

A surreal oil painting featuring a woman's face in the foreground, looking slightly to the right. On top of her head is the head of a large owl with striking yellow eyes and a blue beak. In the background, a large, cratered full moon hangs over a turbulent blue ocean. A smaller owl is visible in the water to the left. The overall style is painterly and fantastical.

ISSUE
12

The Fantastic Other

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Issue 12

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Cover Art: Cycles

by Amuri Morris



Description: This dreamlike oil painting depicts a woman submerged in roiling waves from the shoulders down. An owl head appears to be emerging from or is a part of the form of her scalp. Over her right shoulder, another ghostly owl appears to fade into the waves. Behind her and crowning her, a full moon glows against the night sky.

About the Artist

Amuri Morris is an artist based in Richmond, Va. She recently graduated from painting and printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University. Prior to that, she attended a Center for the Arts in High School. Throughout the years, she has acquired several artistic accolades such as a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship and has participated in over a dozen exhibitions. Her artistic interests range from her identity as a black woman, nature, and fantastical themes.

A Note from the Editor

The sunset of one day led to the rise of the next. Our summers diminished to the dark, and new ones came to stretch the days long. Before we could realize it, we reached our twelfth issue of *The Fantastic Other*. Editors and contributors have come and gone, though we were lucky enough to see some talented people remain with us. While the dream of our magazine continues, our waking lives have turned into something of a fugue.

I suspect that the years may seem a blur to many of our readers as well. The title of our cover art is called “Cycles,” which I think is a fitting reminder for our era. Though we live in unprecedented times, it is good to remember that the tide will ebb again. And likewise, it is good to remember what comfort a good story can bring, wherever it might meet us in our lives.

Some of the works in this issue may bite. Some have sharp teeth, while others attack with deadly kindness. Some may stick with you because of their disturbing implications, while others might woo you with a dream of what could be. However they affect you, I hope you will join us in taking shelter in the worlds these words bring us. And I hope they will remind you, as they remind me, why it is we write and strive to create fantastic things.

G.E. Butler, Chief Editor

Urban Ghost Ledger

by Tyler Jagt

DATE	LOCATION	ENTRY	DEBIT	CREDIT	BALANCE
06/14/20XX	Apartment above the bar	Left quickly	One key, one chair	--	Empty room
07/02/20XX	Bridge over the river	Walked back and forth until dawn	Four hours of sleep	One vague sense of survival	Deeper eye circles
08/19/20XX	Hospital parking lot	Smoking through visiting hours	A pair of lungs	Ten minutes of not crying	--
09/03/20XX	Corner of 9th and --	Kissed the wrong person	Dignity	--	New ghost in the file
10/27/20XX	Your old street	Walked past your window, did not knock	All that restraint	One glimpse of you alive and laughing	Compounded
12/11/20XX	Rooftop of your first building	Climbed up just to see	Frozen hands	City light	Static in the blood
01/01/20XY	Friend's bathroom	Cried over the sink	Mascara, pride	Two arms around your shoulders	Slightly softened edge
03/09/20XY	Train back into town	Pressed forehead to the glass, watched suburbs	Ticket, three hours	Confirmation you still know the route	Heart rate
05/23/20XY	Favorite cafe (now closed)	Stood in front of the dark windows	Hope that this could be the same	--	Negative nostalgia
07/30/20XY	New apartment, different part	Signed lease	Whatever mistake I'll make next	A door that opens only for you	Slightly in the black

About the Author

Tyler Jagt (he/him) is from Ontario, Canada and lives presently in Georgia. He teaches at Mercer University.

Maiden, Crone

by Brittany Redd

I never meant to bring the moon down, to break the only thing I was made to usher forth.

I was a promising Maiden. In those days, the world seemed to bloom at my feet, a sea of moonflowering potential as far as the dim light could reveal. It was easy enough to delight in the abundance of youth. “Look, look!” I would say when I learned to draw down the first rays of light to reveal the hole I had pierced in the sky.

“Someday, someday you will be the best of us,” they said.

And I believed them.

And then the day came when I shed my Maiden’s skin. It slipped clean off, with no warning. No one ever told me it would happen quite like this. I’m ashamed to say that I tried to put it back on, to wear it like a coat for just a little longer. It warped and sagged unbecomingly.

It was time to step into the fullness of illumination. It was time to become Mother.

Drawing down the light had been so easy before. Now, all of a sudden, any time I tried to summon the beams, I found myself alone in the dark. “It’s still so early,” they would say. “Give it time.”

And one by one the Maidens who had been Maidens with me had their turn in the light. Became Mothers. Soon, it would have to be my turn. It was now or never.

“You can do it,” they said. “Just give it a try.”

And at the zenith of the auspicious hour, I could only conjure darkness. I felt the light slip away, skin sloughing off once again all too soon.

About the Author

Brittany Redd (she/they) is a teacher and writer in Thailand. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Funicular Magazine*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Space & Time*, and elsewhere.

The She-Fiend of Thurmond

by Alex K. Masse

Cordelia had sworn she'd never come to Thurmond again, but her employers weren't to be disobeyed. The sun was merciless, not just in its heat but as a spotlight, showing the Depression at work. Bones of old businesses, boarded-up husks of homes, all pale and stark against the trees.

A better person would blush to come back here in all the finery she was wearing, pearls and gems from the city aglitter. But she hadn't been a better person for a long time.

Instead, she'd kept her head low and focused on her path, checking in with barely a word. She'd lingered just long enough to see the bellhop's timid, freckled face break into a grin at the size of his tip and then slipped off to her room.

If nothing else, there was a thrill to staying in the Dun Glen Hotel, rather than merely changing its sheets for spare change. On the outside, it was just as imposing as she'd remembered, a wide wooden lodge standing tall and prideful, overlooking the river. Her room, though, was shabbier than they'd ever been, with dust clinging to just about every surface and a window she couldn't quite open all the way. To think that a lifetime ago, this place set the rumour mill spinning with tale after salacious tale, top billing going to politician mistresses, the mob, and — during one particularly memorable summer — an alcoholic orangutan.

Maybe it'd settled on hard times, like everything else. Or maybe Cordelia's standards had changed, after so much time in New York. What shine did mere gravel have after you'd seen your first diamond, anyway?

At least the view hadn't changed. As Cordelia unpacked, she allowed herself the occasional glance.

Suits. Papers. Pens.

New River.

Matches. Stakes. Holy water.

New River. Not quite holy, but baptized me in all the ways that matter.

Church dress so nobody faints at the sight of me wearing men's clothes.

The Dun Glen would do. She certainly wasn't going to encroach on her family — while her mother insisted she was more than welcome, Cordelia got the sense that Patricia preferred having the second bedroom all to herself.

They'd caught up in letters in the months before, anyhow: Cordelia had offered to bring her sister bracelets and perfumes from the city, and in return, received invaluable intel on the goings-on of all things Thurmond — chief among them the disappearances. There had been six, now, all young women.

Another reason to rent a room: somewhere she could write things down in privacy.

Cordelia gave each missing girl a page to herself, death-white and stained frantic with what notes she could cobble together, forming a circle on the floor beside her bed. She avoided stepping inside of it, partially out of some old, nameless superstition, and partially to avoid trampling the final sheet, in the centre, simply titled *COMMON TRAITS*.

A profile had been easy enough to build, once she'd shaken off the chills and déjà vu: young, unmarried, educated more often than not, and working where they could be hired. The type of girl Cordelia had been, before she'd escaped.

Not that she had ever gotten all that far. She tapped the silver band around her finger, that ill-fitting chokehold of a ring.

She'd ought to have fought back more, when Sebastian had assigned her to Thurmond. He'd given petty excuses about how she knew the area — what little there was *to* know — and how she deserved to visit her family. Still, this place had ghosts — *her* ghosts — she could only hope went undisturbed.

Probably just a mind game of his. Either that, or — and she shuddered at the thought — he was going to join her out here and ask her mother for his blessing to marry her.

Cordelia had always known she'd end up having a rather literal role in the “family business.” Though Sebastian had never been explicit, his vague statements around “raising up the next generation” were hard to be naive to. If nothing else, at least the ring kept men from bothering her.

But maybe, just maybe, a flawless performance could earn her another year or two. Remind The Company she was an asset on the field.

I must shine in this role to keep it, she thought, sliding a stake under her stiff, stained mattress. *I must shine like the blade they have made of me.*

Someone knocked at the door. Cordelia jumped, just about punching a hole through her palm with the stake.

“Yes?” she called.

The door opened a crack, revealing the stubbly, still-smiling face of the bellhop. “Hello, Miss Blair. Your sister’s here — she wanted to accompany you to service.”

“I’ll be down in two shakes,” Cordelia replied, smiling back. It was only after the bellhop had nodded and disappeared that her face fell, and she glared at the dress on her bed.

Frills be damned, she reminded herself. *A blade is a blade.*

“Is this silk?” Patricia exclaimed, teasing at the sleeve of Cordelia’s frock. “Oh, Cordy, if you hate the thing that much, I’ll be happy to take it.”

Cordelia shrugged. “Every good lady needs a church dress. Didn’t Mother teach you that?”

“Well, the Bible says to share what you have.”

“If you keep me up with the goings-on of town, maybe I’ll ‘forget’ to pack this one when I go home. Deal?” Cordelia held out her hand.

Patricia shook it, beaming. “Deal. I don’t know why you care so much about all the gossip, but I do quite like being paid in silk.”

“It’s nice to keep up,” Cordelia said, and she left it at that, for her sister was already scampering off to coo at someone’s new baby.

The church hadn’t changed much, though Cordelia owed that to the fact it had no old glory to have fallen from. There were holes in the roof older than she was, and a lifetime of leaks gave the room a damp, musty smell, even with the doors open. With her every step, the floor creaked, and when she sat down, the pew groaned in protest.

But it was Thurmond, and she was a Thurmond girl. The smells and sounds of disrepair were old friends, and their presence put her at ease. Here, she didn’t have to pretend to be something she

wasn't, to put on an accent and play the games of high society. Why, uncomfortable as it was, she could practically fall asleep where she sat. She'd done it before, lost in the drone of the sermon....

"Dee?"

A low, husky murmur of a voice. One Cordelia knew all too well. Her eyes snapped open, and she turned to see Nora Logan leaning casually on the edge of the pew with a grin.

Like the church, Nora hadn't changed — in her case, because you couldn't improve on perfection. Her dark eyes glittered, and as always, her olive skin was flawless, save for the freckles on her shoulders, under her blouse —

And she was wearing pants. In the House of God. Cordelia wasn't sure if it was envy or attraction, but something warm and starved gnawed at her stomach.

"Done taking me in?" Nora prompted, cocking her head to the side.

Her voice caught in her throat, like a rabbit in a snare. And Nora could tell, from the way she was smiling. Cordelia leaned past her, to where Patricia was holding someone's toddler. Good.

"That dress doesn't suit you," Nora went on.

"It was a gift," Cordelia forced out.

"I liked you more in pants."

"What are you *doing* here, Nora?"

"Well, pardon me," Nora muttered. She skulked closer, and tilted two cold, skinny fingers under Cordelia's chin, until they were eye-to-eye. "I heard Miss Cordelia Blair was in town, you know. And I wanted to see for myself."

Cordelia's jaw worked, and she felt the blush creeping up her cheeks. "My sister's here."

“She always liked me.”

“Only because she hardly knew you.”

Nora snorted. She sat down, just close enough that her thigh grazed Cordelia’s frock. “What brings you out from the coast, Seabird? And how’d you end up staying somewhere nice like the Dun Glen?”

“Work.” Not a lie, technically.

“And yet you, working woman of the city, have deigned to come commune with us backwater locals,” Nora cooed, prodding her shoulder. “Feels like just yesterday we were folding sheets side by side... or messing them up again.”

That was the last straw. Cordelia smacked Nora’s hand away and rose, anger burning at her throat. “This is a church,” she hissed.

“Observant as ever. We can keep talking at yours, then.” She took Cordelia’s hand, and even through the gloves, there was that cold again, that ice all the way down to the bone. Nora kissed Cordelia’s knuckles, and her lips were so cold, Cordelia actually shuddered.

Years of training, and it still took until Nora had sauntered back out for Cordelia’s mind to work. Cold hands, cold lips. The only face in town not aged by the Depression.

She fell back into the pew and prayed.

After supper with her sister, Cordelia returned to the Dun Glen, tore off her frock, and didn't breathe until she was back in her trousers and could comfortably pace the perimeter of her hotel room, back and forth, stepping over her paper girls.

The one thing she had *not* missed about New York was its flagrant display of human vice — hunger and lust, drunkenness and brutality. She'd come to this line of work to banish indulgent fiends from the streets.

And to forget about her own desires, too. The ones that Nora stirred within her, ones that paled in comparison to who — to *what* — the girl was now.

To think I'd been fond of her. To think I'd cared. Damn it all.

Nora was a *clever* fiend, too. The worst kind. Girls went missing — and the only corpses ever found belonged to livestock.

Tink, tink, tink. Three taps on the window behind her, gentle yet insistent, like the curious prod of a crow's beak. Cordelia whirled around, but saw only the river, and the moon dancing in its reflection.

Nevermind that she was on the top floor. Any fiend could manage to —

From behind her again, the creak of the room's door easing open, a slow, high squeal. Cordelia thought of the owl's nest in her childhood backyard, and the terrible screeches that meant the bird was defending its territory.

"Mind if I join you?" Nora asked. Cordelia nodded, still watching the moon. She could see herself now, in the fiend's eye — back turned, welcoming her in, mistake after mistake building the path to her doom.

Nora could probably see her hands shaking, too, and sense the rabbit-quick rattle of her pulse, the adrenaline in her veins.

“I remember cleaning this room,” Nora murmured, shutting the door behind her.

“Is there something you would like to tell me?” Cordelia asked. She finally faced her and immediately regretted it. Nora’s skin had a bluish tint in the moonlight, and she wore a blouse that showed far too much of it.

Nora studied her. “I missed you.” When Cordelia rolled her eyes, she added, “I missed your taste.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Cordelia hissed. She walked toward Nora and then past her to swipe up two of her paper girls and wave them about. “Tell me, how did I compare to Edith Fairweather? Or Clara Holiday? Or any of the others?”

Nora drew back, blinking in surprise. “Dee — are you accusing me of murder?”

“Don’t bother. How long since you were turned?”

“Two years,” Nora said automatically. And she had the gall to *relax* as she said it. “Is that all?”

Cordelia’s fists clenched at her sides, ached for something sharp to hold. “And how many women have you killed?”

“None!” Nora insisted. “I killed an old man once for following me off the road. But no one else.”

Maybe Cordelia should have been upset at that, but truthfully, she had almost done the same a handful of times, so she pressed on: “Where are they, then?”

“Somewhere better than this, that’s for sure.” Nora laughed, waving a hand at the river outside. “Not all of us have the money to leave how you did. So I come in, I drink just enough to keep the girls alive, and spirit them off to the nearest train station with enough change to get a few stops out. It’s a fair agreement, all things considered.”

“A *fair agreement*,” Cordelia echoed, sneering. “Those girls have families who —”

“I also help out some who don’t want to disappear,” Nora continued, ignoring her. “Girls who let me feed in exchange for good company. They’ll turn their noses up at me the very next day, but I don’t mind. I give them all kinds of things their husbands can’t.”

Cordelia was glad for the darkness, hoping it hid at least some of the red burning in her cheeks. “It’s just a matter of time until one turns you in. I’ve been hearing all about the so-called *She-Fiend of Thurmond*, and I doubt I’m the only one. Do you know what happens when something like you is too conspicuous?”

“My sire told me they send people to dispatch us,” Nora said. She gave her an up-down look, and Cordelia’s blood ran cold. “They look like anyone else, but they’d gut you without blinking.”

Cordelia’s hand darted to her belt —

Nora took her by the wrist. Not forcefully, but almost chidingly, like you would to a child taking something they shouldn’t have. She even clucked her tongue, for good measure.

“I knew from the moment I saw you, Dee,” she said. “You used to have two left feet, but now, you’re fluid and easy, like water. And your hand’s been dying to grab that blade on your hip since I got here. Besides that, I know you wouldn’t come back here unless you had to, because you want nothing more than to pretend that I don’t exist. That *we* never —”

Cordelia scoffed, cutting her off. She couldn’t help it. She’d resigned herself to faltering out of some misplaced sentimentality, like a farmer who couldn’t kill her cattle, but to have *this* all dredged up?

“You think this is about what we did, Nora? Please. I’ve made something of myself, saving people from things like you.”

Anger glinted in Nora's eyes, there and gone, lightning-quick. It was the first time her smile had really cracked, her face twisting into something unfamiliar, something monstrous. Like for the first time that night, Nora really, truly wanted to tear her throat out.

It made Cordelia's teeth itch.

But then it was gone, and Nora guided Cordelia's hand up to her chest. She let it rest there, over where her heart beat the slow, soft thrum of something at death's edge.

"Now you're going to try and kill me, right?" she asked, gazing up at Cordelia through long, dark lashes. "*You*? Oh, Dee. I'm not sure you can."

The note of condescension in her voice, soft and teasing, made something inside Cordelia snap, like the string of a violin pulled too taut. In a swift, flowing motion — one she'd practiced time and time again, at Sebastian's insistence — she took the dagger in her other hand and brought it to Nora's throat.

"Don't underestimate me," she snarled. "You *always* underestimated me."

"I was right to," Nora retorted, her gaze unbreaking, unblinking. "All that talk about getting an education and building a life for yourself, but here you are, wagging silverware at the only person in this sad little town who ever really knew you." She traced a finger along the blade's tip, as if testing that it was really there, that someone had the gall to raise it against her.

Then, she frowned.

"Is that a wedding ring?" she whispered.

Cordelia's eyes fell to the floor.

"Oh, Dee." Nora's fingers walked up the blade, grazing her fingers. "I never thought you'd become livestock." Her features softened into something like pity, nauseating with sincerity.

“It will be an honour to continue their work and their legacy.” Cordelia said the words automatically, she’d repeated them so many times, often to herself so she wouldn’t burst into tears. It was a line Sebastian had given her, one that meant more than any ring, an assurance he knew exactly how she felt about him.

But Nora didn’t know any of that, so she just scoffed and said, “It’ll never feel half as good as anything we did together.”

There was something about the way she said those words, low and husky: a threat, a tease, a promise, a flirtation. Cordelia’s will eroded under the rush of hearing them. She grabbed Nora by the chin, savoured the startled way her eyes widened, and kissed her.

She tasted like iron and sweat and the want that had been buried for years.

And if she stayed here, she was going to die. If not by Cordelia’s hand, then by whoever was sent to finish the job.

She pulled back and took Cordelia in with a lazy grin. “Oh, Dee, I could drown in you.”

“You were right,” Cordelia murmured. “I can’t kill you.” She raised her dagger.

Nora’s lips quirked. “The knife sure says otherwise.”

“They’ll want proof I dealt with you.” She offered her free hand, palm up. “Your kind heals quickly. Have you ever had to grow back a limb?”

Nora blanched. “That’s something that happens?”

“Sometimes.”

“I’m not fond of those odds.”

“It’s either that or, when I come back empty-handed, they send out someone else, someone who isn’t so fond of you.” Still, Nora squirmed, and Cordelia relented. “Fine — how about, say, two fingers? That’ll be enough.” Nora opened her mouth to make a lewd comment, and Cordelia rushed on, “I’ll say the rest of you was burned.”

Nora stepped back, leaning against the bedframe. Her fingers tapped across the wood, a steady *click-click-click*. “How about two ring fingers?”

“Two?” Cordelia echoed. “One off each hand?”

“One of mine, and one of yours,” Nora said. “Both of us disappear without a trace, and nobody comes looking. Don’t give me that look — you hate the idea of going back to that man, whoever he is.”

“His name’s Sebastian,” Cordelia said, as if that changed anything. “And he’s not just going to move on from what he planned for me — with me. Besides that, what could possibly leave *no* trace? These people have money, and resources, and —”

“Always with the questions,” Nora chided, but mirth softened her features. “After tomorrow, we’ll never even hear about this awful town again. There’s an abandoned farmhouse a mile north of here — I’ll be there tomorrow night. If you still want to go.”

Cordelia nodded. “I do.” She’d put the serious, logical part of her aside, if only for a moment. She wanted to hear Nora keep talking, keep spinning this tale where she could tear the ring from her finger and vanish into the sunset.

“But you don’t believe me.”

“Not yet.”

“That’s fine.” Nora smiled, and there were no fangs to it, no sharpness. “You have a life over there. An easier one. If you want to go back, I don’t blame you.”

She wasn’t wrong — Sebastian had always assured her that as long as she was his wife, Cordelia would want for nothing.

But what she wanted was the stubborn, teasing woman in front of her, who’d seen her shoddy attempt at conformity for what it was, ever since she’d walked into church in that dreadful frock.

“I’ll be there,” Cordelia promised, and she hoped she meant it.

She made it a mile out before faltering.

In July, the sun took its sweet, stubborn time setting. She’d watched its dance on the river before it’d vanished behind the trees, but even now, the sky was that dreamy, dusky blue.

All of it could be a dream. New York, the Company, Sebastian. And Thurmond, too. Even her mother and Patricia. Though she’d called both home, neither had held all of her, all that she was.

Her time at the Dun Glen, fresh-faced and gangly, kissing Nora when they knew the guests weren’t looking.

Nora, waiting for her, somewhere nobody would find them.

A fiend, something inside her hissed, beckoning her latest victim. What if —

The smell of smoke hit her throat, sharp and stinging. She turned — and there, midnight black against the twilight, a dark plume rose up from a mile away.

The Dun Glen was burning. With it, the bed she'd slept in, and her paper girls, their secrets kept, and the dress she'd left on the bed for her sister, a promise broken.

And with those, the engagement ring she'd so dutifully worn, binding her to her betrothed, now bereaved, Sebastian Emerson.

The sight brought a smile to her face. If Nora was bold enough to set the beating heart of their hometown ablaze, the least she could do was take this leap of faith.

Cordelia smiled, spun on her heel, and followed the river home, a seabird headed to shore.

About the Author

Alex K. Masse is a writer from what is colonially known as Surrey, BC. They've had work featured in *Autostraddle*, *Little White Lies*, *The Lyre*, and more. For Alex, writing is a means of connection and expression, within themselves and with others, and a major source of joy.

One morning the on-ramp to 35W was stopped up with trees

by Sam Storck-Post

not little sprouts, full-grown oaks and cedars and pines
grown up overnight jostling and spilling out
for a look at the city. Considerate
to begin on the highway not in our homes
or maybe just a vendetta against concrete
old-held grudge or maybe
an old forest knows how to immobilize
control the flow of those with axes
bulldozers weapons of war
and what were these new
wooded arteries but camps
to muster in prepare to field a force
large enough to tower over skyscrapers,
business interests, policy-makers.
I believe the parks department cheered. I
set out with cheese, some apples,
a loaf of bread believing any tree
could only be my friend
and in the boughs of an old maple
I watched the saplings dance

in a grassy glen
that used to be a parking lot.

About the Author

Sam Storck-Post lives in Minneapolis, where he has not been enjoying the icy conditions. In his day job he plays with math and gives away rich people's money. His poetry appears or is forthcoming in *The 149 Review*, *Troublemaker Firestarter*, *Paranoid Tree*, and *SWING*. The only thing he knows for sure is that trees are good.

Pierre Pierrot, Sad Clown Extraordinaire

by Caleb Bethea

The clown rigs the camcorder so you can see the air fryer projected against the screen above. Its display flashes green as he unboxes a Hot Pocket while what looks like real tears streaks down his face. The plastic wrapping drifts diagonally toward the stage. The audience is silent.

It's a beef Hot Pocket. He holds it lovingly to his face. It's a little grotesque, the connection they share. But he fumbles the pastry and tries his damndest to save it from the splat below. He tries valiantly, slipping it through his fingers more than once. But the Hot Pocket hits the stage, splitting its frozen contents in two.

His face contorts into a silent wail. He holds up a half of the frozen Hot Pocket in each gloved hand. He mouths, "Vide, vide." Then he holds it to the camcorder so the audience can see the crystalline frost on the surface of the beef. And after they've seen their fair share, he lowers his mouth to the camcorder, mouthing, again, "Vide, vide."

The clown places both halves into the same cardboard sleeve, smashing them together with unwarranted force. He drops the Hot Pocket in the air fryer, slamming the drawer shut. One gloved finger dances across the display from muscle memory, inviting a sonorous beep into the theater followed by the deep hum of the air fryer at work.

Next is time to pick a volunteer.

Winking through tearful eyes, a little lewdly, at the audience, he produces two balls from his baggy pants, then three, and a fourth. Two in each hand. Then a miasma of juggling balls. A perfect circle.

Dictionary illustration levels of juggling, until BAM. He bounces one of the balls off the stage and into the crowd.

An art critic type catches the ball with a shy smile on his face. He follows the clown's pantomimed instructions to toss it back into the crowd. They keep tossing and tossing until it finally lands in the art critic's hands again. The audience laughs, then cheers as the clown motions the art critic to the stage.

The camcorder points directly at the volunteer. The glare of his thick, square glasses flashes across the projected screen. His eyes are pale and enormous.

A beep fills the air. The Hot Pocket is done.

Following the instructions of the clown, the volunteer opens the air fryer. Steam rises in front of the camcorder as the lens follows the movements of the man, the clown guiding the camera with both hands like a captive bird.

The art critic displays the Hot Pocket to the camera, glances at its image on the screen looming over his head. Then it starts to shake. You can tell by the man's face that he's not the one shaking it, that he's aghast with the idea of a Hot Pocket shaking from the inside.

The clown throws his arms out wide to the crowd, longing to embrace whatever they feel next. Real tears carve rivulets in his makeup. He's shaking a little himself. The audience is silent.

In one fluid motion, he regains his composure and removes the camcorder from the tripod. He lowers it to the Hot Pocket; then, he nods to the art critic.

The man adjusts his glasses and slides the Hot Pocket out of its sleeve into his palm, its frantic shaking having reduced to a dull quiver. In its center, cheese and beef have melded together to heal what was once the split that halved the Hot Pocket. The clown nods again.

Slowly, with the Hot Pocket clearly blistering his fingers, the art critic rips open the pastry. Inside it,

underneath the melted cheese and beef, is the thing that's moving. Closer to being free, it's shaking a little more vigorously now.

Shaking his head, the art critic hands the Hot Pocket back to the clown — who takes it softly in both hands, having already re-mounted the camera on the tripod for this moment. With one hand, he holds the pastry to the camcorder; with the other, he peels back the melted cheese and meat.

It's melted into melted things.

A shaking, now-screaming face. It's small but clear to the audience that it's the face of the art critic buried in the pastry. But it's only recognizable a few more moments before the skin begins to slough off in melted strips. Screaming.

“Aidez-moi! Aidez-moi!”

But it's too late. The art critic is crying on stage left, and the little face in the pastry has dripped onto the floor.

About the Author

Caleb Bethea is the author of *DISCO MURDER CITY* (Maudlin House '25) and *Fever Clowns* (Anxiety Press '26). Their stories have recently been anthologized in *Found 2*, *Encounters*, and *Brave New Weird*. You can also find their work in *HAD*, *X-R-A-Y*, *hex*, *Bruiser*, *ergot*, *Vlad Mag*, and elsewhere. They live in the forest with their wife and four goblins. Say hello on Instagram: @caleb_bethea_.

Pareidolia

by Elana Gomel

I threw away the food delivery. This was how it started.

My parents were late. Dad was at his real estate firm, Mom at a church meeting, and I was hungry. Mom texted me to order something online and not to wait up for them. I was used to solitary dinners eaten in front of the TV, Netflix streaming as I shoveled burgers or Chinese or pizza into my mouth. I was not picky. *Ally is such a good girl*, the refrain of my mother's churchgoing friends, their wrinkled cheeks shedding powder like moths' wings as they stroked my hair. *And so pretty!*

The bag waited for me on the porch. I brought it in and inhaled the greasy smell of fries and the meaty aroma of the burger. Saliva collected in my mouth. I was hungry. But still — *Ally is such a good girl!* — I refused to eat from the paper bag and dumped its contents onto a plate.

Red liquid spread onto the white porcelain, forming a puddle that smelled of iron and salt. Did they send me an uncooked burger? I lifted the bun.

A bitter taste in my mouth remained even after my stomach was purged of its meager contents. I threw the burger and the fries into the trash bin and piled up old newspapers on top. And then I sat in front of the TV, staring dumbly at the pictures I had taken on my phone.

There had been a face on the burger.

I wasn't stupid. I knew about pareidolia: the human propensity to see faces in random objects. But the photos did not lie. What I had seen was real: a scrunched-up face shaped in fried meat, coarse

and fissured, tiny eyes, and a mouth opened in the “O” of shock or surprise. The mouth moved, whispering inaudible words. The pics on my phone captured its mute effort to communicate.

Was it a divine sign for me to go vegan like my friend Sophie? It’d be easier to accept if I still believed in God. But I did not. Not anymore. Not after Jason’s disappearance.

I went back to my room. The discolored patches on the walls where pictures used to hang looked like blank faces. My parents had insisted we take down all family photos with the four of us. “No need to live in the past,” they had said. “We have to move on.” I still had one picture of Jason I had hidden in my makeup drawer, and now I pulled it out. My brother’s dark eyes and wry smile looked back at me. I stroked the picture, as if I could feel the stubble on his cheeks, but there was only the cold smoothness under my fingers.

My parents came home separately; I heard first my father’s and then my mother’s steps on the creaking stairs. I did not hear them speak to each other. The distance between them seemed to be growing every day like an earthquake rift, stranding them on the opposite sides. Sometimes I felt like I had been dumped into the rift, buried at its rocky bottom.

I was still hungry, so when they finally settled in the master bedroom, I crept down to the kitchen. Our house was surrounded by dense trees, the backyard merging with Wisconsin woods. I was used to their shadows invading our home, and I was not spooked by the spiky black silhouette on the floor. Until it moved, mutating into a clawed hand that stretched to the ceiling.

I peeked out. The shed where my father kept his tools crept close to the kitchen window and lifted itself up on two scrawny chicken legs, swaying hypnotically and casting moon shadows onto the walls of the kitchen.

I went out through the back door and stood in front of the shed. It was made of sheet metal and had two small windows and a door in the front. Now those windows glowed with pale yellow light. The murky panes were splotted with black round stains that irised like pupils. The door formed a slack mouth.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“What do *you* want?” the shed retorted. Jagged metallic sounds were coming from its interior, and the door flapped as it spoke.

“I want my brother back.”

“I can help you. For a price.”

I was not even shocked to find myself talking to the chicken-legged shed with a human face. Suddenly I realized I had been ready for this for a long time. Ever since my mother became so engrossed in her church activities that she came back home only to sleep. Ever since my father threw himself wholeheartedly into his real-estate firm with a growing inventory and a pretty secretary, surfacing from his business whirlwind only to comment on how I had suddenly grown. Ever since Jason disappeared.

Yes, my older brother had been mixing with the wrong crowd. Yes, he had dabbled in drugs. Yes, he had been a blot on our suburban middle-class family. Yes, my parents had threatened him with detention, even though at eighteen he was legally an adult.

But he was my brother. He used to carry me in his arms and twirl me around when I was younger. He sneaked candy and comics into my room when our mother outlawed both on the grounds of them being bad for my waistline and my brain. When I screamed, awakening from a nightmare, it would be Jason who sat on the floor by my bed until I fell asleep again. Our parents did not believe in monsters, or fairy tales, or love.

And then one day when I came back home from a Girls Scout camp, he was gone. There were blank spots on the walls where his pictures used to be. And my father called me to his room. His eyes were sliding off me as if seeing my face was as hard as staring at the sun. He said that Jason had left us and was not coming back. *He is an adult*, my father said. *He made his choice.*

And ever since that day, I had been ready for atrocious miracles.

“What do you want?” I asked the chicken-legged shed.

“A pretty face. A pretty face like yours,” the mouth-door screeched. The rusty metal bent and bulged around it.

“All right. But only if you tell me where my brother is.”

“I’ll give you three gifts. If you use them right, you’ll find your brother.”

“OK,” I said, and one of the chicken legs rose into the air. It held three objects: a can of oil; a scouring pad; and a ribbon. I took them, and the shed turned around and sauntered away to its place in the corner of the backyard where it settled down, the chicken legs folding and disappearing under its cuboid body.

The “gifts” were scruffy and underwhelming: the ribbon discolored, the scouring pad damp, the oilcan leaking. I put them in the pocket of my hoodie and started walking back to the house. And then I hesitated, went back toward the shed, and poked my head through the open door. Moonlight flooded the interior, and I saw my father’s old shotgun in the corner. My parents were NRA people and took care of their firepower. I was surprised to see the shotgun here, abandoned and tarnished.

The barrel of the shotgun swiveled toward me, the hole of the muzzle flapping like the mouth of a beached fish. The single eye of the ejection port regarded me dully.

“Do you know where my brother is?” I asked.

“I need oil,” it rasped. “They left me here to rust away, though I did what was asked of me. Give me what I want, and I may tell you.”

I pulled out the oilcan. I knew how to lubricate a weapon, having seen my father polish his collection of semi-automatic guns and pistols each Sunday afternoon.

The shotgun lay across my knees like a dozing snake as I unscrewed the barrel, cleaned, and oiled it. The stubby nose of the trigger twitched as if smelling something rotten.

“I did what you wanted,” I said. “So, tell me where to find Jason.”

“I do not know,” the shotgun responded, its voice now oily and sanctimonious like the voice of the preacher in my mother’s church. “But she may.”

And it pointed with its muzzle at the old spade leaning against the wall. I got up, the rust from the shotgun having left red marks on my fingers. I remembered Jason putting Calamine lotion on my hand after I had inadvertently touched poison oak.

The spade was stained with dry mud. The last time I had seen anybody use it was when Jason tried to make a pond for my goldfish and ruined our mother’s flowerbed. She refused to talk to him for a week.

I lifted the spade. The mud stains on its blade formed a cartoonish face with a wide mouth and two small peevish eyes, one much higher than the other.

“Do you know where my brother is?” I asked.

“I need cleaning,” the spade clanked. “They left me here to fall apart, even though I did what was asked of me. Give me what I want, and I may tell you.”

I took out the scouring pad and cleaned the blade until it shone in the moonlight and I could see my own reflection in it. No, it was not my reflection. The face was the same as had been crudely sketched in dry mud, but now it seemed to have sunk into the metal, coarse, and wide, and hungry.

“I did what you wanted. Can you tell me where to look for Jason?”

“I’d rather not revisit this unpleasantness!” the spade jangled. “I do not know where he is now. But since you polished me, I suppose I could lead you to somebody who may show you where he is.”

The spade hopped on its single leg-handle out of the shed through the black grass and toward the margin of the woods. I followed.

A white aspen tree grew there, pale against the dappled night. Jason had rigged up a makeshift swing for me, but the tree was too thin to bear my weight, and the swing had fallen off. I was surprised not to see it in the unkempt grass. How long had it been missing?

The tree's white bark was crisscrossed with black cracks that came together in a long lugubrious face with slanted, squinting eyes and a thin-lipped mouth. But the eyes were obscured by the drooping branches that fell over them. The tree shuddered and waved them aside, but they kept falling back, as annoying as unkempt hair.

"Do you know where my brother is?" I asked.

"They never come by me anymore," the tree rustled. "Tidy up my branches, and I will tell you."

I took out the ribbon and stood on tiptoes. I gathered the whipping branches and tied them together, away from the tree's face, as Jason used to do when I was a small child and my curls got into my eyes. The aspen rustled its thanks.

"I did what you wanted," I said. "Show me where Jason is!"

"I would rather not," the aspen whispered. "He sleeps soundly in my cradle of roots. But you helped me, and I owe you. Ask your friend spade to dig."

The spade tumbled head over heels and bit into the mulch. Lumps of dirt flew into the air, and soon a deep hole was revealed. At first it was too dark to see what was at the bottom of the hole, but then moonlight poured in.

It was not a hole. It was a grave. Under the thin layer of earth bulged the pale dome of a skull. Around it lay remnants of a tarp and discolored rags; one of them still bearing the logo of Jason's favorite brewery.

I jumped into the grave and lifted the skull. Faceless and anonymous, it stared through me with its empty eyeholes. There was an additional hole on the forehead where a bullet from my father's gun

went through. They had used the rope from my swing to tie their son's body into a tarp, but it had unraveled.

Carrying the skull, I went back into the house and made my way upstairs. The door to the master bedroom stood ajar, and soft snores were coming from inside.

I crept into the bedroom. My mother was lying on her stomach, her meticulously styled grey hair fanning out on the pillow. She went to the hairdresser every two weeks but refused to color her hair, telling everybody that God made it that way and who was she to argue with His decree?

Humble bragging, I overheard one of her church friends hiss behind her back.

My father curled up on his side, his bald head gleaming in the light dribbling in from the hallway. His phone set on mute flashed with messages, painting his face in glimmers of green. Or rather, painting where his face should have been. The pallid oily skin flowed smoothly from the top of his skull to the front, forming a lardy, featureless oval. There were no eyes, nose, or mouth.

My mother turned over and I stared at the same lardy expanse of blankness under her steely fringe.

Still carrying my brother's skull, I went down and back into the shed. I knew my father kept gas cans there. It took me several trips to bring them back into the house and splash gasoline around the kitchen.

"Don't do it!" the ice maker on the fridge rattled at me with its toothy grill.

"Don't do it!" whispered the soft shapeless folds of the kitchen curtain.

"Don't do it!" clattered the plates on the countertop.

But Jason's skull was silent.

I lit a match and ran out, carrying my brother's faceless head.

I stood by the shed, watching the flames shoot up into the darkness. The fire painted the woods with orange and crimson reflections. The shed unfolded its fleshless clawed legs and scampered away from the heat. I followed, sticking close to it.

I could still phone 911, I supposed, but then I remembered my phone had been left in my bedroom.

“Just tell them you woke up in the middle of the night, smelled smoke, and rushed out,” the shed said. I looked at it. My own reflection looked back at me, backlit by the fire, and yet somehow clearer and bigger than life.

Ally is such a good girl! And so pretty!

I *was* pretty, I knew it. I had been pretty since I was a child: sweet obedient Ally, her curls blond, her eyes bright blue, her cheeks round and pink. Not like her unruly big brother, with his dark eyes and olive skin, his face betraying his alienness, his non-belonging, his dubious origin.

I had always known Jason was adopted. When our parents despaired of conceiving, they adopted that little stranger, with his mixed-up genes and his junkie birthmother. And then a miracle. Despite the doctors' bleak diagnosis, my mother got pregnant. Their own little girl was born, her face so bright, so cute, and so innocent. Perfect little Ally, to complete their perfect little family. Too bad the flawed adopted son could not be returned to where he came from! Well, they found a way around it, didn't they?

The heat from the fire was too much. I moved away from the shed. But my face remained glued to its metal wall. It ballooned like a reflection in a soap bubble, spreading across the front. My blue eyes superimposed upon the dirty windows. My pink mouth stretching across the dinky door.

The chicken-legged shed swiveled three times on one leg and sauntered into the woods, as the faceless creature standing next to the burning house was rubbing her hands across the blankness of her missing face.

About the Author

Born in Ukraine and currently residing in California, Elana Gomel is an academic, an award-winning writer, and a professional nomad. Her academic work centers on speculative fiction and narrative theory. A member of Horror Writers of America (HWA), she is the author of many short stories, several novellas, and eight novels of dark fantasy and science fiction. Her novel *Nightwood*, a fairy tale about monsters, marriage and exile, won the Silver Award in the Bookfest 2023 contest. Her latest novel, *A Tale of Three Cities*, won the Third Place in the Bookfest Dark Fantasy category.

The Mother of Monsters

by Natalie Harveld

In the first years I fashioned them from longing.

At dusk I gathered river-mist and foxfire,
stitched antlers from the branches of winter oaks,
threaded scales with moonlight drawn from ponds.
The creature rose magnificent and breathing.

Its eyes opened. To animate such wonder required a gift.

It took my voice. My voice departed singing.

Thereafter I spoke only in gestures, yet still my hands remembered their old craft.
From nettles, amber, and the bones of starlings I fashioned another.

A serpent feathered with kingfisher blue, whose passage turned marsh-water into glass.

It took my memories. My memories departed silently.

The names of childhood fields dissolved first,
then faces, then the shape of my mother's hands.
Each morning I woke beside an unfamiliar life, yet still creation burned within me.

From glacier-light and midnight blossoms I fashioned another.

It took my sleep. My sleep abandoned me entirely.

The hours grew bright and merciless. Owls became my companions.
The moon watched me labour through the centuries
whilst kingdoms flowered and failed around me.

Still I continued.

I forged griffins from mountain weather, leviathans from storm-torn seas,
small luminous beasts that nested in orchards and drank only dawn.

They took my ease, my laughter, my certainty. My certainty vanished last.

By then the world was crowded with marvels.

Children pointed skyward at impossible wings. Sailors charted islands guarded by dragons.
Poets filled libraries describing wonders whose origins none could remember.

I sat amongst them, diminished almost to nothing.

No song remained. No recollection. No rest.

Only a pair of hands still smelling faintly of creation.

And when the final creature came, gentle as snowfall,
beautiful beyond all measure... it took those too.

About the Author

Natalie Harveld is a British poet living in Oxfordshire with her husband, cats, and two children. Between teaching English and reading bedtime stories, she has developed a habit of looking for hidden kingdoms in domestic places. She is drawn to faith, transformation, and the strange intersections where myth brushes against motherhood. Find her on Instagram via [@natalieharveldpoetry](#).

Out, Brief Candle

by Z. Hunter Scribner

Prince Dmitry was the largest he would ever be upon the day of his birth, at a colossal nine feet tall. This naturally provoked a good deal of anxiety, but Seneschal Mstislav reassured every citizen of our great island that his ambitious plan was well considered; he had taken the proper precautions to ensure our new ruler would harm none in his reflexive, newborn thrashing.

We all knew the story, even those unlucky souls forced to dwell outside the shelter of the capital, for it refused to die, like a smoldering peat fire beneath the marsh. Mstislav had done his duty upon the death of King Aleksandr, preserving the flame of his mind with a ceremonial torch, then descending into the bowels of the palace to the innermost chamber, the holy of holies, where the crimson wax bubbled up from the earth as it had since time immemorial. From this sacred fountain he harvested material for the new Prince's body, molding the form of a man around the skeletal foundation of a sturdy, well-woven wick. Once dried and set he clothed it and lifted it up to the throne room to birth the new monarch before us all, or at least those of us privileged enough to attend.

The wick caught easily, the verdant fire flaring with unfathomable intensity, the wax midwifing the conflagration of a skull it would proceed to sustain. Our Prince's first breath was a scream that shook a shower of dust from the rafters, but the ropes restrained him — Seneschal Mstislav's foresight vindicated — and soon the court mages were at work, spelling language into the prince's mind. His wails were no less horrific once rendered intelligible.

"Why?" he howled. "Why am I alive?!"

The Seneschal snapped his fingers, and various attendants hauled our Prince from the throne room; they had prepared their brushes to calm him with a soothing coat of perfumed resin. Though Mstislav's plan had worked, he did not look pleased, stroking his beard, his eyes gazing out at nothing from beneath his furrowed brow. The question our Prince had asked reverberated off the limestone; in the years to come we of the palace staff, most loyal servants to him and the Seneschal, would proffer as many answers as we could think of, but none that would satisfy.

There were tales of previous kings of Sceacan who suffered from this curious affliction, such as Vsevolod the Mad, or Yaropolk the Eight-Minded Melancholic, whose unparalleled diffidence fractured his psyche into competing personas. However, poor Dmitry's case was particularly acute. In his first month he refused to leave his chambers for days at a time, and often the logs harvested to satisfy any errant craving of his viridescent head were left by the door, untouched.

Eventually Mstislav managed to persuade the prince to venture forth on an outing, enticing him through a mixture of bribery and admonishment to go horseback-riding round the pastures that littered the outskirts of the capital. After all, though intelligent, Prince Dmitry was still but a child in those days, and children must needs be cajoled. A horse of uniquely strong sinew had to be furnished so that it might bear Dmitry's fulsome weight, but the Seneschal had foreseen that this need would arise, had in fact been specially breeding stallions for years. Dmitry named the pitch-black mare chosen for his companion Zephyrus, and indeed it rode like the wind itself. Those of us who were so fortunate as to be employed by the crown as squires and stablehands delighted in witnessing the prince's first true joy.

"What a fine animal!" the prince said. "I will die happy if only she outlives me." Seneschal Mstislav laughed, a note of awed disbelief coloring his voice.

“Curious, your father said nearly the same thing when we first rode together as boys,” he said. At first there was naught but a calm, expectant silence punctured only by birdsong and the wind through the grass. Then Prince Dmitry fell from mighty Zephyrus’ saddle and onto the ground, his sobs cacophonous as thunder, and the concave recess of his neck spilling forth an acidic rain of liquid wax that threatened to engulf the entire meadow in flame. The attendants managed to stamp out the spreading embers and usher the prince home, but the rumor was that Dmitry had burned through at least seven years of his life in the course of his hysterical weeping.

Needless to say the outing was deemed a failure, and Mstislav lay awake long into the night, poring over his words to try and divine what had so upset the prince. The task was paramount, as Dmitry was nowhere near ready for the anointing; the magic of his wax was lent potency by the waning aftershocks of his own father’s echoing aroma and would soon fade if not fortified by the ritual wherein he would be officially crowned. Tid’s scripture dictated that seven seventh sons of seventh sons must, once they were seven years of age, be tossed into the prince’s flame to revivify the power of the wax, their sacrifice the fuel that would ensure our island’s permanent safety.

It was an undeniable burden, what Sceacan’s princes were obliged to do, such that when Mstislav had first tried to explain the necessity of the ritual, and the Armageddon that would befall our island if it were not performed, our prince refused to listen and did not speak for a fortnight. Of course we sympathized with Dmitry’s horror at the prospect, but knew he must be swayed or else all would be lost.

There were occasional periods of respite where Prince Dmitry’s existential anxieties waned, but they were unfailingly brief and often accompanied by manic behavior that was difficult for the poor, besieged Seneschal to manage. Once, during a high that stretched on much further than was typical, for weeks in fact, the prince was spotted gallivanting through the glades of maple obtenebrated by the shadow of the capital’s great clocktower, in whose lee they lay, joyfully shouting to all who had ears to hear that death was happy to take whatever she wished, today,

tomorrow, it made no difference to her. During these sojourns through the trees he would be found illuminating the dark, his own head the only thing casting light at such an ungodly hour, displaying the mountain of corpses he had piled about him — rabbits, deer, badgers, foxes, and lambs strewn about, their torsos perforated one and all by Dmitry's mighty, waxen fist.

There were perfidious cries from the lesser among us that they feared Dmitry's unrivaled strength might be turned upon the citizenry in the midst of some crazed fugue, or that worse still he might turn his rage inwards and do some harm to himself. These disloyal wretches were of course silenced as duty demands; the prince was merely excitable, and as he still loomed roughly two meters above our island's youth, in addition to being several hundred pounds heavier than they, such antics were his only available method for play. On the other hand, Dmitry was wasting through his cardinal body at a much quicker rate than his predecessors, leaving ruby stains along tapestry, stone, and earth when his misery burned brightest. Already he was a foot shorter after a mere decade of life, his wax winnowing his legs, arms, and torso in small divots and canals, like the furrows of tree bark, lending him the countenance of an ancient oak.

Considering the situation in its totality, we could not deny that there lay one miniscule trace of truth in the voluminous sea of the detractors' cowardice. Prince Dmitry was hemmed in by some ineffable, malicious force, his fragile mind's inability to combat this specter chaining him to a path of desperate, helpless suffering. It fell to us, we who rightly adored and venerated our ruler, to lead him to a brighter, gentler road through life.

We failed again and again in our duty, no matter how fervently we wished to succeed; we watched our Prince mature with pity, as although all loved him, none knew how to help him. The only pinprick of light amidst such serried darkness was Seneschal Mstislav, who had grown alongside King Aleksandr and been his perfect confidante. If anyone had a chance of lifting our darling sovereign's spirits, it was he.

One day he brought young Dmitry onto the battlements, thinking he could encourage the prince to embrace his duty if he imparted the precise nature of the danger facing our nation. They gazed at the ever-irate ocean, Mstislav explaining that the tremor felt earlier that day, the prince's first, was routine here in Sceacan. Near our home one great tranche of the world's shell met another, and the acrimonious friction between them caused the very earth to quake. Some passages of Tid's holy writ claimed that the world itself was an egg lain by a leviathan who still swam the cosmos, and if the world ever warmed too much it may hatch and kill us all, though most respectable clergy, including the high priestess herself, regarded this tale as poetry; Tid spoke with many different tongues. What was beyond dispute was that the only reason the whole world did not shake itself apart was because of our holy dynasty — each king's wax perfumed the air of our island, and protected it from the wrath of storms and quakes alike. Mstislav discoursed with a beaming smile, expecting the young princeling to swell with pride.

"But why am I alive, Seneschal?" Dmitry asked. We heard all, eavesdropping from behind stable walls or under the awnings of the courtyard below. Mstislav let out a beleaguered sigh.

"This again, my prince? We know not how sapience flows from the fleshly matter of our bodies; it is not somehow more mysterious for it to emerge from your wax and flame. Some puzzles are unsolvable, young master, and in the face of such quagmires one must simply admit to ignorance and be content."

"Am I a mere incarnation of my father, or his father before him, stretching back to the first syllable of recorded time? It is his flame that forms my head, an unbroken chain. Have I made any choices at all, even in my fits of erratic madness, or merely done as he might do?"

"Nonsense. You are Prince Dmitry, young Master, and you shall be King come your anointing. I named you, crafted your wax myself so that you may be our longest-living monarch, that you may reign eight decades or more. History will commend you! You ought to banish these petty concerns."

Dmitry marched back inside the palace, leaving Mstislav alone with his arms outstretched, reaching for what he could not grasp. It became clear to us that the prince took no comfort in the reminder that thousands of lives, our entire civilization, rested upon the sacrifice of the anointing; no elucidation of the dire stakes could obliterate the image that possessed him, the boys' blood mixing with his body, two strains of scarlet blending into one. Mstislav, whenever questioned about his progress in persuading Dmitry of this dreadful necessity, would sigh, running his hand through his prematurely gray beard, and declare that the office of mentor was infinitely more taxing than mere companionship.

The years swept by like sweet liquor from a torn wineskin, and every spring our prince would find some inane excuse to postpone his anointing. We held ever-more elaborate fêtes to demonstrate our belief in his worthiness. We curated zoological wonders, importing elephants, sky-whales, and nuckelavee at great expense from the scant few nations across the waters that were not long-since destroyed by quakes and tsunamis. Prince Dmitry examined these singular oddities with a dispassionate gaze, enjoying them for a meager hour before retreating to his chambers.

We wrote operas in his honor, staged with no opportunity for extravagance left unseized. The account of the world's creation was translated into soaring arias, beginning with the leviathan abandoning its egg to swim the ocean of the celestial firmament and proceeding on to the great Tid's anointing of the first waxen king of Sceacan, millennia ago. The costumes were resplendent, though of course even the burgundy silk crafted to imitate the king of old could not compare to the richness of our prince's carmine corpus. Despite all this effort, the music failed to delight him. He wept throughout the four hours of the final opera, those of us seated below his box only saved from scarring burns by our knowledge such a reaction was probable, having brought cloaks of tartan and deer hide in case of failure.

We marshalled language itself in supplication to our prince. Lyrical tourneys were sponsored by the crown upon Mstislav's order, and poets from far and wide dueled one another with words, each

riposte a hosana to the prince's name. Epics were recited for days on end, the rhyme and elegance of these bards unmatched in beauty, bringing many of us to tears. After weeks of such festivals of wit, Prince Dmitry said only that the world was a gaseous bag and a poet naught but its inert chanter, full of sound and fury, yes, but ultimately an empty vessel which might be tuned to any melody.

Year after year, and nothing stemmed his inexhaustible sorrow.

But now, now is finally the day! Citizens have come hither from every inch of our island to gather in our capital, crowding into the courtyard of the palace, compressed as carob tree pulp in pods. We marvel at the dancers, the knights, the indigo ceremonial garb of all who can afford it, and the golden statues erected upon the battlements in dedication to our beloved Tid, the precious demiurge, god of ever-waxing seasons, Lord Time himself. Some of us are uneasy at seeing the seven seventh sons gathered in their place of honor, as although scripture is taught to all since infancy it can be one thing to passively absorb the idea of the sacrament and another thing entirely to see it performed for the first time in one's life, but we do what we must to calm these milksops, showing them that the boys are quite content, and eating better than they ever have before!

But where is the prince? He ought to have walked out and greeted us, his loving subjects, more than an hour previous. Surely he cannot have abandoned us once more, not after he promised the Seneschal that he would at last proceed with the anointing this year. We are looking in the stables, out past the courtyard in the groves beneath the clocktower, scouring every inch of palace; the hour is nigh and he is nowhere to be found!

But there, now we spy him! He stands in fierce disputation with Seneschal Mstislav upon the ramparts! A few pageboys are close enough to overhear and pass the conversation along to the rest of the staff in a chain, like a swift river of sound, holding tight to each syllable lest it slip into the ears of the peasantry and cause panic.

"My prince, it is time for you to ascend, why do you linger?"

"I am sorry, Mstislav, to give you a scant score of years. I am weak-willed. Faced with enacting a predetermined course or making the only real choice available to me, I cannot resist the latter, though I know it will hurt you."

"Nonsense. Come now, the entire island awaits!"

The prince is turning to face his mentor. As he has no eyes in the roiling mass of emerald flame atop his soot-stained neck, we cannot tell if he looks toward Mstislav or up to the heavens.

"Father, weep not for me! I do not want to leave — and I wish I could say I must for the sake of those children down there, but I am not so selfless. No, it is simply that the pain of staying any longer is intolerable!"

Seneschal Mstislav cries out, arms beseeching, but our Prince has already leapt over the castellations. Only the Seneschal sees his body plunge into the ocean below, his flame smothered in an instant by the rancorous waves. As we wail in agony for our prince, the palace walls shake.

This could be the great calamity feared since before memory began, the egg finally hatching and the infant leviathan's maw preparing to swallow the world whole, or perhaps it is merely one of the typical quakes we are all accustomed to, soon to exhaust its fuel, extinguished.

About the Author

Z. Hunter Scribner is a PhD candidate in English literature and theory at the University of Denver, a writer of stories, and someone who happens to go by his middle name. Both his scholarship and his fiction interrogate the permeable borders between genres. His work has either appeared or is forthcoming in *Allium*, *chouette*, *Journal de Folie*, and elsewhere. When not reading or writing he can be found at karaoke, a local sandwich shop, or at board game night.

A Wild Hunger

by Katrina Lemaire

Last time the skin stretched too thin over parchment bone.

Mother kissed her teeth into my cheek, using her thumb to wipe a smudge of pink from my chin.

“You have a beautiful hunger,” she smiled down, jaw split in a crowd of proud canines. “Next time they will know to run faster.” she whispered between our dark.

Under a stitch of moss and meaty breath, I sunk into an almost-sleep. Eyes feathered, the talon curve of Mother’s fingers brushed through the knotted tuft of my fur. I curled in closer, a sharp snaggle tooth poking out under my lip. The stringy catch of poultry ribboned in my maw. Belly full and tender, I nuzzled the cage of Mother’s ribs. She smelled of wet waterfall rocks, of sweet flag and lilies — and of sodden soil seeped in marrow and raw, bleating screams. Screams that made me remember her — my first bite.

I sniffled.

Mother bent her shadow away, the scythe of the moon’s hang clawed towards us.

“Hush, sweet spawn,” Mother soothed. “Remember to turn back to yourself. I will not be able to find your Calling if you don’t find your way back,” Mother said, her voice reverent. Her shape drifted farther away, her warmth sapped by absence.

I stirred and slept in savage gore. *Remember.*

The girl sprouted amongst maculate trees. Pine needles pricked out of her hair. Skirts billowed in her wake, wisps of pearls and a catch of antlers at her crown. Her laugh was a buzz on the breeze. Salted and rich as the pour of morning rain. At night, the girl was a wild creature. Adorned in silks sunken on her flesh, pressed to the soft expose of her nimble limbs. The girl was a snarl of roots, fingers digging into tree skin, peeling flecks of paperbark, cracking bone branches under her bare feet. The sight of her churned the empty in my stomach, summoning a strange craving. Under a canopy of sycamore palmate, a curl of smoke and fangs pulled back. The girl bent under a loom of barberry, her back turned. I crept forward, mouth wet and dripping with saliva and teeth. Her hair caught in a brush of thorns, her antlers bifurcating up in pointed arcs. She smelled of saccharine sap and honeysuckle — a tender taste. The girl was a bite of fruit, her pit a crunch of bone and quartz stone. Her devouring was a pull of pulp and thick syrup, thick enough to choke on at the end. I remembered, between the meat of her heartbeats, when she said to take her gently. To savour what was left of her bleeding.

Mother came in a howl of wolves and waxed moons.

Oh, what a delightfully ravenous brute you are, she crooned.

We hunted the wood for more, and more. Until our bellies could no longer hold the burn of souls.

Upon the next feasting season, I woke under a crimson spill of moonlight. Flecks of scale had shed off my back. A scatter of pebbly rotted teeth plucked from my mouth. Slick, bubbled dermis slipping down my body.

Remember, I told myself. At the tips of my paws, a poke of nail and long phalanges wriggled. I scuttled back, the bend of my spine hitting a mossy boulder. Shed from the peel of my rough pads and claws, a hand emerged. Arms, legs, blunt curved teeth in my gums that grazed the hot roll of a short tongue. I panted, sweat dewing my forehead. This is not how Mother taught me. Smooth, dampened skin glistened. I brushed my touch to the crown of my head. Thick layers of hair tumbled down, waves of it cascading down to the bend in my hips. Traveling further up, the hard hit of horns protruded. Velvet strips hung off in fleshy strips. Marrow tips curling, a crown of antlers molting. My eyes slitted, blinking sideways. The shape of my face was not the same, it was

as squishy and soft as a river guppy. I gaped down, unfamiliar with this body. *You become what you fear.*

Footsteps led outside the cave of my home.

The prints almost the same as my own.

Apex to prey, I was not fully remembered. Weak, soft as ripe fruit. I stumbled into the thick dark, voice wavering in a feeble Calling. A scratch of wind in my ear, a yowl in the yonder. Crows flocked, their oily slick plumage glossy under the bleeding moon.

Mother was waiting in the wood, except she did not look at me.

Not right away.

She perched over the calm of a placid lake. Reeds swayed under a gentle gust of wind. She turned, a spit of drool cornered at her mouth.

“Sweet thing, I could not find you,” she hissed. My gaze watered up at her, fingers twitching at my sides. Mother flinched, membranous wings fluttering.

“This is not how I remembered you.” she said.

A rustle in the brush prickled the small hair at my neck. I shivered, my hide bare.

“I forgot,” my admittance was sore, open as the raw beat of my pulse. The twist in Mother’s expression turned sallow, bleak as a bloodless sun.

“I see,” she said. “If you have no hunger, then it is time for you to begin again.”

Mother crept to the edge of the wood, her form billowing in stars and teeth. She held me in her eyes, soft as a hatching, and opened her mouth, wider and wider.

I bent the crown of my antlered head inside, finding my way back to the start of my devouring.

About the Author

Katrina Lemaire is a poet and fiction writer from Southern Ontario, Canada. Her work has appeared in issue IV of *Dark Poets Club* as an honorable mention, *Soft Star Magazine*, *Crow & Cross Keys Magazine*, and other venues.

Field Notes on Cultivating a Private Moon

by David Anson Lee

Begin with a seed
borrowed from insomnia.

Plant it carefully

in the small dark field
beneath your tongue.

Water nightly
with unanswered questions.

Within a month,

a pale stem will emerge.

Do not be alarmed
when moths begin escorting you home.

This is part of the process.

The moonlet feeds
almost exclusively
on unfinished stories.

Read to it.

Tell it about the wolf
that swallowed winter.

Tell it about your grandmother
who stored thunder
inside a rusted coffee tin.

Tell it about every life
you nearly entered.

Soon the young moon
will rise from your mouth at dusk

and follow overhead,

faithful as a second thought.

Neighbors may complain
about the additional tides.

Fishermen will blame you
for silver storms.

Lovers will write poems
they cannot entirely survive.

Eventually,

the original moon
will take notice.

The two moons
will circle one another
for several seasons,

trading light

like correspondence
between distant relatives.

On the morning
your moon finally departs,

you will discover

that every unanswered question

has become a white feather

waiting on the windowsill,

still warm.

About the Author

David Anson Lee is a physician, poet, and philosopher from Texas who was born on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. His poetry has appeared in numerous journals, including *Right Hand Pointing*, *Braided Way*, *Mouthful of Salt*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Eunoia Review*, *Silver Birch Press*, and *The Orchards*. His work frequently explores memory, transformation, landscape, mythology, and the intersections of science and wonder. You can learn more about David Anson Lee and his work on his Substack page: DavidALee.substack.com.

Honey

by Lesley Hart Gunn

My stepmom, Janice, told me to never go barefoot on barren ground, some nonsense about evil looking to absolve itself on my heels. She was ripe with superstition and red lipstick. I doubted everything she said, even resented her, treated her like she was the stepmom in some old-timey fairytale, wanting to get rid of me, even as she took every opportunity to show me love. So, every time I went outside, I took off my shoes and deliberately placed my feet on the yellowed patches, taunting evil, or just Janice, to do their worst. One morning, while performing this ritual, I stepped on something thorny and cried out. My foot bled when I pulled the spikey mass from my skin and found myself staring at a demon, no bigger than a baby bunny. Its body was covered in horns like a cactus. He undulated like a worm-shaped man, pricking my palms.

“Stop!” I yelled, determined to show my twelve-year-old competence in demon handling.

He grinned and dug his spikes further into my palm. I flung him on the ground, grabbed a rock, and dropped it on him. His laughter was as sharp as his needles. I grabbed a shoe and clobbered him, trying to force him into silence, but it continued, growing deeper, his small mouth widening like a chasm I could fall into.

I was about to throw my fists into him, despite all his thorns, when Janice was suddenly beside me, scooping the wretched thing up in a bucket.

“Don’t fight him. You’ll just hurt yourself,” she said, as I tried to take the bucket from her.

“Drown it!” I yelled. Then it was the sound of my laughter that rumbled as I ran for the hose, ignoring the stinging of my hands and foot.

“Did your mom teach you how to drown a demon?”

This stopped me in my tracks. I didn’t like to talk about Mama, but Janice always brought her up. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be reminded of her, but that I didn’t want Janice reminding me of someone she didn’t know, someone she was trying to replace. “She didn’t talk about demons.” I wanted to add that good people didn’t. Good people thought demons were as made up as dragons.

Janice smiled as if she’d already known that. “Water won’t do it. Gotta drown it in honey.”

Honey was what Janice called kindness. She was always asking me to give her some honey whenever I got smart-mouthed or reminded her she wasn’t my mother.

“Pastor Jay wouldn’t like that. He says to fight the demons that plague us.” Pastor Jay wouldn’t like most things about Janice, her plunging neckline, loud laugh, the way she set her eyes on men, like she was capable of devouring.

“He fights in his own way. I have mine.” She looked into the bucket and sang: “Moon-eyed biscuit, looking for a wife. Found an old woman with a carving knife. She slashed and severed, and they were wed. She took all his crumbs to the wedding bed.”

Her voice was not beautiful, but sweet, soothing.

“Why didn’t you sing a nicer song?”

“I sung just what he wanted.”

The demon stared up at her with hatred in his eyes, but his spikes were gone, leaving just a boneless imp glowering from the dark bottom of the bucket.

“Let’s find the biggest rock and squish him.”

“Fetch me the leftovers from last night’s dinner.”

I couldn’t believe it. “He’s not getting a bit of my cornbread. Look what he did to my hand.” The small perforations were still bleeding as I held them up. Janice took off her sweater, exposing her fitted top, and tied it around my hand.

“Now the leftovers?”

I stomped up to the house, brought back a chunk of bread and small cup of broth. I thought she’d drop it in, but she fed it to him, one small crumb dipped in broth at a time. I got bored watching the slow process, so I put my shoes back on. When I came back the creature appeared smaller, and even though he accepted the food, he was cursing her with each bite until he was half the size he was before.

“Can we squish him now?” I implored.

She picked him up, and I felt my hope rise, imagining what the horrible thing would look like when she squeezed her fist so tightly he turned into a goo smudge, but instead she did something horrific. She cradled him like a newborn in her palm, held gently to her breast. The impotent beggar screeched and hissed until there was a pop and nothing but smoke where he’d been moments before.

For the first time since Janice walked into our lives a year before, charming my father with a face younger than my mother’s and more curves than a mountain highway, I felt awe. Maybe she really did love my dad and as an extension, love me. Maybe.

“How about we have dessert before dinner tonight?” Janice said, doing that thing where she pretended we were friends, but this time I didn’t say no. Instead, I nodded and maybe even allowed my mouth to turn up slightly, almost gently, making my features into an open door for Janice to walk through.

And she did.

She threw her arms around me, pressing me to her still smoking chest and babbling about being happy to see me smile, about how she was so excited to be a part of my family, to spend more time with me, to watch me grow. The words stung in a good way, felt familiar, almost like a song.

Then I understood. I remembered how she'd cradled that imp to her chest, safe as a sunset, and I wondered how long it would be before I was smothered with honey, no room left to breathe or rage, loved into a hazy oblivion.

About the Author

Lesley Hart Gunn is a Rhysling nominated poet with publications in *Strange Horizons*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Uncanny* and others. She is originally from Nova Scotia, Canada but currently teaches college writing at Utah Valley University, where she lives with her partner, three children, and two cats. You can find more publications on Instagram at [medusamakesnoise](#).

Woodwose

by Oliver Smith

I live in the witch-oak in the wildwood;

up among the bird nests and twigs. I climbed,
hunting a dream of the old gods' time.

Feet sunk in the earth, face raised to the sun.

I am as silent as the breath unbreathed;

I am memory; I am the world undone.

My backbone bends beneath the weight of sky,
my thoughts; threaded veins in the autumn leaves,
where the acorns fall and the daylight fades.
lullabied by the pale ghosts in the glades;

I slept for a year in the hollow-hearted oak.

When land was empty winter, the branches
filled my head with the slow creak of his voice.

Mist wove me a coat in the frost-white woods,
the rough, brown bark slicked in emerald ice.

Spring flew in with the shadow-sailor crow
adrift on a sea of leaf, it unbound my sleep.

I am root and trunk and greenwood grove;
a dream of the dead men, lost in the trees.

Bound in a spider web of silken grey,
I am mistletoe gowned and oak enthroned.
I'm the old green king in an ivy crown.

Here in the greenwoods, where the adders rest;
I am snake, I am stone, I am everything grown;

I am a memory as silent as unbreathed breath.

About the Author

Oliver Smith is a visual artist and writer from Cheltenham, UK. He is inspired by Tristan Tzara, J G Ballard, and Max Ernst; by the poetry of chance encounters, by frenzied rocks towering above the silent swamp; by unlikely collisions between place and myth and memory. His poetry has been published in *Abyss & Apex*, *Ink, Sweat, and Tears*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Sylvia Magazine* and has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He holds a PhD in Literary and Critical Studies from the University of Gloucestershire. For more information, see his website: oliversimonsmithwriter.wordpress.com.

One Man and One Planet, or Adamo and Evie

by Laine Perez

Remembering her birth was difficult, but she could just about do it.

She began as a collection of dust and small rocks, but she seized what she could from the greater cloud of debris around her, wrapping everything together tightly to form her small, round body. Then, around her, there were voices crying out in joy. “Welcome! Welcome!” they exclaimed. She looked outward and, for the first time, saw her sisters. They were large, volatile, and beautiful.

She watched as they made their land masses, and she copied them, making islands, hundreds of them, on her surface. After, everything was wet and warm and still. Then, life started. Creatures formed small and then not so small, in the water and then not in the water. They grew fur, feathers, scales, and claws; learned to climb, fly, swim, and run. Some were peaceable and others frightening. Some were forever changing, and others remained the same age after age.

In this way, she and her sisters matured, turning again and again around their large reddish star. For a time, long and indeterminate, they were alone together.

Then, the people came.

They went in their small ships to her older sisters first, which she found sensible. She was, after all, the youngest, smallest, and coldest in their system, being the farthest from their star. But her sisters fed her curiosity, telling her stories of the people and their oddities while she drifted drowsily in her orbit.

“They are quite clumsy,” one said, laughing.

“Yes,” replied another. “And they are very loud.”

“They have no scales or fur or even claws,” a third said. “Very impractical. I don’t imagine they will last long.”

They did though. Despite their deficiencies, they remained, and then even more people arrived in larger, more impressively arrayed ships.

Her sisters gained towns, then cities with spiraling buildings and eternal lights and ports with ships. Their populations grew, and they received names: Ymaj, Ekiam, Osilia. She tried her best to relate to their growing fecundity but still felt as if she was spinning away from them, even though they held tight to her, soothing her, telling her that the people would eventually come.

While it took an age, they did finally arrive, and after a time, they gave her a plain and ugly name, EV-3596.

“Don’t worry,” Ekiam said. “We had those names at first as well.”

“Yes,” Osilia said. “Once they know you, you’ll get something more suitable.”

“Or something equally horrid,” Ymaj said, having never grown to like her bestowed name.

The people traveled over each of her islands but only staked out territory on her largest one. Then, they began taking things from her: soil, water, bark and leaves from her trees, bugs and birds and fish. These people were joined by others who began erecting structures and removing trees and rerouting rivers. They brought noisy machines to traverse her surface and to drill holes, deep, deep under her land and under her seas. It hurt. Her sisters had not told her that they would hurt her, but she supposed she was perhaps too sensitive, and so she tried to endure. But after several turnings worth of discordant damage, she began to shake uncontrollably and violently, one wave after another, for days upon days, sending structures and trees tumbling, cracking dams, and flooding cleared plains. Before the people could recover what had been lost or destroyed, the

eruptions began, hot, orange ooze slipping from the crevices and cracks she had created in her surface. All of the people fled. They did not come back.

Her sisters asked what happened, and she did not want to explain. She had failed to make herself habitable and now was alone. It was shameful that she could not adapt herself as her sisters had. It was even more shameful that she had wanted the people to leave.

“Don’t worry,” Ekiam assured her.

“They’ll return,” Osilia asserted.

“Even if you don’t want them to,” Ymaj said.

Time spun on. She remained uninhabited while her sisters grew more populated and then too populated. Ships began to fly over her often, moving away into the greater darkness beyond.

Spring was arriving when another ship flew in an arc over her western horizon, but rather than continuing on as ships always did, it landed and settled in a clearing a small way from her largest river on her largest island. A person, a man, emerged and walked upon her hard earth under her broad trees, his breath visible in the cold air. His skin was brownish and his hair plentiful and dark. She thought him lovely.

He exhaled and said, “I’m here.” Then, laughing, he happily, excitedly yelled, “Hello!”

After a moment, he retreated and then began pulling things from the ship, wood and metal and glass and cloth. As he sorted these, he spoke to himself in a continual stream of noise.

Then, he started to build, and it quickly became clear that, unlike the others, he was not good at it. His first attempt at a structure leaned and eventually collapsed.

He laughed at the inconvenience. “Suppose I should have expected that, eh?”

The next day, he began to dismantle and recreate it.

She liked his voice but still asked her sisters if it was normal for him to talk so much.

“Of course, it is,” Ekiam said.

“They talk all the time,” Osilia said. “You just don’t remember.”

“The continual noise is, unfortunately, endemic to their species,” Ymaj added.

While she remained attracted to her new inhabitant, there were other matters that required her attention. So, reluctantly, she turned from him as the great thaw came. The banks of her biggest river overflowed and created a marsh filled with a rainbow of grasses and surfeit of insects that shone iridescent in the light and chirped and clicked in the dawn and dusk, and then all was ready for the arrival of the birds.

They landed on a bright day, hundreds of them, in the soft wetlands just as their ancestors had done for thousands of years before them.

Into this scene the man appeared, treading lightly across the soft earth to the marsh’s edge. He stood silently before whispering, “Wonderful, just wonderful.” She could not help but be flattered by his notice and appreciation of these creatures that had come from her waters.

For days, he perched at the marsh’s edge, scribbling and drawing on pages that grew damp and brown from cold, spring rain and silty, black dirt. He returned to the birds every day until they departed for colder climes.

He spent the spring and summer exploring and collecting. He took seeds, leaves, sticks, bark, and moss but never more than could be compensated for. He spent one whole day sitting on the banks of a tributary off her large river, a day’s walk away from his habitat, and sketched the insects and the fish before climbing up in a tree and settling in for the night. He woke with dirt and bits of bark stuck to him but, overall, didn’t seem damaged in any way. He walked through her red forest with

its feathery leaves and collection of birdsong, and he found her shining, deep, incandescent pools. He traveled farther and farther, finally reaching the edge of the island.

And he kept talking. He complimented her plants and her trees, her birds and beasts, leaving her unaccountably pleased. Sometimes he sang, even though he had a terrible voice, which seemed to either frighten or affront most of her creatures, who fled at the sound. More often, he spoke about his family, about his home on Osilia, his studies, the feeling of being different from everyone around him, of the ways in which his life had diverged from his brothers, his friends, his colleagues.

He said, “They all thought I was ridiculous for coming here, you know.” And then he addressed her — or she thought he addressed her — directly: “You’re not exactly the most habitable place in the system, Evie.”

She wasn’t sure what to think of this. But she didn’t dislike the name. It was certainly better than the one the others had given her. It was familiar, friendly, kind, more than she herself was. But perhaps she could grow to fit it. So, Evie told her sisters that she had a name, and they congratulated her on the acquisition.

He handled her land and its occupants gently, which was good, but he was alone, and while she liked listening to him, she began to wonder if he was lonely. His kind seemed to do better with others to speak to and embrace. She asked her sisters if they thought he missed them, the others like him.

“Perhaps that’s why he talks so incessantly,” Ymaj said.

“Oh, don’t be unkind,” Ekiam responded. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Some of them like to be alone,” Osilia said. “Don’t worry so much.”

She tried. But she couldn’t stop thinking about him while her birds returned south and settled in for the winter in their rocky crags, roosting together, and her furry creatures burrowed into fallen logs and generous roots of her old, old forests, taking comfort in the warmth of each other’s skin.

He ignored these warning signs of coming winter, so she worried that he would be torn to pieces by her ice and wind. But the man finally returned to his own habitat, so she could finally rest, growing her ice, blue and thick, across her oceans.

The next turning began. Her ice started melting, blue ceding to green, and her creatures came out of hiding, going about their cyclical customs, rutting and nesting and birthing. Only the man still remained sheltered. She wondered if his life had ceased over the long winter, if he had perhaps frozen without the warmth of other creatures like himself. He was beautiful and, like so many beautiful things, was also quite delicate.

Worried that she had once again failed to be hospitable, Evie asked her sisters if he might have died.

“If he did, others will come to retrieve him,” Ekiam assured her. “They have all kinds of ceremonies for their dead.”

Evie waited, no one came, and eventually, to her relief, he emerged on a rainy morning. She shared her happiness with her sisters. They did not mirror her delight.

“It may not be good to be so concerned with just one person,” Ekiam said.

“It would be better if you had more people. Then, you could see that they are not that special,” Osilia, the most populated of her sisters, said.

“Not special at all,” Ymaj added darkly.

Spring ripened, and another ship entered her atmosphere.

“Finally,” Osilia said.

“Now your inhabitant won’t be alone,” Ekiam said.

“This is exactly what you wanted,” Ymaj added.

Evie told herself that her sisters were right. This arrival was good. The man would have a companion, and she would no longer have to worry about him. But the ship left after no more than a day, having only come to bring a boat. She was flooded with happiness. This she did not tell her sisters.

The river had swelled again with winter melt, so it was deep and easy to traverse. He navigated ably, and, once in the ocean, he said, “All right, Evie. The closest islands are to the east. I suppose I’ll start there.” This seemed sensible. She picked up a wind to guide him.

He reached the archipelago within two days but only stayed long enough to understand the islands’ topography before moving on. The next islands held colonies of her smallest furry creatures who did not much like having their home invaded and did their best to deter the newest inhabitant. They must have been relieved that, again, after travelling the island’s interior and perimeter, he returned to his boat.

This pattern carried on until she realized that he was mapping her, outlining her lands and favorable routes across her seas. She had seen it done with her sisters, and she wondered what he would do with the information, as he didn’t seem interested in taking down her trees and digging under her crust.

In her furthest reaches, there were vast stretches of emptiness between one island and the next. The seas here were also more violent. She watched him carefully through these storms, doing her best to soften the worst of the waves that threatened to wash him overboard and smash his little craft to pieces.

The seas calmed as he came closer to the shores of her farthest islands. He lay down on the deck and watched the stars resurface as she cradled him in her waves.

“This is beautiful,” he said. She agreed. There was little better than the skies after a storm.

“Thank you, Evie, for letting me stay,” he said.

She was glad that he, out of all of the people, had wanted to.

He spent much of the rest of the warm season travelling back around to the river’s mouth where he started and barely made it back to his habitat before everything began to freeze. She missed him that winter and wondered aloud to her sisters what he would make of her evergreen forests on her islands in the south that dripped in glorious blue-white, asked them how he might be spending his hibernation.

“They don’t do much when alone,” Osilia said.

“Except think of ways to cause problems,” Ymaj said.

Evie waited impatiently for spring.

In the next turnings, he traveled and tarried on each of her islands, building domiciles to protect himself from the worst of her wildness, categorizing and notating. When it was warm enough, he sat and buried his feet in the sand and talked to her about the minutiae of his days.

He worked out how to avoid the worst effects of her cold, wrapping himself up tightly in extra layers, so he could wander through her screaming winter. But when she thought he had been outside long enough, she guided him back inside, gently at first, and when his curiosity made him persistent, bringing icy winds so strong that they knocked him from his feet.

In the turnings after that, others came, others like him who wanted to study and observe. These visitors were always young and always quite serious, and, from them, she learned her man’s name. They were often eager to speak to him, show him their findings, and ask for his opinions. Doctor Adamo, they called him. He was kind to each of them, allowing himself to be excited by the things that excited them.

She liked that she had something to call him, something that was just his. This made him special, unique among all the creatures that she housed.

With the others around, she assumed he would no longer need to talk to her, and she anticipated this loss, mourning it before it happened. Yet early in the morning or late at night, he would always find a place, quiet and solitary, and tell her about his day, about his hopes for the young people who came and went, migrating to her and then back home, like her birds.

These clever people built more permanent structures where she allowed them to, and watching them, she felt something akin to pride, for though she did not make them, they had come to her and Doctor Adamo to complete their maturation. She admired their creativity and tenacity because she could not tame herself even for them. They took her as she was, seemingly understanding that her wildness was not an indictment against them, but a part of her nature that they must accede to. They did not speak to her, but she supposed they had no reason to, having always had the company of others of their own kind. Still, she often wondered what they were thinking and what brought them to her.

The cycles that had started ages ago continued, only now, they were carefully watched and documented. Machines were brought to explore her seas and her skies, and all the while, Adamo guided the young, assisted in their studies, and grew old.

It happened before she could even understand. She turned once, twice, forty times around her star, and suddenly his hair was gray and his face, roughened by years on her surface, was lined. In her anxiety, she called out to her sisters. "Please," she cried. "Please help."

Ekiam spoke kindly: "They hardly have any time at all. We thought you knew."

"But," Evie said. "I don't want him to die." She knew the foolishness of this statement as soon as she said it. It wasn't that she was unfamiliar with death. On her surface life could be bloody and brutal. It was just that he seemed irrepressible, so capable and generative, more and more and more life pouring from him.

“This will happen whether you want it to or not,” Ymaj told her. “They are so impermanent.”

“Besides, now there are others who can occupy your time,” Osilia said. “One is much like another.”

They could not understand her, having all been occupied too quickly to ever have grown fond of just one of their people. She turned from them and their attempts at comfort.

She followed Doctor Adamo closely as the summer days waxed and then waned. He sat outside with her most nights and talked of his childhood and his youth, of many people he had spoken of before but in different shapes and configurations. He talked about his first years with her when everything was emptier, wilder, both louder and softer. He spoke of this time with longing. What existed now was good, but what had been was good too. Sometimes he sang. His voice had not improved.

She began to slip into her brief autumn. As was customary, some of her people started preparing the habitations for winter while others began to prepare for departure, including Doctor Adamo.

She had not thought that he would ever depart from her. She had thought, with an uncertain and tender feeling, that she might see his end. Still, she knew she could not hold him to her, and, surprisingly, she found that she did not want to. He came to her freely and should leave the same way.

The night before he left, he nestled into the roots of one of her large trees, and he said, “Thank you. I could not have asked for more.” She held her beloved man through the night in soil still warm from the heat of the red star. When the morning came, he was bundled away into a ship, and this was the last she saw of him.

The patterns that had been set continued turning after turning. People arrived in the spring and explored and left in the autumn. Many lived wonderful lives, and some unfortunate ones died.

And, in this way, she became like her sisters, her people becoming ordinary, no more or less absorbing than her other creatures. Occasionally, one would catch her interest, but this attention always faded with time. Her sisters considered this customary, but at these times, Evie more keenly felt her loss.

One spring, a long, long time after Doctor Adamo, a young woman arrived. She had dark hair and dark eyes, was tall and strong, and laughed loudly and openly. Evie liked her.

After a brief acclimation, the woman traveled to the smallest and most neglected island, and Evie followed her. She chattered continually about the sweetness of the air and the clearness of the water and the skies and how wonderful it was that something as unspoiled as Evie existed. In Ekiam, she said, the skies had turned gray and polluted ages before, and she couldn't believe she was here, a place she had dreamed of ever since she was a small child. She would stay forever, she said, if she could.

Once on the island, she established her camp in the tall grass at the edge of the beach, staking her tent lightly to the ground. It held for one night and collapsed on top of her on the second.

She laughed as she extracted herself from the folds of fabric before lying down on the beach. She said, "This is better anyway, isn't it, Evie? We can get better acquainted this way."

Evie could just barely feel the weight of the woman against her rapidly cooling sand, could only just hear her breathing. A long dormant feeling rushed up, bubbling over with joy. Yes, this was indeed the best way to become acquainted.

The woman's decision to sleep on the sand, however, turned out badly once the tide came in at dawn. She rose yelling and then laughing. She shook out her hair before running down into the surf.

"Good morning, Evie!" she cried. "Good morning!"

Welcome, beloved, Evie thought. Welcome, welcome, welcome.

About the Author

Laine Perez received her PhD in English from the University of Texas at Austin. Her work has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, and *The Colored Lens*, among other publications. She lives in Arkansas with her cats, Mauer and Al Catpone.



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