-old heirlooms. What she did have right now was her mother's drugstore lipstick. It was the reddest red she'd ever seen, grotesquely so, lacking the beauty of a rose or an apple or autumn leaves. It was mall Santa suit red in May.

The dress that is supposed to be hers doesn't smell like hers. Even after two rounds with the washing machine's strongest setting, it still reeks of vanilla. At least it no longer had that sharp and sour smell all of the clothes from the Goodwill did. Old Mr. Jennings, the cashier, dryly called it the smell of death. When someone in town died and their belongings had nowhere to go, they went to the Goodwill.

On the hanger the peachy orange color had a sweet magnetism that drew her eye instantly, but on her body, she couldn't help thinking that it looked dull against the tan of her skin. The bodice fit so well that her breathing was a touch more strained. The skirt was made of tiers of ruffles that initially reminded her of what a Southern belle would wear. In the mirror, though, it had little volume. When she rubs the fabric between her fingers, it's thin and coarse, like tissue paper. Maybe she should have been more patient in her search, but at the Goodwill, with her arms aching from pushing through overflowing racks, she had loved that dress sincerely.

She could blame it on the thick straps her mother had to sew on to make sure the dress fit within school regulations. Her mother could've done a better job at finding an orange fabric that wasn't so bright. She runs her fingers through her hair once. The gesture further maims the dark curls she's tried to give herself for tonight. There was a moment when the curls had stayed, and her hair was the most voluminous it had ever been in her life. She believed in her own beauty. For a second, she didn't mind the flat Filipino nose she had inherited from her father. She had exited the bathroom with a smile on her face earlier, and now standing in front of the mirror in her bedroom, her hair looked like it was drying after someone had thrown a bucket of water over her.

Mercifully, in the school gym, there would be no mirrors, just dancing. She rocks back and forth on her feet, balancing on the thin kitten heel for as long as she can each time. Her shoes are silver and sparkly and she is certain she loves them.

In the end, she scrubs off the red lipstick with toilet paper until her lips feel raw. Still, a faint stain is left behind. When she touches her index finger to her lips, it comes away clean. She wouldn't dare to curse him with such an overbearing shade of red.

Maybe he'd kiss her tonight.

She squares her shoulders and thanks St. Michael.



She's walking barefoot on the beige tiles of the church when St. Michael stabs her. Someone dropped a porcelain statue of him earlier, and the nuns weren't completely thorough in their clean-up. Pain sears through the arch of her foot, so strong that she almost loses her balance. She catches herself by planting her feet firmly in the ground. The porcelain drives itself deeper into her foot. She bites back a scream.

Sticky Mary Janes and socks in one hand, she hops on one foot to one of the windows in the corner of the foyer and sits down on the windowsill. She feels lightheaded. This place that she's been to once a week for her entire life was suddenly unnatural and far away. She puts her shoes and socks down on the floor. Her gray uniform skirt is damp and has been a size too small for over a year now. The waistband digs into the fat of her stomach, a daily penance she has to pay.

Her hands are shaky as she props her bleeding foot up on her opposite knee. The piece lodged in her foot looks like part of one of his angel wings. The wound weeps blood. She keeps her foot on her knee and lets the blood drip onto her skirt. Better than the floor. She's already made enough of a mess.

It's not Lucy's fault that she spilled her lemonade all over her, or that no one ever saw her. Lucy was so apologetic about it too. She was nice. She always has been. All her classmates are nice. She just didn't know how to talk to them, or why she didn't know how to talk to them. Lucy looked at her with wide blue eyes, and all she could manage was a barely audible, "I'll clean myself up,"

before bolting out of the reception hall. It's not Lucy's fault either, that she took her shoes and socks off before she got to the bathroom because the feeling was too dizzying for her to bear.

The nurse's office is at the school across the street. Her foot is still bleeding. The sight of blood and the smell of copper make her feel like she's underwater.

"What happened?" June is suddenly in front of her. He takes up the center of her vision, more real and solid than the hazy church behind him.

He's as beautiful as he was before she was mutilated. He still has his endearingly messy brown curls. Soccer season gave him a tan that made him a divine kind of golden, despite the cheap costume: a thin white robe, a red sash, and a crown of thorns that couldn't hurt anyone.

"I—" Her mouth works, but nothing comes out the first few times. "The St. Michael statue. Stepped on it."

His lips curl into a sympathetic smile. He has dimples. She knew this. The dimples were just normally reserved for other people. "Sister Cecilia hasn't cared about her job since last semester."

Sister Cecilia hasn't smiled in months. Maybe she's actually unhappy. That makes the girl feel bad about saying anything else. "What about rehearsal?"

"Can't do much without our Veronica."

She stiffens. Images of her classmates sitting around seething at her for making them fall behind schedule invade her mind. None of them are particularly excited to fulfill the eighth grade obligation to perform the Stations of the Cross play, and she was preventing them from possibly getting out earlier. "Sorry, I—"

"Sorry?" He sounds baffled by it. It's as if he's never had to tell anyone sorry before. She wonders what that's like. "It's not your fault. Here, let me... Gimme a second, actually." He runs off and returns carrying a bundle of wet paper towels. She's horrified when he kneels in front of her. Juniper McKinley, the boy with the beautiful immortal house on the hill and a cute gap between his pearly white teeth, was kneeling for her. She's watched him dote on his little sisters and help the nuns carry heavy boxes like they weighed nothing. She's watched him laugh easily with the other girls at school too. They were always blonde and had no acne and knew what shade of lipgloss looked best on them.

She chews on her bottom lip. It's peeling. She thinks of picking the dry skin until it bleeds. "You don't have to do that. Please."

"You ain't making it to the nurse's office that way." He pulls her ankle towards him until her leg is nearly straight. She gasps. He only smiles wider. "You never been touched before or something?"

His words are humorous, maybe that's why her stomach skins. She shakes her head.

"I'm a gentleman."

"...Yeah."

He pinches the shard between his thumb and forefinger. Her hands are balled into fists at her sides. She's paralyzed. Her body aches. It's an obscene sight, his grandfather's watch right next to

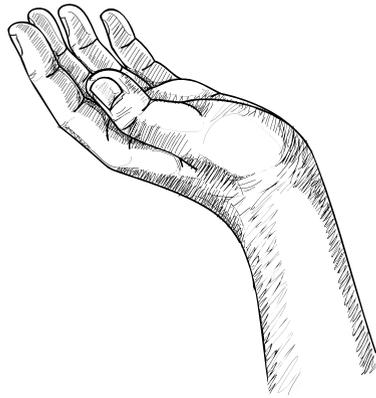
her bleeding bare foot. Her skirt goes past her knees, and yet she feels stripped bare.

His fingers turn, twisting the porcelain, and her body suddenly jerks at the violation. The grip on her ankle holds her in place. He looks up at her with mild curiosity. He's not moving. "What?"

"You just—" If she says too much, she might throw up. "Just imagining things."

"You're in shock." Then he pulls the shard fully from her foot. It's triangular and the length of his pinky finger. Blood drips onto his robe. She's crying, but if she's quiet about it, she can pretend she isn't. Her back hunches. Somehow, she's still sitting up.

She feels a cold sensation press against her skin. It brings her back to her body. She watches in silence as he cleans her foot. It's the touch of a good brother and a good son. "You okay?"



She nods.

"You stare a lot," he says suddenly.

"Sorry. I'm just surprised that you're... You know."

"I wasn't only talking about now." She wants to run. Except he still has a hold on her ankle, and it's firm, even though she's not going anywhere. Has she always been so obvious? She's embarrassed, and yet there's another part of her that's happy that he noticed. He noticed her the same way as he did the other girls. "I think it's cute."

"Oh." Her eyes are so wide she can feel the strain in her forehead.

He releases her ankle. It stays suspended there anyways by some magic. "I'll help you to the nurse's office."

"T-thank you. You didn't have to."

He stands up and shrugs. "WWJD." She would laugh if she had the energy to. That's what he wants her to do, she can tell.

There's a month until Easter, and for the first time since she's reached adolescence, she might finally be the believer her parents wanted her to be. If not in God, then in some other power — one that's on her side this time.

When she bikes down to the river basin, it's the second week of March. There's a light drizzle and a kitchen knife in her backpack. The rains will be stronger starting tomorrow. By next week, it will be flooded. She will find both her parents sitting by the window during this time, as she always does. The rain and the floods remind them of the island country they still call home, even though they haven't been back since she was born. By April the water will have receded. It will have cleansed the valley of blood.

She abandons her bike at the top of the hill. The ground slides and sinks beneath her feet as she walks downwards. A wind yanks the hood off her head. The river basin has always been audacious in its rejection. She's heard as much during gym locker room gossip, and there's comfort

in knowing that here, at least, she's just like everyone else.

She reaches the place where the water meets the land. In the distance, she sees the old bridge on the water. It used to be beautiful, before a freak accident destroyed the middle portion and the townsfolk spent months fishing the dismembered parts out of the water. Now it looked like some giant incomprehensible creature had taken a bite out of it.

A dense maze of trees chokes the basin on both sides. From where she stood, it was hard to imagine that with enough walking, the basin would open up into a river that stretched for hundreds of miles. Even this place, a constant of her life, was always going away from her, out of Georgia, towards places she would never reach herself.

A blur of movement in her peripheral vision makes her head turn.

There, just outside the trees, is a dusty brown rabbit. The wind has died, and the rain doesn't make a sound. Her heart thumps. She expects it to run. The rabbits here have a strange instinct for survival. That's what they all say. They all say the rabbits will make you chase them until you're breathless, on the verge of death, and you'll wonder if the rabbits were doing this purposefully. You had to earn the rabbit. You had to want it.

The rabbit doesn't move. Not even as she approaches it. When she's finally looming over the rabbit, she realizes this one must be young — not quite an infant, yet not fully adult either. The innocent curiosity in its eyes shows her that it's not of the age to know any better.

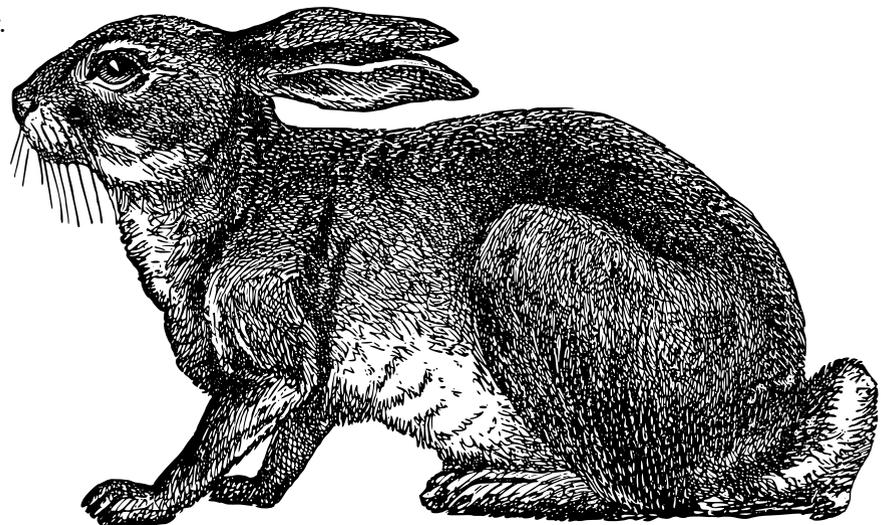
She kneels. She doesn't know why she does it, exactly, but she has to. She knows when she gets up, the mud will have soaked through her jeans and her socks. It would be her punishment.

She holds one hand out to the rabbit. It sniffs her and doesn't smell danger. It nudges her knuckles. She pets it just once. Any more would make her feel worse about what she had to do. She pulls the knife out of her backpack and sets it down beside her. The rabbit doesn't run. Sweetly, it allows her to pick it up and arrange it on its back. She holds it in place with one hand and picks up the knife with the other.

The rabbit doesn't quiver. It makes her aware of the fact that *she* does. She thinks of letting it go.

Except the rabbit didn't run when it was supposed to.

She thinks about Adelaide in the locker room before gym class, how she was the fastest runner in the eighth grade yet said the



rabbits gave her a run for her money. After the ordeal it had been, there was no way she couldn't have gone through with it. But it was an easy trade-off, in the end. It was always easy for everyone else. *One tiny little rabbit for him*, she had said. *People used to make sacrifices all the time. It was, like, part of prayer.* She and Silas were holding hands at the mall by the weekend. The life of one inconsequential creature for the almighty love of another.

This rabbit didn't run when it had run from everyone else. This was a gift. This rabbit was hers. She was already worthy. She had to be. How could she be anything except grateful? Her grip tightens around the handle of the knife. She releases some of the pressure on the rabbit. One last chance.

The rabbit doesn't take it. She exhales.

"You for him," she whispers, and slides the knife into the rabbit's heart to the thought of Juniper McKinley dancing with her in front of everyone else, unashamed. The blood wells around the blade and trickles down its body until it meets her hand. The rabbit twitches for a few fleeting moments, disappearing as quietly it had appeared to her. The rain has stopped. It's not merciful enough to cover her tears, to wash the blood off her hands.



June doesn't save her a dance, though he had many to spare: eleven, the exact number of other girls in their grade, plus two seventh graders who are particularly emboldened to approach him first. A bored Sister Cecilia announces over a scratchy microphone that there are four songs left in the night.

She wills herself to move. Just one step. If she takes one step out of the corner, maybe that would be enough. Maybe that would be enough for him to know in his gut that it was her, and he'd turn his head towards her and close the rest of the distance. She wouldn't need to do a thing. Not this time.

It doesn't happen. She can't take the first step. She watches as he takes Annie Palmer — lead singer of the choir, the mayor's daughter, and therefore the town's sweetheart — out on the dance floor. Even in the darkness, the girl can see that Annie sparkles. She always has. Even during First Communion, she wore a diamond bracelet that was the talk of the reception. She watches as he spins her and her skirt takes flight. It's hard not to think that her feet might leave the ground next, that she'd be floating above them all, an angel in Cinderella blue.

The moment passes. She looks out at the gym — the crude paper stars against the sterile white walls, the same navy blue tablecloths they used for the Teacher Appreciation Day banquet last month. There's a sad smattering of balloons littered about. They do little to conceal the painting of the school's mascot, a faceless knight that she once thought was from a fairy tale, that dominates the floor. Most of all, she sees her classmates, all people she's gone to school with her entire life

because no one ever leaves, and she sees that they're all far from her. There's never been any magic here.

June whispers something close to Annie's ear. There is a dull piercing ache in her chest. She wished she could reach inside herself and try to find the source.

June leaves the gym.

She follows.



It's a mild Sunday in April when the old playground hurts her. Broken limbs and wild animal encounters had always been its form of hospitality. Even so, she preferred it to the newer park across town, because it was quiet, left to rot in its own time. She never thought June would be the type of person to prefer it too. It excited her.

It happens as they're sitting not quite shoulder-to-shoulder at the top of the rusty metal slide. He's telling her about the first time his father took him hunting and he killed a deer. "Felt like I was finally growin' up." He smiles. It's not meant for her, but he lets her see it. Her heart flutters.

She puts her hand down on the wooden floor and immediately gets a splinter. It juts out of the meaty part of her hand, below her thumb.

"You okay?" She nods. There's no blood. He reaches out to cup her hand in his. "Ow." "Yeah," she replies lamely. "Ow."

His thumb grazes the top of the splinter. She chews on the inside of her cheek. "What'd you do with the deer?"

"Taxidermy." He continues to tap the splinter gently. "Family tradition for a man's first kill. Mine's in the dining room, next to my old man's."

"Your house must be very beautiful." This is the closest she's ever been to his face. It's intoxicating because it's like something out of a dream.

"It is. The most beautiful one in this whole damn town." She believes him. This moment feels tender. Then he starts to press the splinter with more force. She winces and tries to pull away, but he holds her there. "You're alright."

There's still no blood, but it hurts. She tells him it hurts. He doesn't stop. The skin around the splinter begins to cave in. A single drop of blood leaks from it. She can't tear her eyes away. He can't either.

She stops breathing. If she breathes, she'll scream.

Then he stops. He pulls the splinter out so easily.

"You're stronger than you look," he comments, impressed.

"R-really?"

"Yeah." He stretches his legs out in front of him. "You going to the dance?"

“Oh... I don't know.”

“Come on. It's the last one before we graduate, and you've never been at any of the other ones.” He's right. More importantly, he had noticed it. He had been noticing it for the past three years. “It'll be fun. We can dance together.”

“Okay.” She feels so light she might float away off into the sky. Maybe she'd reach Heaven, but she didn't want to go just yet. There was now more to come after this. It was a promise.



“Why didn't you just ask?” June asks her this in the desolate parking lot. There's confusion in his voice, like it could never occur to him in a million years why she wouldn't. The sky is clear and yet the stars have retreated elsewhere.

“I thought you'd remember.” It sounded so much less pathetic in her head.

He sighs and runs a hand through his perfect hair. “What is it you want from me?” “What is it... I want from you?” The words sound stilted in her mouth. It sounds like a different language altogether.

“If I kiss you,” he says suddenly, “will that fix this?”

Fix this. She doesn't know what needs to be fixed, but he's right. She nods.

“Come here,” he says.

The girl moves so fast that she trips. She falls directly on both of her knees. Her skin burns. She catches herself with her hands. The asphalt is cold and rough and unforgiving. He's looking at her. It's not disgust, or even worse, apathy. There's a tentative fascination on his face, an anticipation for what she's going to do next. She never thought euphoria could feel so dull.

Her right ankle gives out the moment she tries to put weight on it. She collapses again. She bites back a whimper. He still hasn't left. He is still standing there. Waiting for her.



She starts to crawl. Every inch renews the pain in her knees, but she pushes through it faithfully. He says nothing, and she has to train her eyes towards the floor, but she can feel his gaze on her.

Finally, she arrives in front of him. The tips of her fingers are mere inches away from his polished dress shoes. She looks up at him and finds him looking down at her. He steps back. “Look, I was just being nice. Did you really think I’d go for a girl like you?”

She swallows down a sob. *A girl like you.* A girl who didn’t look like any of the other girls despite her nightly pleas to God that she would wake up as beautiful as them one day. “You’re just fun to mess with. You’d let me get away with anything.”

The disgust in his voice makes her curl her fists in her lap. *Yes*, she wants to tell him. *I would, if it meant I could finally feel like a person here.* The words that come out are small and shaky, “...That time in the church. And on the playground. You were trying to hurt me on purpose.”

June laughs; she detests how the sound makes her heart skip a beat.

Just like that, his eyes are drawn to somewhere behind her. She’s not pretty enough even in her suffering to keep his attention. She looks behind her.

There, in the parking lot, is Annie Palmer with her wide eyes and infallible dress. The door to the gym is open. Gradually, more of their classmates trickle out of the gym. They’re looking for June. The girl knows this. All of them would notice he was gone. All of them would want him for the last song. They all came out for him.

But they’re all looking at her.



Principal Adams has a crucifix hanging above the desk in his office. On her left, her father hasn’t spoken — the smell of incense always gave him a headache. He keeps closing his eyes.

On her right, her mother’s shrill voice cuts through the air. Her tongue stumbles in and out of English, and the speed at which she’s talking renders the English incomprehensible. Principal Adams keeps stopping her and telling her to repeat herself. The gaps of silence before her mother regains the courage to speak again grows wider and wider. The girl knows she should be the one explaining. But she wouldn’t know what to say.

Her mother’s voice suddenly goes deep. The girl can’t understand the language, but even if she could, it wouldn’t matter. She recognizes that her mother is about to cry.

Indeed, her mother stops talking mid-sentence. There’s a pause, an aborted intake of breath, and then she doubles over and starts to sob. The girl stiffens. Her father reaches across her to rub her mother’s back.

Principal Adams’ face is stony. The girl understands him least of all. What she does understand, though, is the sinking feeling in her stomach, telling her that the fearful voice in her head was right: she and her family don’t belong here. She can tell he doesn’t believe what her mother’s saying.

Juniper McKinley and his family would never hurt a fly. She could fight, but it's easier not to.

She traces the scabs on her knees. It still stings. She's full of shame. She swallows all her words down before she can learn what they are.



Her family moves towns. They don't go very far — there's no going far around these parts. But they go far enough that she doesn't see June again. No punishment is given to him. Her parents enroll her at an all girls' Catholic school. The uniform skirts are red and black plaid, which she likes better, and she finally gets to buy new ones that fit her well.

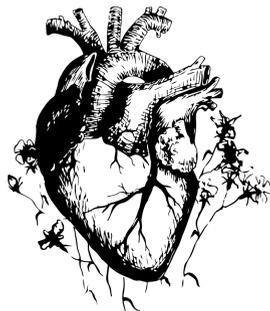
They still visit the town they used to live in to see the Castillos, the only Filipino family left there. They had a daughter who left for California and hasn't come back. The girl wonders how she pulled it off.

The Castillos live on the same street they once did. The street is dreariest in the wintertime, when the sky is the same faded grey as the cracked asphalt and patches of grass are sparse between the houses. The houses themselves are each an awkward shade of brown. Inside, though, the Castillos' house is miraculously colorful. They tell her family stories about all the trinkets that live there.

One time, in November, she takes the disappeared daughter's bike and rides it to the McKinley house. The rose bushes surrounding the house are naked. They're just thorns. The black ivory fountain in the front isn't running either. She's heard that in the warmer months, birds would perch there.

She imagines them throwing balls inside the house. Food with names she can't pronounce. A handsome man on the piano, and another on the violin. She thinks about the girls who would be invited, their beautiful dresses, the joy of announcing that you're here and part of the world. Not just any world, but this world. And boys like June would welcome them in with a kiss on the hand and a dance.

Her heart aches. She thinks about cutting her chest open and reaching inside herself to find the source. She wonders if she'd pull a kitchen knife from the cavity and if she'd be able to distinguish her blood on the blade from a rabbit's.



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