



THE FANTASTIC OTHER



ISSUE

11

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Editors

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| | |
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Apollo and Daphne

by Mallory Caloca



About the Artist

This piece was contributed by Mallory Caloca and was inspired by Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne. Daphne was transformed into a tree by her father, the river god, to avoid being raped by Apollo.

Mallory Caloca is an artist living and working in Paso Robles, CA. She is a graduate of CS San Luis Obispo. She shows frequently in the area, has been published, and is often hired for commissioned work.

A Note from the Editor

"All that you touch you Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth Is Change. God is Change."

— Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Most expect change, but change is rarely what we expect. Once, we dreamed of a shining future like those in the landscapes of solarpunk fiction, one fueled by eco-friendly tech that gleams in glass and chrome beneath the sun. Now, we find ourselves living in a period of questioned truths, and many valuable artists and creators have lost their jobs to this new plastic reality.

To capture the anticipation of a full and absolute change, we decided upon "metamorphosis" for this winter's theme. Our contributors responded with fiction, poetry, and art that illustrate both positive change and dreadful transformation. Some depict an inner metamorphosis, while others express this in bodily change. In other pieces, it is the stagnation that is highlighted, the refusal to change and the rot and ruin that comes with it.

A full transformation often includes periods of darkness. These contributors have woven that uncertainty and strife into fantastic works for us to admire. They are not imitations, like that of the "artificial intelligence" that can only pull from what has already been formed. As living things, they and their work operate on the absolute mandate of change. Let them envelop you in their wondrous worlds. Embrace a metamorphosis that readies you for the changes to come.

G.E. Butler, Editor-in-Chief

Secondhand Stillness

by Saheed Sunday

[1] my father's clock hangs on the wall.

he made a supplication out of keeping it clean
like holiness.

exfoliation of all the thumbprints on its glass.

Isn't this how you make a god
out of an act?

the clock obeys.

(tick)

(tock)

[2] after father leaves,

the hour's hand morphed from flowers
to arthritis. became too heavy to move.

the second hand stays still like art.

[3] i do not touch it.

i do not dust it.

i do not speak my father's name
beside it.

the clock coughs up silence

in little gray flecks.

dust = dead time.

[4] someone who knew of my father's wall clock
asks me for the time.

i say:

his hands no longer move.

& i mean both the clock and the man.

[5] there is a gravestone

hanging

on our living room wall.

[6] tick.

tick.

nothing.

nothing.

About the Author

Saheed Sunday, NGP V, is a Nigerian poet, a Star Prize awardee, a Pushcart nominee, a Best of the Net nominee, a Best Small Fictions nominee, an HCAF member, and a poetry reader at *Chestnut Review*. He has been published in *Palette Poetry*, *Strange Horizons*, *Lucent Dreaming*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, etc. He can be reached on X at [saheedtsunday](#) and on Instagram at [_saheedsunday](#).

Sky-limbs

by Samuel Cromwell

For the first fifty years of my life, I was a linden tree. The tallest of my neighbours, my sky-limbs twisted higher and caught more warmth. My earth-limbs wound deep into the soil atop a ridge, and many of their feelers caught the runoff water from a nearby creek. Before I knew time and its demarcations – day, month, year – the passing of the seasons was a slow pulse. Time was a gradient that I seeped from the soil and respiration into the air. A day was an arc of warmth, the movement of shade across my boughs.

I do not recall first becoming aware of him – whom I now know as Philemon. He began visiting me at first-warmth and last-warmth, kneeling in the dirt between my exposed earth-limbs. He would leave offerings, a seashell tucked in the hollow of a bole, or a splash of wine upon my trunk. I thought no more of his presence than I did the squirrels that skittered up my bark, or the doves that alighted upon my sky-limbs.

Everything changed the day of the storm. The air simmered. The wind yanked my limbs and made my leaves chatter. Then came the sky-water, thrashing countless shivering sensations across my canopy. I felt the man, Philemon, sheltering beside my trunk. He tore at his cloak and shouted, and this time his prayers were answered. The ground shook with the arrival of someone mighty and enormous. He spoke with a voice of booming vibrations, and at his command the air sizzled with hot bursts. One, two – and the third struck me.

I thought I was dying, burning, coming apart. Raw sensations flew through me. My skin changed, wrinkled bark peeling back to reveal smooth, pale flesh. My sky-limbs twisted together, winding from dozens into two arms. My earth-limbs thrashed out of the ground and contorted into legs.

Gasping in the light and sky-water, I shrank into the shape of a human. Philemon sobbed as he held me. His touch was warm against my cold new body.

What hundreds of leaves had once done on their own, I now had to do consciously, contracting and expanding my torso to breathe. Water, warmth, terror. Colours swam and became shapes.

“Baucis, my Baucis,” he repeated, his voice cracking.

He carried me, slipping and lurching in the mud, down the hillside and into his lone cottage. He lay me on a bed of straw, wrapped me in a blanket, and stoked the fire of the hearth.

Over the next few weeks, he taught me language.

“Philemon,” he would say, pointing at himself. Then, pointing at me: “Baucis.”

Every night, he would repeat the story about how I was his wife, I had lived with him in this cottage until the gods had come down and exacted punishment on the village. They had sent a flood, washing away everything save for this cottage, and then turned Baucis into a tree.

“I prayed for the gods to turn you back into my wife. And now we are reunited,” he said.

One of the first things I told him, when I understood the words and their meanings, was, “I am not Baucis. I am a tree. I want to be a tree again.”

His heavy brows bent in sorrow. “No, you *were* a linden tree. The most gorgeous of them all. Now you are my wife.”

Behind the cottage, there was a small garden with pear and fig trees, rows of crocus, lilies, and violets. I would sit among the flowers, longing for the joy of being still for hours, days, longer. To move freely about the earth was at first unnatural and

frightening. But soon enough, it became addicting. I felt like the wind, a single leaf, or nothing at all, so loose were my movements.

Some mornings I walked along the shore of the lake, barefoot, feeling the small stones beneath my toes and the chill of the water. I could sense him watching me from the porch. He had told me to stay within sight of the cottage, but I kept walking, until he caught up to me, and gently turned me around. "Not too far, darling."

He often stayed up late in the candlelight beside my bed and described a person I did not know. I found it hard to look away from the tiny glow of the candle. How incredible it is to choose the light you observe.

"I am not who you think I am," I told him.

"You are re-learning, that is all. I will wait as long as I must for you to learn how to be who you truly are. That is love."

Whenever I asked what lay around the lake or beyond the hill, he would grow surly and quiet. He dismissed those questions and then tried to distract me with a laurel flower or a colourful river-stone.

When I grew braver, I swam in the lake. The cool water went beneath my flesh and washed my veins. One afternoon, I returned, wrapped myself in a blanket and sat beside Philemon on the porch.

"I dove under the waters and searched for the remains of the village."

His face darkened. "You should not have done that. It is dangerous to swim that deep."

"I saw nothing. I saw wondrous fish like darts of light, and long, wavy grass. But I saw no remains of any huts."

"It was all washed away. The flood was fearsome and destructive."

I hardened my expression. "I want to see a village. I want to see other people."

"Their ignorance was the reason I lost you."

"Are all humans like you?" I asked.

"Like us. And no. Many are violent, selfish, or dim-witted. None are as happy as we are."

The next day I slipped on stone by the lake — not entirely by accident — and skinned my knee. A red droplet welled and broke and then rolled down my pale skin. Human-sap was so thin and bright.

He was aghast when he saw. "I should keep you inside. It is too dangerous."

I reached for his hand and felt its calluses. "I think you were once a tree, too."

A smile cracked his face. "No."

"Your skin is rough like bark."

"That is from years of hard labour."

"You are unmoving, like an oak in a storm."

"How do you mean?"

"You have your earth-limbs in one place, and you go no further."

"This is where we belong."

I loved feeling the wind in my hair because it reminded me of the breeze through my leaves, and when I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine I had leaves again, and a hundred arms instead of two.

In the depth of the night, I was startled awake from a nightmare of turbulent darkness. Dozens of trees had crowded me, pleading for help. I rushed to his bed and fell, crying. "Make me who I was, please, please —"

He wrapped his arms around me. "Shh, you are safe with me."

The next morning, he did not speak to me. Something fought beneath his surface expression. Later, while he was distracted, I snuck away and returned to the ridge where I had been a tree. I scrunched my feet into the loose soil, held out my arms, and gazed at the lake. I tried to inhale the messages of my neighbour trees — their satisfaction, their distress, their warnings or their joy — but could not.

He found me a couple hours later. Anger flashed in his eyes. "That's enough, Baucis."

I did not move.

"Come home."

I kept my gaze fixed on a distant point of the lake.

His face went flat. "Very well. Return for your dinner when you tire."

Sometime in the night, I must have collapsed. The next thing I knew, his sturdy arms had scooped me up, and he carried me back to bed. For days on end, he confined me to my room, and those walls became my world. When I was finally allowed to leave, the sky-limbs of the trees had caught fire with the colours of autumn. The sight drew water from my eyes, making two small rivers upon my cheeks. I had always known autumn as a time of draining, losing the life of my leaves in preparation for the long-shade. I had never known its beauty.

Philemon found me staring at my open hand. "Will my fingers turn red and fall away?" I asked.

He chuckled. "We do not change with the seasons."

“How sad.”

But Philemon did change as the seasons shifted. The cold came early and frosted the grass and the leaves that had not yet fallen. Philemon fell sick and stayed inside to rest. I fetched the water from the well, picked the berries, and cooked the evening stew.

He kept protesting, saying he would be healthy in another day or two, but the sickness spread. I laid a damp cloth over his forehead. “We must travel to the village. I do not know how to care for you.”

“No...” he said.

I opened the blankets and crawled in beside him. He was shivering and hot at the same time. When another tree became sick, we could taste it in the air, and our earth-limbs would search for each other beneath the soil, then twine together to share our fuel. So that is what I did, beneath the blankets, I curled my legs around his and twisted my arms around him so that we were intertwined.

But I was not enough. Waves of helplessness crashed through me. “You need others to help you.”

“We have to stay,” he groaned.

By the time the sun rose, his breathing was laboured and ragged. Fear scrunched my chest. I had to act. With spare fence-posts, I made a sled and lined it with his thickest wool coat. Then I woke Philemon and helped him to his feet. I told him I was moving him to a more comfortable position, and I guided him outside and helped him onto the makeshift sled. Once it was secure, I tested the weight. Then I began pulling him along the frozen lake.

“Where are we going?” he mumbled.

I drove through the snow and the drifting flakes. The icy blades of wind. When we stopped the first evening, I felt a prickle of alarm. These were trees I had never seen. I might as well have walked beyond the edge of the world.

I fed Philemon a crust of black bread and rewrapped the bundle of blankets. Falling snow softened our sounds and made the night long and deep. He alternated between sleep and wakefulness, never fully present. By the next evening, a little after sundown, we arrived at a village, the sled rasping over thick snow. Two dozen huts were clustered around a frozen pond and a dead orchard. Children ran across the pond, their laughter rebounding over the ice.

“Help!” I cried. “We need help!”

Light bloomed from the threshold of one of the cottages. A man emerged, hunched and slow. “Come warm yourselves. All travellers are welcome under our roof.”

From behind him appeared a woman, her eyes set in a nest of wrinkles. She grabbed at the sled. “Let’s get him inside.”

I knelt and kissed Philemon on his warm, damp forehead. “Goodbye,” I whispered. My earth-limbs compelled me to remain, wishing to bind us upon the soil so that we would never part again. My sky-limbs urged me onward, wishing to spread, to take me to the birth of rivers and the end of the winds. A new, nameless emotion sprouted within my heart.

The woman took him inside, and by the time she looked back, I had disappeared into the darkness and the whirl of snow.

About the Author

Samuel Cromwell is an aspiring writer who currently lives in Calgary, Alberta. His short stories have appeared in *Landing Zone*, *Curiouser Magazine*, and the short story anthology *Thorns* from *Black Hare Press*.

Cailleach

by Alex Glebe

My kingdom awakens when the veil between worlds whittles so thin that the souls of the dead can cross into the realm of the living as easily as slipping through an open door. I leave it ajar for them, of course. With them come all manner of spirits, demons and ghouls, but that's your concern, not mine. From Samhain to Beltane, the world is in my thrall. I wrap the world in a pall of ice and snow with the careful tenderness of a spider encasing a fly in silk. The nighttime stretches until the darkness seeps into your bones. I darn the frost like lace and bedeck cobwebs with tiny icy bells that make the unseelie faeries dance. Rivers congeal and freeze as the otters, my sleek little water hounds, travel through a liquid darkness under the icy eaves of the streams. For I am the divine hag, The Cailleach, the veiled one, goddess of winter.

My realm is one of darkest nights and brightest stars, of the roaring of bonfires and cartwheeling sparks, fireworks and the frenzied jig of storm-riven trees. The world grows taut and lean under my care. In a forest gilt with hoarfrost, the fox hunts the starveling rabbit. I herd my deer; my faerie cattle, their antlers hung with ice, as each strike of my staff on the snow-bound ground deepens the grip of winter. Above us my friend the long-eared owl carves the frigid sky with silent wings. Winter has its own rhythms and its own language; one of gusts of freezing air that burn your lungs, of animals foraging for meagre food or prowling after prey. Indeed, that is what I do to humans. I hunt you out of love. I hunt you in your dreams.

I send you nightmares as a wolf might harry sheep; because my affection is that of a goddess, fierce and all-devouring. My frost bite kiss teaches lessons that you could never learn in summer.

Is it any wonder that I, who created winter, love dreams? Under its shroud of snow, the world grows still. Footprints vanish under a winding cloth of whiteness, sounds

muffle or else carry far on the crystalline air. The gaudiness of summer has withered; the world is stripped bare, and your childhood hiding places are now frost-choked gullies filled with crow feathers and twigs. Never fear. Curl in on yourself like the hedgehog, and I will send you visions. I will release a host of ravens into a bone-white sky for you to divine or bid you follow the tracks of deer who move like mist through the tangled snarl of icy woods. Open your dreaming eyes to my signs, and you will see me there, laid in wait. I am the shadow cast by the lone Rowan tree, the wolf you thought you saw slip into the black mouth of the underbrush or the crone with tangled hair dressed in piercing white, passing like a naked flame through the darkness of the trees. I will send you three dreams to teach you the lessons of winter – if you are brave enough to accept.

To truly live you must first meet your death – your *Fetch* – a creature who looks in every way like you, your twin. It will chase you through the ruins of an abandoned palace hung with tapestries of hoarfrost and carpeted with snow. Your hurried footsteps will ring on an ice-bound bridge where a frozen moat glitters far below. You will chase yourself up the spiralled steps of dark towers, the narrow roost of crows – while I laugh myself sick in the throne room. How will you pass my test? Turn and walk towards the Fetch until you are close enough to see your death held within its gaze. It's not an easy thing to do.

On the second night, you will meet an each-uisce beside a frozen lake. Its breath carries the scent of human flesh, and its knotted mane is garlanded with strips of fabric from the clothes of those it has drowned. Climb upon it. The chill night wind will rush through your hair, and the last sound you will hear above the water is its hooves cracking the ice. You will be stuck fast to its back as you plunge into the waiting blackness of the lake. Naturally, you will be holding your breath in abject fear as the monster draws you downwards into the icy depths. But I want you to open your mouth and say my name:

“Cailleach”

Repeat it three times, because until the water runs down your throat, you will not surface, nor will you wake. Let's see how you fare. If you fail to conquer your fear, I

have promised your sleeping flesh to be a meal for the each-uisce. Don't be upset, it's their nature after all.

On the third night you will hear her before you see her; approaching with a high keening wail that could rattle the teeth in your skull. The Banshee will grasp you in her embrace and will scream until all thought is driven from your mind. You will try to flee, but she will not release you. Listen to her piercing scream and in it hear the lament of your hidden self, the yearning of your secrets. She howls for your soul's death, your unlived lives, the chances not taken, the fears that consume your dreams. To banish her, tell her who you would be if you were truly free — unfettered, incandescent. Wake and burn like the aurora borealis in my dark nights, be an undulating brightness that drenches the constellations in vivid green, the deepest blue and a hallowed royal purple. Be as radiant and unwavering as the North Star. You have fought your way through winter, newly taloned and fledged to weather any storm; freed now to fly into the coming blossom scent of spring.

About the Author

Alex Glebe loves all things gothic and the fantastical. Her fiction and poetry are featured in *The Lit Nerds*, *101 Words*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Eternal Haunted Summer*, *Spellbinder*, *Club Plum Literary Journal*, *Fiction On The Web*, and is forthcoming in *Flash Fiction Magazine*. When not writing, she enjoys painting portraits and exploring nature. Find her and the books she loves on Instagram @alex_book_treasure.

Road Split into Two & Both Were Wrong

by Hannan Khan

the lonely street languidly unzips itself
a seamless Möbius strip of neon haemorrhage
gasoline – every chic lamp is schism
every eerie shadow is a trapdoor to elsewhere
but is it actually open or merely yawning?

a radio knavishly lies
fossilized in the ribcage of a car abandoned
mid-thought – the static crackles like brittle
bones, words amputated mid-sentence:
transmitting (to the void / to the void
to the void)

beneath the matted asphalt
bronchial roots slightly coughing into silence
deep veins of copper ghost
the slow vowels of worms spelling *dirges* in
loam
(but is anyone mourning?)

somewhere a rugged man drops his coffee
& it falls
upward spilling into the inkblot mouth of the
sky, liquid constellations shuddering mid-air
(time you slippery beast, you hoax)

the adoring lovers whisper in adjacent
dimensions
but never in same one
she says: i love you
he hears: i haunt you
they repeat this until their throats unravel
(until their meanings cancel out)
(until their words fracture into stillness)

the lonely street is whole
straight as gunbarrel under aneurysmic LEDs
every chic lamp is a ruthless interrogator
every eerie shadow is a two-way mirror
but who is actually looking & who is merely seen?

an uneven heartbeat stirs
zipped into a glove compartment, a car still rolling
headlights shredding fog & the voice
on the radio says: *you never really
arrived – so where are
you?*

above the matted asphalt
exhalations of machines
sinews of steel arteries
the electric sutras humming *commandments* in
zephyr
(but is anyone obeying?)

somewhere a rugged man catches his coffee
before it falls
dazzled heat bruising his palms
sultry steam curling like DNA helixes into the cold
(time you gentle trickster, you gift)

the adoring lovers whisper in adjacent
dimensions
but in different languages
she says: i love you
he hears: i rewrite you
they repeat this until their bodies fault
(until their meanings expand)
(until their voices rewrite the universe)

a dusted door opens
or maybe it folds inward like a dying star
 maybe it was never there at all

someone is standing at the threshold, staring at
 you
(but are they stepping forward or you falling
 backward?)
(does it matter if the floor is vanishing?)

(what if this is the last doorway you will ever
 see?)

a dusted door remains closed
or maybe it was always an illusory mirage
maybe you're outside... looking in, but what's
inside?

someone is waiting beyond, staring at
you
(but are they real, or you are the
reflection?)
(does it matter if you're forgetting your own
name?)
(what if you've already stepped through & never
noticed?)

About the Author

Hannan Khan is a nefelibata, poet, fiction writer, editor, and scholar of literature and linguistics from Pakistan. He combs through moments of love, death, delirium and relational complexities, seraphically tracing what's breathed and what flickers unbreathed. He is the winner of the Native Voices Award 2025 for his poetry collection *Isn't Cooked Is Cursed*. He sips coffee & reads Manto. His work has appeared in *IHRAM Literary Magazine*, *Graveside Press*, *SpecPoVerse*, *Eye To The Telescope*, *Abyss & Apex*, *The Headlight Review*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Winds Of Asia*, *Zoetic Press*, and *Uncanny Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *Native Voices Anthology*. For a glimpse into his life, find him on Instagram: [@hannan.khan.official](https://www.instagram.com/@hannan.khan.official).

isol

by Henry Cecchini

The structure is like a kettle pond; the fluid inside is mostly water but it is thick, syrupy, and warm. A wet black crumbling mouth. The diver comes up out of it, clawing to the surface, not with urgency. More like a sleeper making an effort to awaken. They are wearing a plasticose wetsuit that covers their body except for head, hands, and feet, and an insectoid gill mask. They lie halfway on the edge of the sinkhole, the rim where fluid meets drier land, and remove their mask. Feeling too exhausted to drag themself out of the fluid fully. Nothing is going to harm them for the moment, so they are safe in the shallows. Their hair looks darker, slicked to their head like this. Their eyes close briefly in the sunlight as their breathing stabilizes.

Something is pricking at their closed fist; they uncurl their hand. Should have worn gloves, they realize. What if it had stung them. And no help for several miles.

It's alright. It looks inert, isn't moving. Just jagged edges. Can't always be sure what's infectious or will try to propagate itself, even in human flesh, but they would guess that this one can't survive long outside of its own environment, the murky chemocline of the kettle pit. It looks like soft coral or veins filled with wax. The diver has imperfect short-range vision, so they touch it softly for more detail. Patches of cilia line it. It's almost red.

They are used to this place by now, or so they like to think. They try to be unfazed and objective. But this specimen is a little upsetting to them. Probably how anatomical it seems. Like something that could be inside of a human body, if something went implausibly wrong.

They adjust their grip on the specimen and stand, reaching for their shoes. The fluid is drying invisible and lightly sticky on them, on their back, like mucus. At camp they

will be able to bathe, or at least scrub off the fluid, but they'll have to walk back in the wetsuit.

They put their gill mask in the satchel and, after a moment of deliberation, transfer the specimen to a container and store it, too. It might not be good to touch it for too long.

There's no path, but the low-growing biota is like a scrubland here, and it's not difficult to navigate. The diver — no, what are they now? — the researcher has a good memory for details, and they know the way back. Where they have to, they clamber over exposed planes of rock, karst outcroppings mirrored belowground, feeling agile and somewhat naked in the wetsuit. It makes them a little anxious; not that their usual clothing would protect them any better in this environment, but anything that contours so readily to their body gives them the sense of not having a barrier between them and the rest of the world. They like the pressure of it around their throat, chest, and wrists, though. The plasticose material flexes against their skin but pushes in on them. It compensates for the lack of actual clothing, makes them feel safer.

Big pale sun, vapors rising from the earth. The researcher steps between and through reefs of bleached tissue like shelf fungi. There is a biomat crust between them and the camp location; they cross it cautiously, aware that less stable terrain could underlie it. Their boots scuff over material like a scab on the ground. It doesn't break; they are light.

The exclusion tent isn't really used anymore, but it stands out, still inflated like a great shapeless lantern, off-white in a way suggestive of quarantine or a grub's body. It is the first marker of the campsite. Then the antenna tower asserts itself. The compiler's biocomputers are strung through it, one platform 14 meters aboveground, another embedded below the soil layer, like twin brains.

Closer to that antenna spike, a constant hum. Of some field or magnetism. The audible presence of a signal. The researcher gives the compiler a wider berth than they need to.

Now they are not the researcher because this is a crew of five. The others are Tir Yin, Anchrode, Vennel, and Shial. Surnames are easier, or designators. There are cultural

differences in the approach to naming; the agency is internationally staffed. But a pseudonym keeps this work separate from the life that came before it.

The researcher's name is Ordine; at least, that is what they are called here, a few letters away from their real surname, if such a thing exists anymore. Tir Yin is a tall, calm man whose specialty is simulations; Vennel is a woman, a computerist, sardonic and cagey. The others are androgynes like them.

Ordine fills a tub with water from the filtration tank. Behind the tents, at the back of the campsite, they prepare to bathe. A precautionary action, rather than mere concern for cleanliness: The fluid of the pit could contain hazardous material. Cnidocysts, microscopic barbs and acidic filaments. There's no washing off most of the unseen flora of the isolate zone. Their own microbiome is thoroughly altered by now. Their sweat smells different than it used to: chemical, chalky.

They strip off the wetsuit, and as it releases its grip on them, another disturbed aspect is revealed: thin chitinous limbs embedded in their torso, over the ribs. Some submerged in the skin, some protruding, folded against their body. Purple-brown like a bruise, slick as bone. Ordine has no ability to move them on purpose, but as they extend each one by hand to rinse the fluid off, the vestigial limbs twitch weakly. A shivering flex against the chest wall, down into the abdomen.

This is the work of the compiler. When the researchers die here, they come back as approximations.

The biocomputer system has their metaphysical coordinates. Compiles them from snapshots, locates them in the area over time. The new iteration is never quite contiguous. Light wounds missing arbitrarily: abrasions, burns, rashes, even scars from years before the fieldwork began, begging the question of what sources the compiled database is drawing from. Sometimes an excluded detail will manifest again in a later iteration. Of course, the deaths leave no mark, but the memories remain.

Some of the others are more familiar with the compiler's logic. Ordine is distanced from it by incomprehension; their field of study does not involve these sorts of computers. They are a subject rather than a collaborator.

They reach over the side of the tub. Rummage through their clothing. In the pocket of their shirt: a small vial with a dropper cap, tinted glass to protect the contents from sunlight. Inside is a nootropic stimulant. It makes their tremors worse; at night they have to take a sedative before sleeping, otherwise they'll wake up paralyzed and frightened, seeing predatory shapes in the dark. But the stimulant grants them willpower and clarity.

Ordine takes a drop of it, letting it seep into the capillaries beneath their tongue. They lie back in the tub. The sun is warm, white, lancing through the water to touch their body, prising against their skin. Their pupils are wide, and there is heat in their throat. For a long moment, they imagine there has never been any other scene in which they took part, nor any demand to come.

That evening, as every evening, the researchers cook dinner on the necrofuel stove and sit in the circle of its low fluttering light. The flame burns teal; even the atmosphere is different, this deep into the isolate zone. Shial holds a thermal cup with one hand. The two smallest fingers are undeveloped nubs of doubled-over skin, dark brown underlit green by the fire. They were not always like this.

Shial has never yet died, unlike the rest of the researchers, and yet they were once recompiled. One day soon after waking, they realized they had changed, but remembered nothing that would point to any death in the night, not even a disturbed dream. For a while afterward they kept watch for other differences: something about the joints, a difference in their color vision. Suspicious of their own form.

And where is Anchrode? The biochemist went out this morning to survey an area. Their absence by this point is unusual and cannot be resolved. If, worst-case, if they died, they will be here soon, physically repaired. If they are not dead, they should have returned already. None of the four around the fire ask, but all wonder: Why are they still gone?

Will we lose ourselves, and become subsumed in the landscape? Or is it this landscape that will be lost? There is nothing else like it in the world, it is primordial, deep, a vision of four billion divergent years, barely compatible with the rest of life. The isolate zone. Isol. Its boundaries are minimally porous, maybe magnetic. Crusts of biota build

up on both sides, shifting over time, but there is little overlap. Imagine now its prokaryote marshes dredged for fertilizer, its minerals mined, its necrobial oil and gas tapped: the death sludge of the deep earth drawn to refine and burn. Roads, pipelines, pavement. Isol will break like the skin of a bubble and vanish within the present.

For what purpose does it exist? Can we learn anything from it? It is a dangerous place even to step foot into. Not worthwhile except for study and extraction, no tourism here. Motile multicellular life is rare. On old maps this place is accursed, a lair of evil things, not to be touched, ritually unclean, haunted. There is something wrong with it.

Or: There is something wrong with the outer world. Isol is a tangible dream of feverish geoperfection. Some said the isolate zone was an alternate for the rest of the living world and that, should the world falter, isol would sweep over it and eclipse its biota. In the depths of isol were maddened things, hell biology. Prior missions had glimpsed vast skyward pipes of grown rock like displaced tubeworms, made by molluscal amorphous creatures with grasping fronds. Acid-jetting gestalts that formed and reformed of particles, swarms sometimes billions strong that ate the landscape raw. Volcanic churning in the lower earth. Natural reactors in the rock striata that vented radiation upwards. The primordial center warred with itself, as though in memory of meteoritic bombardment on a newly formed planet. None of these living things can be classed as animals, plants, fungi; they are older than eukaryotes.

Its boundaries had moved before. Traces were found, altered soil chemistry and fossils in sedimentary rock dozens, hundreds of kilometers and millions of years distant. Whether magnetic fields or glaciation or some other imperative had made it migrate, nobody yet knew.

These are the things the researchers speak of around the camp stove that night.

Shial dreams of the kettle pond, three kilometers deeper into isol. The expeditions are reaching slowly, mapping optimal routes. Recording isoclines of water table, atmosphere, species distribution. In Shial's dream they drown over and over in the depths of the pit, lightless fluid and biotic warmth.

Ordine lies awake in the dark, staring at the ceiling of their tent. Sometimes they confuse the work of the compiler with the work of isol itself. They have died the most, and everyone is starting to treat them differently, they think. Their thoughts are strange lately. Too bright.

They keep dwelling on the layout of camp. The antenna spike and its premise.

Anchrode and Shial are biologists. Ordine is something else. An interpreter, they generally say. Before their work here, they studied high atmospheric data, the intersection of space with the traces of the isolate zone that escaped its self-set bounds, nearly undetectable. And other things beyond the world and its sky. Astrophysics and language, cognition, patterns. Possibilities shunned by other researchers, bordering on conspiracy. The landscape forms a kind of pareidolia for them, in which they see suggestions, but nothing is certain.

The light comes in through a milky sky. Vennel's radar monitors ping; a swarm is moving through the area. She activates an electric field around the perimeter. Single-celled creatures the size of hogs, their filmy surfaces peppered with ocular pores, trundle across the ground on sets of pseudopods that make their silhouettes approximate caterpillars. In their wake, the biotic crust is stripped raw, glistening with digestive enzymes.

One member of the swarm crawls in through the perimeter where the field is weak. Shial takes a machete to it.

Anchrode has not returned, and nobody wants to leave camp. Ordine cradles the glass vial, rolls it back and forth in their palm. Feels the hungry twitch of their abdominal limbs.

They take a dropperful of stimulant, pressing it into the space under their tongue. Some of it leaks up bitter, staining the tissue of their mouth. Too much. Too high a dose, not as careful as they should have been. Their breathing is quick and unsteady.

Latent paranoia wells up into their waking mind. A lack of clarity from the institution outside isol, a lack of pattern to the purpose, random gathering of information. Or the

pattern is degrading. The researchers are degrading. Something is wrong with the compiler. Or: The compiler does not act as they were all told it did.

Why are we here? The protocols are concerned with keeping researchers safe, uncontaminated. An impossible standard. Isol itself is more resilient than a human body, but repeated expeditions act as an influx of contaminating matter. It responds in unpredictable ways, as though the outer world were an allergen. A mutual histamine response.

We need to obliterate ourselves, Ordine thinks in a moment of frenzied clarity. Only then can we understand.

There is no way to observe without interfering. How to get a closer, truer view? Betray the compiler. Become the terrain.

After nearly a decade in the field, the antenna spike has been covered by a patchwork quilt of rusty siliceous lichens, its crevices packed with dark mats of slime. It interfaces with the sky, speaking invisibly to satellites at the periphery of space. It interfaces with the land, rooted in soil and bedrock. The living core of the compiler, a biotic machine, pulses like a comb jelly or a jewel, surrounded by a circuitboard panopticon. Its surface is warm and slick.

Ordine climbs the ladder hand-over-hand with cultic urgency. The platform at the top is a metal grate, its gaps occluded by a waxy coating of microbes. The biocomputer's casing is screwed shut, and above it is a toolbox, sealed against the isolate zone's weather. Ordine presents it with the key chip, and it clicks open. The tools within are lined up from smallest to largest, magnetically set into the case.

The computer's polymer cover is slick with the excreta of small transient lifeforms that perhaps crossed it or landed on the spire for a moment, leaving residue of their alien metabolisms. A greasy rainbow shines on the plastic. Underneath, the core of the compiler opens like gills, a set of green glassy flaps flaring subtly. The researcher, in their stimulant delirium, parses it as communication, language, assent, and approval; and they are thrilled.

Vennel sees them perched on the narrow platform, calls to them from below and receives no response. They are busy stripping away the cobweb circuitry, gouging glyptic wounds into the panels, dissecting the tissues of the biocomputer. She goes to rouse the others.

It is far easier to destroy a system than to create one, but the compiler has failsafes, is engineered for utmost durability. Its living components are the most vulnerable. The researcher picks at it with animal desperation. Their hands shake badly.

Below, their colleagues have been shouting, to no effect. One of them needs to stop this from happening; so Tir Yin climbs the ladder because he senses that nobody else will or wants to. He is not sure what to do once he is up there with Ordine.

Just as he reaches the platform, he sees a spark snap from an exposed circuit and feels its burning arc articulate his horror. His colleague is killing the compiler, killing all of them; if it is destroyed, then death's permanence will close in around them and there will be no tether to anything outside isol. The five researchers will be swallowed.

In his fear and desperation, he seizes the largest wrench. Later he is not sure if he did it on purpose; thought he wanted to strike their shoulder. To the watchers below, as he swings the wrench hard at their head, it looks intentional. Blood lashes readily over his hand. Despite the cracked skull, Ordine is still partly conscious as they fall 14 meters from the platform, as they lie broken with rib fragments in their lung, the remnants of their voice catching on useless consonants.

If Anchrode were here, they would make it stop, but nobody wants to touch the dying researcher, so it takes a while.

Tir Yin watches from the tower. His throat and eyes burn. He has never done anything like this to a person before. He feels like he owes it to Ordine not to look away. It is a great relief once their body dissolves: all at once with the transience of timelapsed foam, repossessed by the wounded compiler or by the air itself.

He attempts to repair the biocomputer, but there is no saving its amputated organics. He cannot do anything more here. Eventually, slowly, he climbs back down the ladder.

They wake past dusk at the edge of the kettle pond, standing beside the shallows. Reeling, dreamlike in amnesia, then they recall gliding down through dim scenes; they had seen Anchrode, subsumed in a cenote of tar anemones, and known this to be truth. A kind of remote viewing extended by the isolate zone to and through them. The process of recompilation made their perception porous. And then there had been themselves, another Ordine, but not that name. The self they had been before the isolate zone. That prior one stood before them, and they felt as though trapped in a translucent membrane, pressing through it to meet their past. And once they did, the double revealed itself to be fragile as the skin of water and was dispersed.

Their vision is different. At this hour the landscape should be greyed into lightless abstraction, but what they see is a luminous graffiti of colors.

They raise a hand to their face and feel hard black eyes beside their eyes, faceted like jewels. A scattering of visual pearls. The limbs in their chest are gone, but something more is different about them now.

It unfurls in their mind like wings after a metamorphosis. Not the compiler but the isolate zone itself is recombining, iterating, reclaiming the dead. The compiler is here to restrict possibility into an artifice of plausible form. Its biocomputer patrols the boundaries of humanity, delineates an appropriate body. With the compiler compromised, isol will have its way with them; they will no longer be external matter but clay in the hands of its living mind. There will be nothing to fear, nothing to lose, no irritation between self and surroundings.

They feel a sort of inertia, the inevitability of continuing. They have to bring this understanding back to their colleagues. The belief in a miracle zone.

Assessing their surroundings and self for continuity, they realize they are wearing the same wetsuit. Sometimes after recompilation, a researcher will be rendered naked, or in rags, or covered in plumes of prokaryote bracken. Now it is as though they just came up from a dive.

Overhanging growths at the edge of the kettle pit move minutely in the night, questing for nutrients or territory or warmth. In this sunken vulval scape, the saline shallows

are mirror-still, isotonic to a body's water. Above, the stars are fogged with haze; the biomat exhales. Again, the diver walks out of the pond.

About the Author

Henry Cecchini is a recent college graduate living in New York. They write nightmare ecology, bodies, and landscapes. More of their work can be found at antemaion.itch.io.

Small Gods

by Soonest Nathaniel

all hail Njaba – the god of wet nose,
the god of eyelashes, the god of prose,
the god of wishes, the god of old love letters
found under the box, the god that orders us
to set them on fire.

all hail Ekenma – god of love songs that make us cry in traffic,
the god of apps that drain our souls but give us free serotonin;
the god of bad wifi,
the god of one more episode
that keeps us locked to the screen

*buffering buffering buffering buffering buffering buffering
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until we forget
what we came here for,
until we are our parent's prayer points,
unending, springing in the guts of the universe.

All hail Mbataku – god of missed calls, god of inbox.
the god of spam mail, the god that teaches us
how to make money on Google.

all hail Ogbunabali – the god of cleared search history,
the god of disappearing messages, the god of deleted texts,
the god of maybe this time, the god of third time, a charm,
the god of another woman's husband, the god of dating apps
that become hookup cathedrals.

all hail Ohamiri – the god of heartbreak playlist,
the god of love is a scam, the god of feeding fat
on our exes jam; the god of horror movies,
the god of fantasies, the god of popcorn,
the god of Netflix and Chill,
the god of splitting the bill;
the god of jokes we tell ourselves,
the god of eating crackers and laughing
at the sad jokes that we have become.

About the Author

Soonest Nathaniel is a poet, digital media strategist, broadcast journalist, and spoken word artist. His poetry collection, *Teaching Father How to Impregnate Women*, won the RL Poetry Award. He is a Rhysling and Pushcart nominee; he's also a fellow of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. He was a 2021 Langston Hughes Fellow at the Palm Beach Festival and Poet Laureate for the Korea Nigeria Poetry Festival.

Slashed Beauty

by Elizabeth Rosen

“See the Divine Architecture of the Human Body!” the exhibition poster exclaims.

Calyx is intrigued. She follows the diesel fumes to the back of the building where a truck sits idling at an open loading bay. Unnoticed, she drifts past the tall woman with high cheek bones and nicotine-stained fingertips signing delivery papers. Calyx follows the hum of fluorescent lights past the activity of the inner loading bay and down a hall through several swinging doors that open into a pristine, climate-controlled storage room.

The room is two stories high, filled with shelving on tracks. The storage racks on their carriage and rail system stand fifteen feet high, each lodged tightly against the other until the black spokes of rotating handles are spun to move them apart. Laying her hand on the metal of the shelving, Calyx senses within it the many fragile spaces to hide things. She climbs to the top of the bay and squats on her haunches as, below her, staff hurry to and fro. Waiting, Calyx becomes the shadow on a sandstone pillar in Thebes. The shine in a crow’s eye. The comma in a love poem from a live lover to his dead one. The dust of starlight.

After a few minutes, the squeak of rubber wheels on tile can be heard. The oversized doors swing open on their automatic hinges, and the tall woman from outside walks alongside a sarcophagus-sized wooden crate being pushed by two staff members and steered by a third. The woman has donned the thin white jacket of other staff and keeps one hand on top of the crate to gauge its balance on the dolly.

As the crate is gently lowered to the floor, the woman stands to one side, her lower lip pinched between her teeth. She wears her worry like an invisible bandage tightly binding her breasts. Her eyes never leave the crate, even as she draws soft cotton

gloves over her nicotine-stained fingers. Staff members pry nails from the crate top, and the curator watches like a meerkat scanning the horizon.

The woman's nervous energy draws Calyx's attention. As a Secret Bearer whose job is to find homes for the secrets she carries, there are people whose secrets appear to her as malicious tumors deforming their silhouettes and unbalancing them. There are others whose secrets resemble goiter that choke away the voice. There are still others whose secrets manifest as tiny angry, itchy knots on their skin, as if they have waded through a mosquito-infested bog. But this woman, with her auburn hair meticulously scraped into a ponytail, her secret, whatever it is, is a phrenologist's dream: a landscape of bumps on her skull inviting one to run his fingers over them like a tea reader.

Calyx regards the tall woman with interest, for though the Secret Bearer can become the nacre in a nautilus's shell or the tumble-and-turmoil in the air behind a hummingbird's beating wing, though she walks the spaces that compose the edges of form and matter, she cannot know the secrets she has not placed herself. She does not remember this woman. Whatever secret the tall woman carries, it is not one that Calyx placed.

As the crate top is lifted away and the packing peeled back, the woman hooks her gloved fingers over the edge of the crate and peers in at the figure laying supine on her cushioned bed within. Other staff members do the same, murmuring in appreciation. The auburn-haired woman's relief rises off her like a cold draft.

From above, the Secret Bearer, too, can see into the crate. The last time she saw her sister-in-the-box had been a different time in the world, a time when survival itself was a burden, fraught with suspicion of the unknown, fearful of plague and of poisonings. Her sister-in-the-box's waxy pallor and the long strands of brown hair carefully arranged over her shoulders are the same as Calyx remembers. The string of pearls around her pale neck are perhaps slightly more yellow, but the polished shine of her cheeks and half-mast of her eyelids are just as she recalls. Seeing the face twisted in eternal pain and ecstasy, sympathy and nostalgia fill Calyx once more. Soon, her sister's innards will be splayed out for everyone to see, for that was why she'd been created. The most famous of Susini's Renaissance works, her sister-in-the-box had been

an attempt to understand the divinity of creation. Her creator and his master had been lights in the darkness of that superstitious time hundreds of years ago, and the woman-in-the-box is plump and beautiful in the way of her day, welcoming those who would peer beneath the layers of her waxy flesh.

Calyx rises and drifts into the neighboring preparation room where, like Snow White in her glass coffin, case after climate-controlled case bear her wax sisters, innards exposed. A young woman in a clinical white coat, camera in hand, moves from case to case, documenting the displays and the figures in them. Each time her eyes light on the wax viscera of the models, a micro-expression of disgust warps her features.

It is no doubt the life-like appearance of the models that disturbs. In fashioning their proportions, Susini had taken as his models the idealized beauties of Botticelli's Venus and the Venus di Milo. Pygmalion-like, he learned to replicate in wax the unblemished alabaster of young skin, the fine arch of a foot, the sheen of buffed nails. In his quest for human exactitude, he had used human hair for the lashes and brows, crafted finely-bumped aureole for the breasts, and even conjured the gravity that tugged at their life-like flesh.

It was a sort of forgiveness.

And yet none of it rivaled the verisimilitude of the interior landscapes of his creations. The delicate threading of blood vessels over intestines. The mollusk-like lacrimal caruncle and delicate pink of the conjunctiva. The bloody honeycomb of the womb walls. The mysteries of female biology laid out for study in the most meticulous detail.

Did the master craftsman understand the prurient nature of his creation? Most assuredly. The delicate hairbands and pearl strands adorning his models' necks suggested a social status for his *anges anatomiques* much higher than that of the real bodies most medical students used in their studies. Susini had posed his angels in peaceful repose, faces turned into the crook of their arms and fingers slightly curled in sleep, as if their gruesome dissections were merely some dreaming they were having. Or else he posed them languorously, feet crossed at the ankles, eyes half-opened in amatory regard, as if to suggest that the vivisection were some erotic experience long-wished for.

It was perhaps this, more than anything, that caused fear to flicker behind the otherwise passive faces of female viewers. For in the most secret part of their souls, women recognized in the rotting whiff of violence and desire of the medical models something which they tried most earnestly to forget: that their husbands, brothers, fathers believed that a woman torn apart was a thing both bright and breath-taking, and more, that this rending of women's bodies was a thing of erotic beauty, something to be yearned for, even sought out. Perhaps the tall woman's secret has something to do with this, thinks Calyx, the photographer's camera clicking once, then again.

The Secret Bearer, who rarely knows the company of others, is grateful to her wax sisters for forcing this usually hidden secret into the minds of their living brethren. The caching of secrets is a solitary pursuit. In the shared presence of so many others, Calyx's heart grows large, becoming the wing instead of the wind, the pillar instead of the shadow. She reaches through the glass and touches the cool cheek of the wax figure there, becomes the shell, and the eye, and the love poem as she does. She moves on, comforted by the thought that, for once, a secret is not hers alone to carry, knowing that when the tall woman sees the photographer's pictures, she will run her thumb over the smudge of light that seems to be bent over the glass case, peering inside like a prayer.

About the Author

Elizabeth Rosen (she/her) is a native New Orleanian and a transplant to small-town Pennsylvania. She misses gulf oysters and Southern ghost stories but has become appreciative of snow and colorful scarves. Her stories have appeared in places such as *North American Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Flash Frog*, and *New Flash Fiction Review*, and have been nominated for the Pushcart, Best of the Net, and Best Small Fictions. Colorwise, she's an autumn. She still wants her MTV. Learn more at thewritelifeliz.com.

Midnight Solo

by John Xavier

Sunset fell like a ruby chalice dipped into a vat of blood. Flat miles of farmland deepening with the flood of shadows. A few precocious stars appearing in the gaps of glacial clouds draining from ephemeral purples to nocturne greys.

Josiah, willow-brown and thin in his Sunday-best, waved at the man on the porch who'd hosted him for supper and then followed the dirt path to the wooden gate and opened the latch on this and left. His old lady was no doubt waiting up. Sick with a fever, she'd stayed home that day but expected him back earlier. Much earlier. Like, hours ago. But a member of the congregation had noticed his fiddle case and they'd gotten to talking. Folk music mainly. And then the invite, which he realized now he should take special care in retelling since he wasn't bringing any food back with him. Nope, just a full belly and an instrument with warm strings.

Best he could do was speed up his return then. As the crow flies, that'd take him straight across the ruins of the Elroy ranch. A whole family burned up in a fire there not more than three weeks ago. Should he? Well, the dead had been carted out. All the people at least. Most of the livestock were caught in the inferno too, but these must have been removed, right? Can't just leave corpses lying around, can ye. Either way he felt a morbid enthusiasm for seeing the place. Couldn't do no harm. And he wouldn't likely get a chance to do so again before they tore everything down. Such is this fleeting world that the efforts of men and women's lives were wiped away as easily as chalk dust from a tablet and what was written there, however heartfelt and pure, returned inevitably to the fold of inhuman and incomprehensible nature.

Cutting across a gravel road, he began his incursion of the Elroy place and noticed right away the tall barn gutted open to a now-dark sky. He laughed to himself falsely as he navigated between this and the mostly incinerated ranch home; not that there

was anything to be truly nervous about. The shield of his smile melting however when he turned a corner and saw *them*. A donkey, a sow, a goat. Ravaged by flames, these beasts with innards and skeletons exposed in parts. And they were standing in a trio on their hind legs, heads aligned with their spines like crocodiles, but eyes turning towards him. He fell to the ground, speechless and terrified. He tried to crawl away but found a huge bull of equally charred necromancy blocking his path. Hooves sinking into the dirt under the beast's erect bulk. It laughed. So did the others. Joy exclusive to spirits of the most demonic kind.

"Play us a song, you bastard of Adam. And quick! Or die."

Instinct steered him to his nearby fiddle case and unclasping this, he ripped out the thing inside and began to play a manic tune without thought or harmony.

"Faster! FASTER!"

And he obeyed, and the monsters danced around him in an untethered ring of frolicking glee, and heaven's black remnants vanished and the world, as his bony fingers bled in their desperation while the haunted night stretched into supernatural eon. When Josiah was found in the morning, he was sitting crossed-legged. His cheeks tear-stained and the violin still tucked under his chin as hands stiff with rigor mortis clenched its neck and bow.

About the Author

John Xavier is a writer of diverse interests. His only complete novel, a literary thriller titled *Thrysus Falling*, is available for free at obooko.com; as are several other works, including numerous poetry collections. His writing can also be found at aegisnoise.wordpress.com.

Now I Am a Lake

by Rachael Raine Rivers

I have not been allowed outside the Bulles alone since I was twelve years old. I have certainly not been allowed this close to the ocean. Not since I almost drowned. Not with this mangled shoulder I can scarcely lift, long-healed shark tooth punctures enclosing my half-numb forearm in parentheses.

It's not that I can't still swim. Every child of the Bulles, since our forefathers' ship wrecked on this deserted pinch of rock three centuries ago, learns to swim before they can walk. No, I bear restrictions because I proved a liability. And during an exhibition exam, no less, that should have qualified me to train as a diver. Partly because my idiot child-self, dredged from the water in pieces, bleeding scarlet swirls of shark saliva onto the gray pebbled beach, claimed to have heard wrens. Claimed it was why I stayed under so long, flouted common sense, even as the instructors shouted at me. I remember none of this, but I'm told I insisted, in my delirium, that the wrens had sounded like a poem I hadn't read yet.

Obviously, this was fever nonsense. But the real catch was that I bolted upright, pulverized arm swinging. And, with crazed, unnatural eyes, I apparently seized the hand of a nearby toddler — a chieftain's son — and sprinted back towards the water, screeching my own, my mother's, and my grandmother's, names: "Marie! Marie! Marie!"

Ever since then, I've been confined to "women's work" and watched. And I have in turn had to watch as my childhood friends, my cousins, everyone I ever felt close to, melted gradually from my life. All wholly and happily absorbed in occupations, and then courtships, and then babies of their own. All pulled away, none-too-begrudgingly, from a disfigured nobody, who proved she'd turn hysterical at the mention of wrens.

Wrens do not exist, of course. They are folklore — corollary of old world faeries blended with the sea creature sightings more commonplace in my world. Which is to say, a world with only vague notions of what a “tree” must have been (unless I’m misinformed, and these were mythic, too). A world that makes its beds in rough-hewn glass bubbles naturally formed along the sides of an isolated, underwater mountain, woven internally with caverns and freshwater springs filtered through ancient lava sheets. A stalactite-encrusted, bioluminescent city under the sea.

But I think of wrens now, as satin-cool water slithers above my ankles, my thighs, my belly. I fear them — or, at least, their shadows in my mind — as much as my body fears that shark. I fear the sudden betrayal of any possibility you open yourself up to, that you hand power to shape your life. But moreso, I fear the shape my life has taken.

The Mage’s voice returns to me as my face breaks the surface: “What would you do, Mair, if you found a perfect, secret, fantasy world, a place to escape to that was all your own? And then it swallowed you up and became your prison?”

I’m not actually sure when we began calling him “The Mage.” But the better I’ve gotten to know him, the more I suspect it was at his own request.

His real name, this unprecedented foreigner, is Tomoya Alan-Faria from Pittsburgh — a musical collection of syllables that once thrilled me. I mentioned I have a thing for poetry. I would incant these over and over in whispers as I deboned fish, pressed moisture out of woven kelp. And I suspect, though can’t prove, that he caught me at it once. There’s no other reason he should have requested me by name for the cohort assigned to bathe, feed, and cart him around after his accident. Let alone singled me out for training as his “personal research assistant.”

I didn’t complain, of course. I only cared that he would give me access to his books. And that he would teach me the language they were written in.

But it bothered me that he claimed to have chosen me because of my arm. Because I would “understand him” in a way no one else could now. And because, he’d said, lifting my chin and turning my face from side to side, his new insight into misfortune enabled him to find and foster talent where “others would never expect it.”

To be clear, he had been fully mobile the first several times he visited. Always carting in more books and odd equipment. Always wearing a kind of blue-leather armor he called “jeans” wrapped tightly around each leg. Always talking about the year – 1996, 1998 – as though he imagined we held no tally of Anno Domini.

But then, he slipped on one of those treacherously slick cliffside footholds connecting our underwater domes to the craigy surface. And, worse than landing on naked rock, he splashed into our construction site pool. Days later, they found him unconscious, soaking hip-deep in a solution our ancestors had discovered would rapidly transform anything placed therein (shells, fish bones, even braids of human hair) into solid stone. “Petrification,” I’ve since learned, is the Mage’s word for it. He is full of such words.

He has scarcely seen the sky since that day, though. He couldn’t retrieve his mechanical boat, and our divers found its wreckage after a bad storm. So I’m unsurprised, in this moment I’m rehabinating, at his soliloquy about secret worlds and prisons.

“It’s like our story,” I remark, “of a wren trapped inside the mountain. Immortal, but unable to cross lava lakes and resume her true form.”

I flick to a well-worn crease in the book I am shelving for him and brush my fingertip across now familiar lines: “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea.” Words about my world from a poet who had never seen my world, never imagined it actually existed. But who somehow sourced the image as a metaphor for mental prisons formed beneath the pressures of his own world.

“Hmm?” the Mage intones. “A wren?”

“Yes,” I snap, the elegantly-woven threads of my reverie swept away like cobwebs. “A sea wren. From our stories.”

The Mage shrugs. He does this often: this gesture that physically releases him from existential responsibilities. He has told me more than once that he believes himself to be a great peacekeeper and rationalist – that other people’s “drama” is the source of all suffering. Both their own and his.

"Well, actually," he redirects, "You won't have thought of this, but that word 'wren' is pronounced exactly like the modern French word for 'queen.' Isn't that fun?" I nod wearily. They are not pronounced the same, and he is not the first to make this connection. We have a tongue-twister nursery rhyme about a wren who reigns as queen. But peace costs silence.

"Also," he continues, "the term 'sea wren,' if spelled S-I-R-E-N-E, is just your French pronunciation for the English word 'siren.' Now, Mair, obviously, sirens are Greek mythology, via Homer. But, in contemporary fantasy, we conceptualize them as more-or-less interchangeable with ... mermaids."

He glows, waiting for this revelation to strike some chord.

Again, I swallow my true thoughts. Which is that his nickname for me, "Mair," sounds like our French words both for "sea" and "mother." And I've yet to work out which he unconsciously perceives in me.

"Yes," I say, "I've seen 'mermaids' in your fairy books. Hans Christian Andersen. The concepts seem similar."

"But how," he chuckles, "could a mermaid get inside a volcano? Was there a stream that dried up? Did someone carry her?"

"In our stories," I say, "wrens can grow legs when they choose and walk unnoticed among humans. They don't need a witch to curse them. In some tales, they pass through a veil-covered doorway, shimmering like the surface of the sea. In others, their legs part during menstruation, so they can rest on land, away from ocean predators. In others, they use a magic mirror."

"A magic mirror!" This piques his interest.

"Yes," I say. "They see in it another version of themselves. A version they lost when their ancestors took to the sea. It's a kind of metaphor."

But I can already read how he has absorbed this particular metaphor, applied it to himself. To his own exile, his own legs. So I hurry on.

"It represents our shipwrecked forebears' losses. Their reinvention of life here. There are no actual magic mirrors," I add. "It's just a story."

"But legends are rooted in fact," he muses. "Like, maybe it wasn't an actual mirror. Maybe it's another underground lake, but with properties that reverse petrification. Bacteria that stimulate cell regeneration, or something."

He shrugs again. "Or, maybe magic is real. I sometimes think you don't see the magic of this place because it inhabits you, saturates your entire, purer way of life, so deeply." There is a beat of silence while his words land.

I do not like the way they feel. There is something about them that makes me think of worms in the corpses of long-dead fish.

"If magic here were real," I retort, intentionally side-stepping his meaning, "The First Marie would not have had to drown herself. Something, anything, would have intervened."

"The 'first Marie'?" he's taken aback. "Who was she?"

My voice escapes me for a moment. In childhood, I left tearful offerings at my namesake's memorial. She is precious to me. She does not belong to this outsider who fancies himself a magician.

I have not, in fact, spoken about her to anyone in years. I rarely invoke her memory inside myself. Something about the history of her drowning feels unspeakable to me, particularly as I grow older and understand more. It has become untouchable for its horror.

"She was Mother of the Bulles," I say at last. "All of our mother. The distant arrière-grand-mère of everyone alive here today. The only surviving woman on board our forefather's ship. A woman foreign to them, with dark skin, sold into bondage. Whom

they denied equal status even on a deserted island of her own discovery. Even surrounded by children, the makings of an entire nation, that she had born to each of them. Against her will." I pause to gasp for air, drowning in my own pent-up fury.

The Mage gapes at me like a skinned fish. I think he might interject, shrug me off. Wave away my "drama" with a fluttering, cursive gesture.

But instead, he grows silent. Creases dent his forehead. His glance darts between the hollowed-out bookshelves and his fists.

"I don't know," he says, "in which of these books you would have discovered identity politics," he spits the foreign phrase. "But you know enough about my world to know contemporary society isn't some Utopia. Demonizing men didn't somehow fix everything. I ..." he trails off. "I am going to bed. You are still welcome to sleep on your mat at my feet. Tomorrow, we can look for 'magic mirrors.'"

But he does not know, I reflect grimly, now opening my eyes underwater to muted seal-gray light, that I am going to find that magic mirror tonight. Even if it does not exist.

I have no clear plan or aim beyond this insane craving to experience distance, open space, exertion. I have not committed to some fugitive flight, have not stolen the fragile, hollow-stone canoes sometimes used for fishing. That might have been smart, actually. But I have also, for the record, not tied rocks around my neck, although the thought occurred to me. Not because I am bent on self-destruction. Just as an option. A fail-safe.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea

Hazy remembrance of a deep-water vent, an old garbage chute and channelled release for toxic gasses, returns to me. If I had trained as a diver, I would have inspected these vents as part of my regular duties. So I have some sense of where they are. I'll need to plummet deep into the blackness.

Repressing imagery of underwater graveyards spread invisibly below, telling myself of course my very first idea will bear fruit, of course a mythical, lost magical artifact would end up in human rubbish, I sink past the domed, rough-glass bubbles strung along the mountain's slopes like pearls. I can see inside some of them: a sun-hungry garden, filigreed roofless structures dividing up living spaces.

I have measured out my life in coffee spoons. . . .

But I underestimated the uselessness of my arm. I am out of shape, even my lungs. And though I fight it off, chanting to myself that mental control is half the battle, knife-sharp desperation for air seizes my body. I am acutely aware that I never completed the training to push past this part.

And we have lingered in the chambers of the sea. . . .

And seconds into panic, I realize I'm... hallucinating? These lines I've been mouthing are no longer mere abstractions inside my head. I can actually hear the voices of those modern poets I devoured from the Mage's bookshelf: a cross-hatched, gossamer dialogue caught between the past and the vividly urgent present. A tangle of thoughts swimming and swimming around the periphery of my body at the very moment this body draws me frantically inward, threatening to implode.

“We have lingered in the chambers of the sea....”

And in me she has drowned a young girl....

“By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown....”

And in me, an old woman rises toward her....

“Till human voices wake us....”

Day after day....

“and we drown.”

Like a terrible fish.

And then I remember. Remember my childhood. Remember the stories told about me, about what I said, after that shark dragged me under. After I almost drowned the first time. That the voices of wrens sounded like poetry inside my head. Poetry I hadn't read yet.

Except, now I have read it. Now, the musical words could be coming from my own heart. From the few parts of myself I found, rather than lost, inside of the Mage's chambers. As if my own inner landscape, my poets, and these voices which sing them back to me, are all connected in some endless circle. As if we are somehow all the same.

And then suddenly. Inexplicably. With this half-formed thought still chasing up the shoreline of my consciousness, the very light and atmosphere around me shift. Turn to sizzling, fevered iridescence. I find myself awake inside of a vivid and highly malleable dream. And the dream-world is made of magic.

Encircled by the swirl of voices, I find myself descending, as if through a tunnel, towards a flawless reflective pool contained within the water, suspended high above the ocean floor. It mirrors sunset, as though the sky had bent low enough to trail its brilliant, gauzy tendrils in the dark sea.

I see myself in the pool's gloss. And reflected behind me, or perhaps before me on the other side of the watery portal (it's hard to tell which), I perceive at last that I am flanked by companions whose faces I can't make out — women with wildly long hair in all imaginable hues fanned out around them, reaching well beyond their outstretched fingertips. A net to catch me, should I burst.

And one in particular, a woman with rich brown skin, achingly familiar, reaches toward me, her voice ringing high above the others as she calls out my name: "Marie! Marie! Marie!" *Is this your name, too?* I want to ask her. Though part of me doesn't need an answer. Part of me already knows.

And if it is, did I drown, too? Am I also dead?

The searing pain in my lungs pulls me back to my body. Which, unfortunately, is still undeniably alive. Though for how much longer, I could not say.

I drag my eyes to my reflection in the shimmering pool, expecting my vision to go blurry and then dark. Expecting my own, worry-drawn face to be the last thing I ever see, as I myself fade into a watery memory. A memory important only to foolish young girls, like I once was, who do not yet understand how unfathomably little the world will value them. How readily it will use them up, discard them, and forget.

But my reflection neither flails nor faints. It revives. It glows with health and strength. And as I lift my hand, touch the pool, I feel, while I witness, sunset-colored fish scales unfurling down the curves of my legs. My feet lengthening and flattening into a powerful, shimmering tail. A fish's tail.

Like a wren's.

I open my mouth instinctively, gulp in the rubbery-smooth ocean, and find that, as it fills me — like a memory, an aspiration — I can breathe it as if it were air.

New lightness traces through my veins, a wild, ecstatic joy blooming from someplace just behind my sternum.

With an experimental shift, a wiggle of my body, I push myself fully through the glossy pool. On the other side of it, the ring of women, all of whom I now recognize as sea wrens, greet me with beaming faces. Swim towards me. Enfold me with gentle arms.

It feels, I think, like being born for the first time.

I am not prepared for the sensation of vastness that suffuses my newfound form. Water, I find, contains memories of all it has touched. Water is among the oldest things on earth. It has touched the breadth and depth of earth, in one form or another. And I contain this water. *I am* this water. I am its form now. I am a lake, like those secreted within the caverns of the Bulles. The lakes which harden around invading objects until they have been shaped for the purpose of building something new. The lakes which

winnow their way through impenetrable mountains, hollowing space out of nothingness for air, for movement, for life.

But I myself am no longer the hollow space, waiting to be filled. I am a sea. I am an entire ocean within the ocean. I encompass all things I both am and am not. And as I turn to follow my sisters, my ancestors, into the waters of immemorial time, I reflect, with my own distinct smugness, that I am something the Mage never was. Even before he turned to stone. Even before he rooted himself in the only, minuscule, vastly imperfect world I had ever known and tried to tell it what it was. Before he sank his teeth into it, like that shark into my arm. Before he adopted it as his project, his prison, the glass bubble that he will die in.

I smooth a hand along my forearm, marveling at how the familiar old wounds illuminate with a penetrative healing glow. Their shapes, a testament to my life, to the self I have become, remain. But the pain of it falls away from me like scales.

I am free.

About the Author

Rachael Raine Rivers is an academic librarian in the Midwestern United States who has officially entered her fantasy/fairytale era. She is also a harpist, a poet and songwriter, a small-space gardener, and a remarkably bad roller skater. She enjoys embracing wonder and whimsy in her daily life and choosing to believe the best of people. She has already been advised, thank you, that she is perhaps "too sensitive" and "too much."

Last dance of the small house

by Luca Fois

The house's so small that when my boyfriend calls,
his breath too warm, my body melts with snow.
I stretch my arms, besotted with the walls.

The books of poetry, an orgy on the floor
with ivy and pothos he with such care grows.
Our house's real small and when my boyfriend calls

the window shakes. But maybe it's the squalls,
upcoming storms and people brains that close.
I stretch my arms, my body's in the walls.

The kitchen table is floating above the hall.
A violent shaking, the house in its death throes
and from the other side, I hear my boyfriend call.

On the door lintel, a lively cockroach crawls;
if I am a ghost, why am I wearing clothes?
To stretch my arms, I lie against the wall.

The vines, the dust, the hair unruly sprawl,
within my lungs a maddening of crows.

His house's so small, I barely hear my call.
I fold my arms, my body is the walls.

About the Author

Luca Fois is a poet from Edinburgh. He loves chaos. You can find him on various social media sites as cuttinghail (but on Instagram as happy_narvalo). His work has appeared in *Streetcake Magazine*, *Tiny Wren Lit*, *Corvus Review*, *Black Stone/White Stone*, and *BRAWL lit*. He has been shortlisted for The Brilliant Poetry prize.

The Last Somnambulist Parade

by G.W. Musko

Gone are the somnambulist parades.

When dusk looms and the last sleepwalker appears atop the hill, no heads turn. I alone cross the veil to hang over the town as witness.

Now the sun has dipped lower, and he has careened into the thick of town. Guards once cleared the streets, now cruel steel beetles push him with honks and curses. No passerby guides him onto the pavement, not even when he is struck and reels away bleeding.

Only the dead and near-dead remember the parade is no frolic. The others forget the dreamer is clearing a path through the field of nightmares, so they may sleep unharmed.

Again, he falls into the blind crowd and is pushed away. I see the tides of time come to claim a fellow forgotten one, and my sympathy swells. I descend, cross through the web of wire and emerge corporeal.

He wakes; his milk eyes open wide with shock. The mortal sleeper clutches at his heart, then drops on the wet cobbles.

One old man outside a pub sees us. Shadows of a half-remembered boyhood pass over his face. Evenings spent in a crowd of children struggling for a glimpse at the scarecrow in nightclothes. He doesn't understand the tears welling in his eyes. Before they can stream down, he turns his face and retreats inside. The coming crowd washes over the lump on the pavement.

It no longer matters. We have risen into the wires beyond the veil.

Here, where the moon never sets, riders on white steeds lead the parade over the eternal black beaches. We wear masks, and the band plays wailing trumpets. Dancers twirl, a multitude of voices howl, and our somnambulist marches on while the wind swirls nightmares onto an unsuspecting world.

About the Author

G.W. Musko was born in Warsaw in 2001. He has a penchant for writing macabre stories, which you can read more of in *Tenebrous Antiquities*, *World of Horror*, and at gwmusko.com/portfolio. He can be found under a rock or on most social media @gwmusko.

The Sky Repairer

by Amanda Fetter

The day the sky fractured, Abigail sat on her front porch, drinking tea and gazing at the trees. She heard a faint crunch and cocked her head, mug halfway to her mouth: A jagged crack appeared above a cloudbank in the eastern sky.

She set down her mug, wondering which remedy she ought to try first.

Watch gears were increasingly scarce, and she'd used the last of the summer's goodbyes on Thursday. Laughter might work, as long as it was sincere. Abigail thought, too, of the zinnias and climbing roses in her garden. She wasn't partial; anything that would keep the sky unbroken and unblemished would do.

She packed her satchel and hoisted her ladder under her arm, quiet anxiety speeding her steps along the oak-lined streets. She only paused for a moment when she reached the edge of town, where an empty field stretched into the distance — and the serrated crack was there, high above her head, waiting.

Songbirds darted beneath her, twittering and scolding. The ladder wobbled, but held fast. Abigail had never fallen — not really.

She reached towards the crack, testing its fragility with a practiced touch. Instantly, the crack splintered and gaped. Abigail froze; the sky rippled like an enormous sheet of metal.

One broken thing at a time, she whispered. She opened her satchel. As she considered whether she should begin with spider's silk or babies' yawns, she heard the unmistakable rush of water, roaring over rock and height and space.

It was coming from the crack in the sky.

Things slipped through sometimes – music, snatches of conversation, even wildflower seeds and strange insects. Of course she'd wondered what was on the other side. Of course. But she'd never once tried to peer beyond. She'd only ever wanted to make her own sky whole, to seal in the boundaries of every choice that had shaped the life she knew.

But water – at this height? Abigail glanced again at the town spread like a map on the horizon, the birds swooping and wheeling just out of reach. She stood on tiptoe, allowing curiosity to overcome caution. The ladder wobbled again, and she put out a reflexive, steadyng hand. Her palm landed on the still-spidering crack and punched straight through the sky.

Water and worlds thundering, she lost her balance, and for the first time in her life, Abigail fell.

She plunged into deep water.

Abigail experienced a moment of vertigo, hair swirling, limbs suspended in liquid weightlessness. She kicked towards the surface, her lungs demanding air.

Snow-crusted mountains reflected in the mirror-still lake, their summits pink in the sunset. She collapsed on the shore, eyes already panning the sky in search of the crack. But this sky, drenched in clear, neon-brilliant light, was undamaged. It was not hers.

Abigail wrung out her hair and clothes as best she could and tipped the excess water out of her satchel. Stars winked into the velvetng sky as she approached a fisherman sitting alone on a rocky outcropping, his line dangling into the water.

His face was scarred — a map of violence, both given and received — but she knew in an instant that his soul was gentle. Had always been.

He reeled in his catch: a heart. Not a human organ of muscle and blood, but a child's drawing made substantive, a two-lobed Valentine's gift pulsing weakly in the dusk. Abigail could see that it was broken.

The fisherman examined its cuts and tears in the glow of its own watercolor wash of light. After a time, he tossed it back into the lake. It slipped beneath the surface, its luminescence still visible as it sank.

"Will it heal?" Abigail asked.

The fisherman turned and considered her. Gave the barest ghost of a smile. "It might," he said, "but that's not always the point." A pause. "I saw you arrive."

Abigail shivered; the temperature was dropping. "You say that like it's normal. Can you tell me where we are? Or how I can go — back?" Her teeth chattered.

The fisherman wordlessly handed her a thick sweater from a canvas sack at his feet. She pulled it over her head gratefully. "Not really," he replied. "I came here when I was done wandering."

Abigail sat beside him and tried not to notice that the sweater was riddled with holes. "Wandering?"

"Through worlds like these. You can go on if you'd rather."

He reeled in another broken heart, this one glowing magenta in the half-light. He offered it to Abigail.

Worlds like these. She took the heart. It was ripped nearly in half, the line jagged.

"Can I try fixing it?" she asked, seized with the compulsion to fix what was broken.

The fisherman shrugged.

She dug in her satchel, the cold forgotten. She'd only ever fixed the sky, but how different could a broken heart be? She settled on a simple paste of gardenias and piano nocturnes, then applied it directly to the site of the wound.

The heart grew fat with light, its radiance reflecting in her face. Abigail's own heart soared, flush with the excitement of repairing something — of making it whole — of swiftly and expertly saving it from brokenness. She was on the point of putting it triumphantly back into the fisherman's hands when the heart's light abruptly faded.

She pulled it close and watched, stunned, as her handiwork melted away from the reopening wound, leaving the broken heart raw and exposed once more. Skies and hearts were perhaps less alike than she thought.

Abigail applied remedies to the heart all night. Sometimes its condition improved, and she sighed in relief: The heart was not doomed to an imperfect existence. But the relief was always short-lived. Each time, the momentary glow of healing faded and died in her hands.

Near dawn, Abigail held the broken heart, staring sightlessly towards the lake. Gently, the fisherman reached over and took it. As he had before, he examined the heart, turning it this way and that, an observer. A witness. He glanced at Abigail, then tossed the heart back into the lake.

"You might not need to fix it." His voice was soft. "You'll both survive."

Abigail stood. His words were impossible; nothing fixed itself. She would find the hole in her sky, would heal it, would fix what was broken.

She retrieved an empty jar from her satchel and filled it with lake water.

"Would you mind putting a few hearts in here? I'd like to take them with me."

The fisherman didn't argue.

Worlds like these.

In each one, she searched for her cracked sky, hunting for a way to return home, aching for something — anything — to repair.

She thumbed through filing cabinets of unanswered letters and ignored invitations, vexed at the absence of return addresses. She composed discordant symphonies on an upright piano with missing keys, the jar of broken hearts perched on its lid. She lost her way as she paced mazelike hallways in the dark, desperate not to wake the sleeping child in her arms.

She woke beside strange compilations of all the lovers she'd ever had. They gave her strange gifts: a pencil that only marked the surface of the sea. A vial that glittered with the unmistakable color of regret. Moonlit pebbles collected from liminal spaces. A skein of thread, whisper-thin and strong as steel, spun from every *Never* she'd ever defied.

She wore the fisherman's sweater in snowstorms and windstorms and sandstorms, but could find no yarn to mend it, its tears and snags a constant reminder of past pains that she would rather keep hidden away.

Months or maybe minutes later, she entered a cathedral where stained glass windows mapped a mythos she didn't recognize. She sank into a pew, clutching the jar of hearts.

Somewhere out of sight, a single voice sang a tentative, questioning note. More voices joined, branching; the music rebounded, its dissonance reaching for resolution, mirroring so perfectly the state of Abigail's lost and longing heart. The voices washed over her bones, scrubbing her soul clean, leaving yearning wonder in their wake.

As the music rose and fell, thick with ethereal harmonies, the miracle occurred, unlooked for: One of the hearts became whole, pulsating with ebullient new light.

Abigail watched in astonishment as the last notes faded into silence, but the heart's light remained strong.

She didn't witness every healing. Some mornings she woke to find that a heart had healed as she slept. At other times, she watched them change, slowly, like orchids unfolding.

Once, it happened as she sheltered a young girl in her arms, carrying her from a dilapidated house where the very walls continually bellowed *shut up shut up shut up*. Abigail handed the girl the jar of hearts to hold — anything to distract her, to comfort her, to muffle the verbal assault as they made their escape.

But not every heart healed — *not yet*, she taught herself to think. *One broken thing at a time*. She ached with the remembrance of hurts given and received, and it was in those moments of weakness that she still longed to heal the broken hearts herself. Slowly, she learned to let them be broken, learned to surrender to the halting, unpredictable flight of time.

Worlds away from where she'd first fallen, she found it: the hole in the sky gaping over the ocean like a missing tooth, ugly and dark, impossible to miss: the way home.

A schooner laid at anchor beneath the harbor cliffs. Its captain, a salt-scorched woman given to belting lusty sea shanties, requested a heading. Abigail pointed towards the hole in the sky. The captain asked no questions, but charted a course over the waves, sailing away from the hissing, rock-walled shoreline.

The schooner, ballasted with the weight of words, rode into an ocean of garbage — *her* garbage — everything she'd ever wasted or thrown away: tea bags, term papers, and toothbrushes; liquefied vegetable remains and rancid meat trimmings; shingles and shadows and shampoo bottles; wrappers and packages and mementoes and mistakes.

The voyage took hours, or maybe weeks.

Abigail prepared as best she could, mixing compounds in jam jars and weaving a wide net from the strongest fibers she could scavenge. She considered using the fisherman's sweater — it was in tatters — but couldn't bring herself to unravel it completely.

She spotted a ladder bobbing in the garbage, its legs just visible from the ocean's surface. She recognized it instantly; it was her father's ladder, the one she'd used to reach the first crack she'd ever seen in her sky.

She'd snuck out just before sunrise. That first crack was easy enough to repair — it needed only a smear of apple blossoms and a whiff of bottled fireflies — but she'd positioned the ladder poorly, and the bottom two rungs snapped when she was halfway through her descent. She'd crashed to the ground, shaken and chagrined, but unhurt.

She'd hurried home, replaced the ladder, crept back into bed, and never spoken of it to anyone, even when her father asked about the damaged ladder. The repaired cracks, she had an inkling, were better off unacknowledged. Untold.

He'd raised a dubious eyebrow at the lie, but didn't question her further. Instead, he'd laid a hand on her shoulder, his voice unexpectedly tender: "We'll just fix one broken thing at a time."

The hole grinned and lengthened, and still they seemed no closer. Abigail struggled to hold her creeping worry at bay, the dread she'd long forbidden from taking shape: that this time, the crack might prove irreparable — or worse, that she didn't *want* to repair it.

And if she didn't? Would the worlds shatter piece by piece, or collapse in silent oblivion? Would there be chaos and suffering for those who remained? Perhaps she could simply stay, like the scarred fisherman — a wandering pilgrim, singing with

invisible choirs and fishing for broken hearts and walking in liminal spaces. Perhaps she could find such a purpose.

During the long watches of night, she held the luminous jar of hearts, taking comfort in their gentle light as the ship skimmed the detrital tide. Once, she scooped out a broken heart and examined it, feeling a familiar ache in her chest – painful yet sweet, like pressing on a bruise.

She remembered the fisherman's words: *You might not need to fix it.*

Worlds like these.

Was her home, too, a world like these?

Did she need to repair every crack in her brittle sky? Or was it enough to witness the brokenness, to hug the jar to her chest and watch in wonder as the healing happened, always unexpected, always a miracle?

She thought of the ancient quorum of oaks lining her street, their branches forming tributaries of fern and moss and sunlight. She thought of her steaming mug on the front porch, long since grown cold. She thought of the cracked, imperfect sky that framed her life – the life she'd chosen once and would choose, unhesitatingly, again – again – again.

She slipped the broken heart back into the jar.

The ship hove to beneath the hole in the sky.

It was larger than she'd anticipated. From the crow's nest, Abigail reached towards the yawning blackness, hair whipping her face. Her fingers touched nothing. She jumped as high as she could; the hole remained irritatingly out of reach.

The wind shifted.

A bank of dark, roiling clouds raced westward towards the schooner, their depths crackling with purple lightning. The sun dimmed as the captain reefed the sails, shouting frantically to Abigail.

The first sheets of rain broke upon the ship. The ocean of garbage swelled and struck the schooner's sides; the captain sprinted to the helm and wrestled the wheel. She pointed the bow at the oncoming waves, steering the schooner straight into the storm.

Thunder rumbled as Abigail gripped the sides of the crow's nest to keep her footing. Rain stung her face, tasting like tears. On a vast upswell, the ship soared aloft, and she reached again for the hole. This time, her fingers caught its edge and came away bleeding; a chunk of sky splintered off and plummeted into the sea as the ship slid down the other side of the wave.

Abigail braced herself against wood and iron and snatched supplies from her satchel. She waited for the ship to rise again, clutching her handwoven net tight in both hands, a threaded needle clenched between her teeth.

The sea lurched. Great waves of garbage undulated below the schooner, thrusting the ship upward. Abigail flung the net into the sky — once, twice — the third time, its weave hooked on the hole's edges. There was no time to consider her courage. She cinched her satchel against her back and leaped, her fingers only just catching the bottom edge of the net.

The net held. She climbed until both feet were secure in its thick, strong lines. Working quickly, Abigail used the thread of Never to stitch the net securely to the sky, forming a makeshift hammock where at last she huddled, exhausted and sopping wet, fingers shaking from cold and fear and what might have been hope.

It was difficult to see through the unrelenting rain, but she thought she saw the captain salute her as the ship surged forward and away into the raging sea.

The lightning grew closer.

She began at the edges with the strongest stuff she could find: youthful determination, maps of migratory patterns, sequoia sap, unrequited love, seasoned love. It held, but only just. She used lighter things for the next layer — hummingbird tailfeathers, beetle exoskeletons, whispered endearments — but the more she added, the more the patch sagged and crumbled.

One broken thing at a time, she whispered as she tried remedy after remedy, holding nothing back, smearing and pushing and hurling everything in her possession at the hole in the sky in frenzied desperation.

The patch was too heavy, too large. It buckled under its own weight, and Abigail could only watch in horror as her work collapsed and plunged into the torrent below, leaving the chasm in the sky blacker and more immense than ever.

Sobbing, Abigail crumpled into the net. Only the jar of broken hearts remained in her satchel. She pulled it out. Considered it. Hugged it to her chest. Whispered an apology to the mountain fisherman that sounded more like a prayer.

She unscrewed the lid and pulled a heart from the jar. She tore it clean through, exposing its soft interior that glistened with loss and uncertainty and desire. With the heart, she painted over the hole in the sky, the iridescent pigments staining her hands with their secret hurt, their unspeakable grief, their holy surrender.

The sky accepted the offering. It absorbed and knitted the heart-paint into its own fabric, creating new wholeness where, moments before, there had only been emptiness. When the first heart was spent, she tore another, then another. It took every broken heart in the jar to paint over the hole in the sky — one brokenness to repair another. The new sky quivered with their light.

The storm was nearly spent. Abigail fashioned a harness from the net and tugged on the thread of Never, making sure her stitching was secure. She gripped the jar of remaining hearts with one arm. With the other, she pulled open the last crack in the newborn sky, faint and soft and flexible. She took a deep breath and pitched forward into the opening, somersaulting into the void.

During the long fall, she thought she heard a sea shanty on the wind.

She wore the fisherman's sweater every day when the weather was cool enough.

It was impossible to find a yarn that matched the original fibers. Instead, she mended its holes, slowly, with bottled birdflight and secret dreams and the reflected phosphorescence of rescued hearts, her own included.

If the sky cracked again, she chose not to judge its weakness. On Abigail's front porch, the light cast dappled shadows, green and golden and shifting, and the sun warmed the horizon's fragile sky.

About the Author

Amanda Fetters is into stories that span our shared human experiences in surprising, hopeful ways. She lives in Louisiana with her family, where she teaches college writing. Her work appears in *Short Reads*, *Abraxas Review*, *Hearth Stories*, and *The Lit Nerds*. You can also find her on Threads and Instagram at [amanda_fettters_writes](https://www.instagram.com/amanda_fettters_writes).

Offerings to the City

by Michael Bettendorf

The street below the squatter's apartment resembles a circuit board. The squatter rubs his hands together, his breath filling the room with apparitions. Below, an old man waits for a bus that won't show because it hasn't in over three years. Not since the last drop ship.

The ship is never coming back either.

Another broken promise.

It probably had nothing to do with the captain's unwillingness to save more people, the squatter thinks. But only death waits out in space. The squatter doesn't believe in the existence of haven planets. No space stations either. None that could support a population as large and desperate as the one remaining down here, anyway.

In the dark, behind thin and chipping drywall, his neighbor shrieks at ghosts; and when the squatter pounds on the wall, pleading for him to be quiet, it causes a chain reaction.

Malnourished babies crying. Hungry dogs barking. Broken and vulnerable people hurling threats of violence, their patience and capacity for empathy toward one another slowly dwindling to delicate ash.

The squatter returns to the window, and eventually, the disquiet dissipates.

Time passes as the luxury of sleep escapes him. He continues to watch the old man, who has since rolled onto his side on the aluminum-framed bench. The squatter holds onto the belief that the old man hasn't given up on the bus, but has instead settled into

an obscure sense of tranquility that comes with this particular type of government-assisted destitution. The bench is transformed into an altar, and the old man's body lies in repose as if offering himself to the city.

The squatter knows better, though, because the city has no use for sacrifices and offerings. The city only takes. It always has.

The cold bites at his fingertips and toes while one of the city's last taxpayer initiatives is hard at work on the street below. An automated trash bot rolls on ill-maintained treads, traversing the uneven pavement. It maneuvers until it reaches the old man and vacuums a thin layer of fallen ash from his fading military surplus jacket.

The squatter can't hear the chime from his vantage point, but he recognizes the glinting light as the trash bot finishes its job. He imagines the automated voice requesting payment for the custom cleaning job. Its mechanical larynx sputters accepted payment options. Its wired vocal cords beg for its hard work to be acknowledged.

The old man pushes the trash bot over while the squatter debates burning his mattress for warmth.

About the Author

Michael Bettendorf (he/him) is a multi-genre writer from the Midwest. He's the author of experimental black metal gamebook *TRVE CVLT* (2024), cyber-noir collection *Midwestern Chrome* (2026), and literary bizarro novella *Help! I Can't Stop Shitting Snakes* (2027). His short fiction has appeared/forthcoming at *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Mythaxis*, and elsewhere. He works in a high school library in Lincoln, NE – a place he believes is too strange to be a flyover state. Find him on Bluesky @BeardedBetts and michaelbettendorfwrites.com.

the shadowed stag

by Isaiah Alexander Gatlin

sometimes he becomes
a stag of nightwood,
antlers tangled with smoke,
hooves ringing hollow
on floors he never treads.

he slips through doors
i didn't open,
breath like wind
cutting through paper-thin walls.

i call –
his voice is sap,
the scrape of a saw,
a shadow folding itself
around my chest.

he leaves tokens:
a coin, a ribbon,
a folded note
curled in fur
that disappears before dawn.

sometimes he storms –
windows shake,

chairs leap,
eyes lantern-black
tracking worlds without him.

he is inheritance:
distance made flesh,
work, fury, love
spun into fur and horn.

i reach
for antlers,
for hooves,
for the echo
he leaves behind.

i learn to carry
his absence like fire,
to fold it into my own bones,
to walk between shadows
and know
he is both
myth and father,
present only in pieces
that blur, shift, vanish.

About the Author

Isaiah Alexander is a Black gay poet and writer from Houston, Texas. His work explores memory, desire, grief, and transformation through surreal and lyrical imagery. He shares his poetry on Instagram @theebadwriter, experimenting with voice, form, and rhythm.

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