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The Erl-King

after Angela Carter

Zara Williams (they/ them)

My lover weeps in summer flow'rs,
and lays his head in sylvan bow'rs,
and wanders oft beneath the trees,
and dances with the birds and bees.

My lover walks in homeless hills,
by sweetly-singing silver rills,
through hill and dale and autumn glen,
'til his feet lead him back again.

Some name him the Flower King.

Some say he taught the birds to sing,
the hare to run, the flower to bloom,
the sea to love the distant moon.

Some say he named all 'neath the sun,
and last, when all his work was done,

he counted all the stars, and slept,
while overhead dawn, blushing, crept.

I love him true and love him well,
but some folk darker tales do tell:
tales to make the blood run cold;
tales, perhaps, best left untold.
Children snatched out of their beds,
mothers driven out their heads.
Brides bewitched with whispered words,
turned into caged, voiceless birds.

In truth, I have not seen these things,
but in my dreams I hear soft wings,
and his voice, quiet, sweet, and low.
What all this means I do not know.
But when from sleep at last I rise,
it's to his smile, and pale green eyes
like liquid amber, holding me,
and in them I rest happily.



Beneath the Fine Towers

Michael Paget (he/him)

An excerpt of two chapters from *Beneath the Fine Towers*, a novel in progress set in a post-apocalyptic Italy. An indolent friar and a troubled foreign agent posing as a nun are both bound for holy war, their fates entwined with that of a frenzied criminal who believes himself to be a reincarnated saint.

These sections are taken from early on, showing the two protagonists in their home city of Napoli, one of the last coastal remnants of Italian civilisation known now as the ‘*Le Città dell’Azzurro*’ – ‘The Azure Cities’. The pair have not long learned of the crusade-esque voyage their holy orders are to support. I attach an illustration of ‘Pascal’, one of many I plan to scatter throughout the novel.

...

The box room flared gently into existence as the solitary lightbulb fizzed to full strength. The overlapping grooves, where the walls had been carved from the volcanic rock, grew in form and marked Pascal’s only space he could call his own. Ducking in and sliding the partition shut, he removed the modesty cowl, placing it on a hook suspended from the low ceiling, and adjusted his glasses. He nudged aside an old oil drum that served as his desk and flopped down on the stiff cot that faced the entrance. He was home.

His brothers, no doubt, would be tucked away in their rooms, composing lists of prospective targets for initiation—those

lost slices of communities most susceptible to the Order's buzzwords and narratives. Not Pascal. If he wanted to fill his quota for hopeless citizens willing to do anything to leave their drab, sordid lives, he need only to walk five minutes down any street in Napoli.

No, now was for rest. If he had to spend any time in his order's miserly sleeping quarters, living no better than a rat, then he may as well spend it unconscious. He'd show his face for a few hours in the dark, humid, cramped conditions like a good little friar, and then escape to normalcy. What pretext would he lean on this time?

An emergency blessing needed for the well-to-do in Marechiaro or Cuma?

That's some trek, Fratelli. I'll be gone a whole night, at least.

Declare a sudden urge to pray at the Spaccanapoli?

Amici, I heard Him calling. The shrines. I must go. It cannot be ignored.

Head out this instant to begin gathering loyal soldiers of L'Azzurro?

Why wait? Every second wasted is a sin accrued.

It would be better to say nothing at all. Let them come up with a good and godly reason a friar must abandon his post. Pascal stretched himself out, yawned, and settled himself as securely as was possible on his fragile pauper's bunk.

The partition was ripped open with a swift crack.

'*Che cazzo-?*' He spun to face the hallway beyond, his snarl dropping to a prompt look of horror. '*Padre?* I'm- Forgive me.'

Pascal knelt before his superior.

The Avus curled his lip and entered the room without ducking. It had been carved out for a man of his stature. He'd shed his jewelled cloak but still held the staff of office. This, he rested in the corner before taking a seat on a small stool beside the bed.

Pascal swallowed.

'Avus, *Signore*, What can I do for you?'

'Where were you today?'

Pascal opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again.

'Work. At work, working. The festival, I mean. You know what I mean. I was there.'

'Ah, *si*,' the Avus raised a bushy eyebrow, 'And which relic were you to secure for the procession this morning?'

'I uh...' Pascal's voice dropped softer even than the Avus', 'The bones? The bones...'

'The finger bones of our Revered Saint,' The old man signed a cross, 'Were already spoken for.'

'Right, silly me. Must have been something else.'

'You were to bear the Reliquary of the Blood today, Pascal. On Feast Day. Pascal.'

'Oh, the blood?'

Pascal's gaze flickered to a key, currently sitting atop the oil drum. There was one relic apart from the others, right at the centre of the vaults, locked away and on a raised shrine. It was an eerie thing, those vials of changing substances in their casket of glass and gold.

This miraculous congealed lump of tar, about a cup full of San Gennaro's sticky juices, was paraded out by the Order every

year. If it turned back to liquid on that day, then the luck and harvest of Napoli's people would be ensured. If it failed to, then they were in for a rough time. Rougher than usual.

'*Fratello*, what is the name of our order?'

'The *Fratelli della Chiesa del Sacro Sangue*,' mumbled Pascal.

'What was that last part?'

Pascal stared at a dripping stalactite on the ceiling... at his swaying cowl... at the hallway, then back at the key. Anywhere but the Avus.

'*Sacro Sangue*.'

'*Sanghe*. Sacred Blood, *Fratello*. Blood,' The Avus bent closer, nearing Pascal's level, some of that trademark animal shriek making a comeback, 'Not the Church of the Missing Fingers. Not the Church of the Knotted Hair, nor the Church of the Player's Hair, of the Pistol Saint, of the Eared Skull, of the Corpse of the Net, of the Fertility Chair, of the Lactating Fountain, of the Hairy Man, of the Virgin's Garments, of the Lumpy Anvil, nor the Church of San Giuseppe's Stick. Sacred Blood, Pascal. *Il San-ghe*!'

Pascal shrank away as the Avus spat each mention of a relic at him.

'I'm sorry, *Padre*. I was held up on the Lungomare. The parades. And there was an accident.'

'Oh, was there? And what was it that brought you to the Lungomare?'

Pascal kept quiet.

'You made a laughing stock of the Order today. Thousands were waiting for you, Pascal, and millions more were

watching on the network. But you weren't there. The Blood wasn't there. What do you think the people will hold on to now that they haven't been allowed to see the transformation, huh? The Cities are already suffering this year. They believe they are doomed now because the Blood was not seen to liquify.'

'Well, maybe it did go liquid, Padre. Just no one around to see it.'

'No one around to see it? If no one saw it happen, then. It. Did. Not. Happen. Now we are on the precipice of Hell. War looms, the armies are on the move.'

'*Oui*, but weren't they always going to be mobilised, Padre? The brass loves to send out a *pantiata*. Always some war somewhere. The blood is just blood. Or is it even? Who knows? When was the last time someone took a sample to test it?'

The Avus' scabby nostrils flared. His eyes widened.

'*Porco insolente*, I should have your tongue cut out! That is the very life force that flowed through our Divine Patron,' He signed the cross, looking to the rocky ceiling. 'Even if there was no *pantiata* this year, we'd have had to declare one anyway, with no viewing of the Blood. Why did I even let you become an initiate all those years ago? What was the point?'

Why had Pascal joined up in the first place? He needed shelter, food. He remembered that. Also, he was in dire need of some concrete excuse to keep him from the compulsory military service all other refugees found themselves posted to, whenever deemed fit enough. Although with how regimented and gruelling the holy training was, you'd hardly have known the difference. At least he'd never been given a weapon.

'*Alors*, I only needed somewhere to stay. I'm still here, aren't I? I don't quite understand the appeal. But it seems that

religion is fashionable again these days, the numbers you've got lining up.'

'Fashionable! *Marona mia*, Pascal. Soldiers of the Gods are following their calling, as should you. If you just stopped fucking whores and showed up, we might get some use out of you. When will you get a real hobby, like planting oranges or, I don't know, attending to your congregation? Do something before someone more deserving comes after your rank, *mio figlio*.'

Pascal scooted forward on his knees and pawed at the Avus' dark underrobes.

'I can do better, Padre, I promise. I will do better.'

Do better to cover my tracks, Putain.

The Avus smiled.

'You will do better. Because I've chosen you to represent the Order as my second-in-command for the coming *Pantiata*. I expect impeccable personal conduct from you, to behave as any man of the cloth should behave, front and centre. Fratello Pascal Couture, you're going to war.'

With that, the Avus retrieved his staff and marched smartly out, leaving Pascal clutching the air, feeling like a horrendous weight had formed, crushing down on his chest.

III

War. Ever there was war. First comes the cheering, the celebration, the excitement. Then regret.

How long would it last? How long before she would be allowed home? No, forget about home. What is home? Home is

the convent. Home is the Sisterhood. If that meant following them through ruin and eradication, then she would appear loyal to her home, for as long as it sheltered her, as was her duty.

Anna felt her hands grow cold, despite the sweltering late summer dusk, as she bundled out of the truck after her sisters. It had been a long journey uphill, swapping vehicles partway – fortified beasts with blackened windows and number plates removed – such was their practice. She had been on edge all the while.

Her sisters still blathered away about the upcoming Pantiata; their pent-up thoughts having spilled out as soon as they'd found themselves alone.

'I heard we're travelling west across the sea this year, *Ragazze*.'

'Sardinia then? Surely not as far as the Hispanic Legion?'

'That'll be a voyage. I hope that big one from the Sanghe group joins us this year.'

'No, Ida. Him? Really?'

'What? I like the way he rants to his fellows. I'm sure he caught my eye tonight.'

'Complete *stronzat*.'

They were oblivious to her distress. This was intentional. If there was something wrong, anything at all, no one must know but Anna. Keep that for the dark gaps between dreams. For the one, for the intimate self only – this was her mantra. Not another soul was allowed in, try as they might.

The hooded brother saw. He watched you slip. He knows your lies, your Other. Your Incomer.

Anna's legs shook under her habit as they all stood sweating in front of the gates, waiting for the Pontefixa to hurry up and remember which pouch she'd dropped the keys into.

The Pontefixa Beneventana. She would try exactly four keys before she found the right one. It happened every time, enough for Anna to wonder if the woman's mind was starting to fail. Past middle-aged, approximately sixty-five, as a rough guess. One metre seven in height, taller if she didn't stoop. Generally unfeeling as a superior, but fair. Name unknown, even after all these years. Anna had glimpsed her first initial on an envelope once, before it was delivered. Her name started with 'O'. Anna had logged this fact with care. The note had been from a loved one. Anna had known it from the splitting lines of her superior's fleeting smile, in the single silvery bead that had formed in the corner of her right eye. As far as Anna knew, the Pontefixa was the only member of the Sisterhood permitted informal contact with the world outside of the Azure Cities.

The keys jangled with a fussy mumble from the Pontefixa. The fifth key was produced, slotted, and clicked. She entered and held the gate open, beckoning to her younger sisters.

Anna followed behind the women as they filed in, their chatter lessening as they passed under the sharp gaze of their superior.

The chill in her hands was spreading to the wrists, rendering them numb. Footsteps echoed in her head, voices and laughter ringing through her entire body. Something was out of sorts; she could sense it. Some shadow was coming for her. An imminent doom.

'Do you plan on spending the night under the stars,
Sorella Testa?'

‘Huh?’ Anna noticed that her sisters had left her alone with the Pontefixa at the gates. ‘*Scusa, Madre*. I was... I-’

‘Bad form to idle at a threshold – no good comes of indecision. Hurry to bed now. Busy days to come.’

Drifting across the driveway and up the steps, entering the convent’s central vestibule, Anna counted. Seven. Seven steps inside. Precisely forty-seven tiles on the floor; two were missing, a third removed to accommodate modern wiring. Yellow paint flaked to reveal pale sandstone on the walls. Walls lined with the sisters’ travel coats and event loafers. Twenty-nine coats, twenty-nine pairs of loafers for twenty-nine *sorelle*. Anna shed her outerwear and increased the number to thirty, slipping on her work boots.

She let her boots carry her by instinct, directing her to where she needed to go. The tall garish alcoves of the chapel (nine of them) passed her by, the shrouded altar hidden at the far end, inconsequential. She allowed herself to be taken into the stairwell (twenty-two steps, the last two worn remnant dips), down the corridor fifteen windows long, sweeping around the curved backside of the convent’s tower. At its end, the reading room, where several sisters were lounging.

‘Anna. *Come va*? Where do you think we’ll be posted?’

Ida had called to her. Loud girl. One metre six. Faded piercing scars, four of them, dotted around her nose. Unreasonably lively. Obsessive. Her family was from the Pompei farmlands, living in converted ruins. Their address was-

‘Anna?’ Ida and the other sisters were waiting expectantly.

‘Mm. *Sì*. North, I believe.’

***Shit.** I mean, merda. Don't tell them that. You're not observant. You are just one of them.*

Ida nodded, turning to the others.

'See, north it is. I told you – if it's from Anna, it's got to be the truth.' She winked at Anna, 'Won't you join us, *Sorella*?'

'Have to go,' Anna suppressed a tremble, 'Bed. Tired. See you.'

'Oh. Okay then,' Ida smiled, '*Buonanotte*.'

'*Not- Notte*.'

All Anna's limbs were cold now. She couldn't feel her feet or hands on the last stretch through the sleeping quarters. She may as well have been a pair of eyes roving dark hallways in mid-air.

She passed the door down to the broad courtyard, where the great green tree was beginning to yellow. Eleven steps from there to the next corner. From there, fourteen and a half until she arrived directly at the centre of her doorway. She was somewhat aware of her hand wobbling onto the handle and gave it a sharp twist.

She went into the cosy rectangular space. Three point one four by five metres, free of decoration or personalisation, bar a noticeboard plastered with notes, maps, diagrams. Moonlight beamed from the small window to envelop her trunk, spreading over her immaculately tucked linen. Three steps to the bed. One. The next. Take the next step.

Anna slumped, her legs no longer willing to hold her weight. If not for her hand grasping the sheets, she'd have toppled face-first onto the floorboards.

On her way back to her room, she had not dared to breathe too deeply. Now the air came in great wheezing gasps, her whole frame jerking in all directions. Her arms and legs rocked and battered the mattress, the floor. Terror gripped her tighter, sharper than a gauntlet of thorns.

Warmth finally spread back to her, all at once, beginning with endless streams of tears blanketing her cheeks. She was overcome with release, relishing each lurching sob. She clutched at her belly, fingers running over fading scars.

‘*Stupida*,’ she hissed to the dark room, ‘Shut up. Stop it. Stop.’

She pursed her lips, slowing her breaths, tear droplets running down her chin, down her neck, soaking her collar.

If any of the others saw her like this, if any of them saw behind her usual sedated performance, how would she explain it away? Attacks like this were meant to be a thing of the past. She’d prepared herself. She’d trained for this. She’d talked it over, smoothed those habits out. What had provoked this sudden fragility? She asked herself the question without needing to.

The answer was a part of her. This weakness was not Anna’s, but that of the Incomer. It was a fear she had long since buried. Not an everyday worry, not the usual fear of being discovered. No, this icy, trespassing thought was a dread of longing, an anticipation of loss. And now, just a sliver away from the completion of her assignment, that fear threatened to capsize and drown her.

Maldoror Laments

Daniel Reilly (he/him)

Author's Note: this poem is based on the novel "Les Chants de Maldoror" by the Comte de Lautreamont.

And yet I am Maldoror the unceasing
The tide, filled with clouds and dance,
A breeze of gold and hills of evil.
Dripping along the bay, with stony heart,
Evaporating and forever unseeing,
The dirt, the thunder and minds aligned.

All the planets are absent poets,
An animal-realization and an infant wasteland
Stretch out beyond the horizon,
Death is seen in a thousand eyes.
What shall I be today but nothing at all?
Or everything at once?

The clouds shiver, each star prays to God,
Yet he is silent, and I deliver threats to Him.
At the top of Sinai I pull a ladder from heaven.
I am the water, the veiled night-protrusion,
The carnival-elephant as trumpets blare.

Fester then the living flesh of man.
I am not in it, but around it, dead and undead.
Unloved and unburied, my hand is the grave.
I am the letters of obituary and epitaph,
Yet my name is formless and unending.

A black-handed shadow, I cease and stare.
I turn to the mirror and see nothing.
Out from the window I flew,
A star-cloaked sight of dreams and sleep.

I manifest as an open window in the night,
Eyes peering from the dark,
The shadow of a broken streetlight.
I am Maldoror, now blessed and accursed,
The house you've never noticed before.

Artist's Statement

I based the poem on the novel *Les Chants de Maldoror* by the Comte de Lautreamont, a work which forms the bridge between gothic literature, horror and early surrealism. The work deals with the strangeness of existence, at once a desire to understand your own existence and a frustration in being. I have always been interested in fantasy and how it relates to surrealism, as both styles allow us to create art using the untethered mind. *Les Chants de Maldoror* is firmly rooted in the French fantastical tradition and draws much inspiration from the works of Victor Hugo as well as classical mythology while blending these motifs with the psychology of the author. I believe the poem is an expression of our inability to understand the existence and limitations of our own existence. It casts the protagonist as both hated and in control of their own existence without a solid foundation to identify themselves with, which I feel is a common feeling throughout society.

Broomstick Orphans

Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (she/her)

The witches flew above the Pacific Ocean in squadrons.

They removed the combs from their hair and tossed them into the waves.

The combs transformed into coral reefs

which penned in the submarines and wrecked the ships of our enemies.

In the vegetable patch, there was a scarecrow. It had not been there the day before. It had a ripe pineapple for a head and wore an evening dress, the glass beads on the skirt tinkling chime-like in the wind. A pair of stockings stuffed with rags formed the legs, ending in ‘feet’ stuffed into Madge’s decrepit silver dancing shoes. A magpie clung to the ankle, trying to pick the buckle from the frayed T-strap.

Elvie sat on the stairs leading up to the Residence for the Orphaned Daughters of Our Plucky Servicewitches. It was a single-story building of haphazard wings, encased by a verandah of clattering boards and chipped wrought iron. A few residents were sleeping in their hammocks, having opted for the cool night air, even though bitten and bedeviled by insects. Elvie sipped from a china cup of tea, liberally laced with homemade gin.

A pair of knitted slippers appeared by her head. She glanced to the side to identify them. "Morning, Cissie."

"Morning, Elvie," said the young woman attached to the slippers. She sat on the step above, stretching out legs in plain black pajama bottoms. The sleeves of her top fluttered about her upper arms, the neckline embroidered with scarlet hibiscus and red and yellow parrots. She hugged her knees and stared meaningfully at the china cup. "Your giggle tea? This early?"

"Late," Elvie corrected. She peered up at the sky. The pinks and oranges had faded into the blue of early morning. The moon was nothing but a ghost, chased by the fiery sun.

"You should probably remove the big, life-sized dolly from your bed, then. Miss Watanabe will be in soon to rouse Mildred."

"Is she still snoring?"

"Sure." Cissie took the cup from Elvie and gulped. She used her extended pinky finger to point to the scarecrow. "You, on the other hand, would rather stay up all night putting Miss Watanabe's new evening clobber on a scarecrow?"

Elvie smiled artfully.

The scarecrow's short skirts began to swing, cloth and broomstick hips swaying. The faint tune of a rag carried on the morning breeze. It sounded like the banged-up, upright piano in the parlour. The scarecrow's knees knocked, scaring the magpie who, with a final stubborn tug, flew away with her shiny prize.

The two women cackled with delight and, linking arms, went inside to find their breakfast, the jangle of music following them through the screen door.

The Residence for the Orphaned Daughters of Our Plucky Servicewitches had been established after the Extraordinary War. The Victorious Governments promptly classified all witch missions, retraining disbanded squadrons for civilian lives of cat-raising and cake-baking. The orphans, however, were a terrible reminder of sacrifices made by fighting witches, and so the residence was established, first to raise the girls and then to impound them just as they became independent, sassy women. The children of witches were always independent and sassy. Scientists speculated upon whether it was nature or nurture, writing endless government reports and conducting studies that involved the pricking of many thumbs. The current manager, Miss Watanabe, dryly concluded that it was certainly a sassy gene. She did not intend it humorously.

The residence was built on a glass island in the Pacific. It was created when Air Witch Marshal, Gussie Latur, spotted a freshly-bombed ship floundering, its crew tipping into the ocean. She immediately tossed her quizzing glass, which transformed into an island as it splashed down. The crew scrabbled gratefully onto the new island, and after a number of years, the glass island became fertile. It grew into a lush, tropical paradise, with only its beaches remaining clear glass. The orphans liked to lie there at night, enjoying the coolness of the surface, watching the sharks and jellyfish swimming below.

Cissie had the triangle of toast, liberally spread with pineapple marmalade, halfway to her mouth.

“Scarecrow,” announced Miss Watanabe in a forbidding tone. Her steel-grey hair was twisted into a tight bun, the plain, neat cut of her black dress relieved by an apron with two large patch pockets embroidered in a design of flying cranes.

Elvie chewed her mouthful of fatty bacon. "One word. Brief. To the point. Scarecrow."

"Mouth," said Miss Watanabe, her glass eye swiveling towards Elvie. "Closed."

Swallowing dramatically, Elvie assumed an expression of innocence. Cissie kicked her under the table.

"Who?" Miss Watanabe tapped her teacup with a spoon.

Germane, mouthed Elvie. She then stuffed in a forkful of scramble, her eyes twinkling.

The other residents adopted various poses of nonchalance, stretching legs, yawning, sweeping up crumbs, pretending to drink tea. They all wore the same loose, black dresses, fabric shiny with washing and ironing, each scarred by mending and alteration. They were distinguished only by their aprons, hand-sewn during their schooling, some elaborate, some practically austere.

"Cissie. Elvira."

Elvie pushed away her plate. "Two words. We're done for."

"It's your scarecrow," muttered Cissie, finishing her toast in quick, neat bites.

"You made it dance," Elvie returned, following Miss Watanabe into her office.

The office was pleasant. The French doors opened onto the verandah, and a spindly desk was set amid a variety of palms, allowing Miss Watanabe to gaze into the garden as she collected her thoughts. Photographs of her family in Japan were set in silver frames about the room, along with glass fishing floats. She directed

the two young women to rickety chairs and stood, herself, looking out the doors at the scarecrow, still gently swinging her hips.

As usual, Miss Watanabe didn't say a word for some time. Elvie and Cissie bit their tongues, knowing that any words rushing to fill the silence would only intensify their latest transgression.

Finally. "My dress," said Miss Watanabe, an inflection of regret in her tone.

Elvie's chest inflated, proud and defiant. There was no use in groveling before the manager. "It's beautiful."

"I intended to wear it to the Ministry ball," Miss Watanabe said, turning to face Elvie and Cissie. "Why?"

"I didn't have a spare dress," replied Elvie.

"You can't have a nude scarecrow," added Cissie.

Miss Watanabe frowned slightly. She had experienced such a frisson of pleasure upon opening the box, parting the tissue paper, discovering the dress inside with the fine layers of net and beads, the crinkly silk. It slipped over her head with ease, the gathered skirt resting neatly upon her hips. The fashion was perfect for her figure, which she had grown up believing to be unattractively scrawny. After a lengthy correspondence with friends in Sydney, she had also booked an appointment with the most popular hairdresser to bob her long, frumpy hair. In the meantime, she begrudged every morning's struggle with hairpins and spent some quiet minutes admiring the curve of her neck. Miss Watanabe had been filled with joyous anticipation right up to the moment she'd opened her bedroom curtains and followed the sound of ragtime straight to the vegetable garden and its new scarecrow.

“Take the spell off,” said Miss Watanabe, her glass eye revolving back towards her desk. “Retrieve my dress. In pristine condition.” She took the dressmaker’s box from the floor under her chair and gave it to Elvie.

Elvie and Cissie immediately chased themselves to the vegetable patch, picking their way through bolting lettuce and cilantro, fat green tomatoes, and lolling watermelons. Cissie whistled a few bars of a rag, recalling her spell. The rag was swallowed in the stillness, but as they took another couple of steps, they felt a fresh breeze and heard syncopation. Cissie stopped dead on her heels.

“That wasn’t me,” she said.

The scarecrow gave a tremendous shimmy and the dress flew off, floating over the pineapple field, where the golden fruit ripened on stalks. The scarecrow’s pineapple head was flung away, smashed into a sweet, sticky mess. The shoes, stockings, and rags flew. Beneath it all, the two old, gnarly broomsticks broke free of their strings and swooped.

Elvie leapt into the air, grabbing the twiggy bristles. Her feet, in their sensible black shoes, left the ground. She uncurled her fingers and dropped down as her stick went into a vertical climb.

When the Extraordinary War was over, and the witches were deposited into little flats and suburban cottages, the Victorious Governments decommissioned the magical broomsticks. Iron nails were hammered into the twine, affixing the twigs, and iron collars circled the broomsticks. The faery wood became inanimate. It no longer soared. The broomsticks went into cupboards where the best they could hope for was to fall, maybe on top of someone’s skull.

“Where did you get those sticks?” Cissie inquired.

“The broom closet, of course,” Elvie replied. “Who knew? I nearly cut myself on a rusty nail, so I took the nails and rings off, and ta-da.”

The brooms dived, swooping by the young women. “The rumours are true,” Cissie murmured. Miss Watanabe had specifically forbidden any fooling about with broomsticks. Of course, whenever a girl had to sweep anything, she romanticized the possibility that she would take flight, but the staff kept a close eye on the orphans when brooms were involved. “What shall we do? If she’s at her desk...” Cissie stared back at the residence, the verandahs shadowing the French doors. One of the brooms flew into her shoulder, nudging her forcibly. Another flew into Elvie, prodding certain low-down parts of her anatomy.

Elvie leapt. “Ouch. What are they doing?”

Cissie’s broom gave her another tap, making her stagger. “Are they trying to beat us?” The broom gave a hopeful, friendly waggle, flying at hip level. Cissie touched it and it bobbed under her fingers.

“They want us to ride them?” Elvie’s broom gave her a whack upon her hip. “Mine’s not shy.”

“I don’t know how to ride a broom. How do we mount it?” The broom whooshed in close to Cissie’s hindquarters, prompting her to sit. Now with a passenger, it flew upward at a gentle incline. Cissie’s knuckles were white as she clamped onto the wood, feet dangling, face tipped to the sun. Her stomach felt queer, as though it were still catching up. The broomstick flew back down, depositing her safely on the sweet potatoes.

Elvie gave her broom side-eye. “That was kidnapping.”

“I think they want us to fly them.” Cissie’s broom bobbed encouragingly, losing a couple of twigs.

“I guess if I were locked up in a broom closet and made to sweep dirt off floors, I’d want a joy ride too.”

Cissie picked up a handful of the twigs. “I wonder whose brooms they are? Do you think one belonged to Air Witch Marshal Latur? It could be the one she was flying when the island was created! Wouldn’t that be swell?”

Even as her voice rose with excitement, Miss Watanabe projected her voice down past the trellises of beefsteak tomatoes and winged beans. “Girls! Put down the brooms! Now!”

Elvie and Cissie exchanged one quick look, nodded curtly to each other, and climbed onto their broomsticks.

Elvie shielded her eyes as they passed over the beach, the glass brilliant in the sunshine. The blue ocean flew below them, their shadows enormous upon the surface, occasionally broken by a leaping dolphin or humpback whale.

Cissie gulped. “There’s the heebie-jeebies in my tummy,” she managed to say before upchucking into the blue.

“Oh, Cissie!”

She wiped her mouth with her hand. “Glad I didn’t have the eggs. Where do you think we’re going?”

“You still look a bit green,” said Elvie, who was enjoying herself. She had always dared to climb onto the highest tree branches. She was also famous for tumbling off the roof when she was ten, an older girl’s dress tied about her neck to serve as a witch’s cloak. “I wish they could talk, then we’d know. Think we’re flying West, at least. Which means we’ll probably land in Australia. Maybe even Sydney. We could buy some records.”

“We have no money,” Cissie reminded her, “and Miss Watanabe only lets us use the gramophone for an hour on Sundays anyway. She listens to it herself, you know. In her bedroom after curfew. I can hear her clomping about to the music.” Cissie had been put in a room on Miss Watanabe’s wing, a punishment for her various crimes. Elvie would have been there too, but she snored obnoxiously.

They flew on, the pins that held Elvie’s thick black hair tinkling into the ocean, where they curiously turned into a fleet of fishing boats.

After some time gossiping and musing on the possibilities of their future, the young women saw a long expanse of white sand. “I think that’s a proper continent,” said Elvie. “Thank goodness. I’m so starved, I’d eat Madge’s Salad Supreme.” Cissie gave her a good glare, her stomach still queasy.

But the broomsticks flew on, over a spreading city, tin roofs shining in the sun, a patchwork of farms and suburban houses stretching out in neat rectangles around a curly river.

“I think it’s Brisbane,” said Cissie with some disappointment. Her broomstick continued smooth and steady. “I don’t think we’re even going to the bright lights of Brisbane.”

They flew up over the mountain range and across the Darling Downs, past the village of Crows Nest, to a farm nestled between dirt tracks. The shiniest stars were starting to break through the sunset as the broomsticks slowly descended, landing not by the weatherboard house with red glass in the windows, but upon another hill, where a chicken shed perched. It was out of sight of any building, surrounded by fruit trees and cabbages, but it shone from within: a strong, golden light.

The broomsticks dropped, allowing Elvie and Cissie to get off. They nudged them towards the shed, following the flock of brown hens who hurried to their perches and nesting boxes in the little annexes built against the walls. There was a loud cackling and flapping as they went, a joyous goodnight cacophony. Cissie picked a feather out of her chestnut locks and sneezed. Her broomstick flew straight up to the rickety door of the shed, banging sharply upon its surface in an approximation of syncopated rhythm. The door rattled, a few nails flying loose.

A moment later, the door opened, the light flooding out, turning the gloaming into gleaming yellow.

“Maude!” a voice cried in delight. It was a high, squeaky voice, like the call of an excited blue-footed boobie. Elvie and Cissie could see the broomstick roll and soar about a figure, just like a lightning bug. Elvie’s broomstick was also doing tricks, attempting to be noticed. “And you too, of course, Gracie. How I’ve missed you both!” There was a moment. “And there are friends in the dark. Just a moment.”

The brilliance began to dim. The stars popped out, twinkling. The moon shone silver. The little chicken shed dimmed to the light of kerosene lamps. And in the doorway, was a woman wearing a dress of pale gold lace, soft as butter, still shimmering with light, her hair caught by a diamond band.

“You’re a witch!” cried Cissie.

“Stating the obvious,” added Elvie. “Hello. We’re Elvie and Cissie from the Residence for the Orphaned Daughters of Our Plucky Servicewitches. Your broomsticks brought us here.” Elvie was always very practical in unusual circumstances. She peered around the witch, staring into a dingy, drab shed. It did not match the lushness of the witch’s current attire.

The witch giggled, which rose into a cheerful cackle. “I should change.” She retreated into the shed. “Come in, come in.”

She moved behind a rickety old screen, pasted over with fashion plates clipped from the magazines. The screen was greyed and peeling. There was just the one room with chinks in the walls plugged with newspaper. The floor was compacted dirt, covered over with flour and feed sacks. There was an old wood stove, its chimney poking through the tin roof, but still covering everything in a fine layer of soot and ash. It made the room warm, but stuffy. A tin tub of water sat on the table, and there were a couple of chairs and a bed, the cover a worn, knitted quilt.

As Cissie went to sit down, her legs still wobbling after her flight, she shrieked. Balanced on the chair was a drawer from the nearby dresser, a scratched and stained object that sat in all its crooked glory under a cloudy mirror. In the drawer was a bundle of knitted blankets, in the midst of which a baby slumbered. The baby opened one dark eye at the shriek and then went back to sucking her thumb.

The witch’s head popped over the top of the screen. “That’s just Baba. Don’t worry. She’s the bee’s knees.” She reappeared in the room, now dressed in a drab, light blue dress and dirty apron, her hair frizzy and diamond-free. She had a smattering of freckles across her nose that she quickly obscured by washing her face in the ash-strewn water. “I’m Heenie.”

“What happened to your other dress?” asked Cissie, awkwardly patting the blankets around the baby. There hadn’t been a baby at the Residence in years. She thought the small, round human looked like the grumpy, old board members who sometimes came for lunch—and she smelled like their gaseous emissions too.

Heenie inclined her head. “It’s back in its macadamia shell. Sometimes you just want to get gussied up for a lark.”

“But...” Elvie looked meaningfully at the interior of the chicken shed. Maude was already sweeping chicken feathers and other matter into the corners with some help from Gracie.

“I know. It’s the pits. But I couldn’t sell the dress, you know, even on the black market for enchanted objects. The macadamia always opens to reveal the most fashionable dress in the world, and I plan to hand it down to Baba one day. Would you like a cup of tea? No milk, I’m afraid. I was going to make some supper, and I think I can make it stretch.”

Elvie raised an eyebrow at Cissie and murmured “Surprise salad,” prompting a chuckle, but they were used to making do, and they helped Heenie fry up some stale bread, tomatoes, and onions to make a passable meal for three.

“I’d offer you an egg on top, but there weren’t enough eggs today.”

“You live here all alone with Baba?” asked Cissie, kicking Elvie under the table as she wolfed down her food.

“Absolutely. I did have a nice flat in Brisbane after the war. I was among the last to join the broom squadrons, so I didn’t see a lot of action, but I was demobbed just like the other witches. I was kicked out when Baba came along, of course. The Naumanns took me in. It’s becoming quite the thing to have a ‘fallen witch’ living on your farm.”

Witches rarely marry. They claim there’s no room on their broomsticks for a husband. When the servicewitches returned to civilian life, the government placed conditions upon their pensions. Namely, the witches were forbidden to have any more little witches. The Victorious Governments insisted that all the

witches conform to current moral standards and behaviours. Witches are not good at observing rules.

Like any woman having a baby alone, wayward witches faced a grim future. Most witches took themselves into the country, where local families thought witches would ensure crop yields and help with calving. For a city-born-and-bred witch, cows were a complete mystery, but fresh eggs and milk ensured healthy babies, and if nothing else, a witch is very good at picking things up.

“But... the father?” Cissie had only a rudimentary understanding of where babies came from. They’d had a lesson about it all that had made far less sense than the intelligence that babies appeared in cabbage patches, passed around when they were all in pigtails.

Heenie cackled with glee. “I went to a jazz club with Fletcher Moxley.” The two faces looking at her were blank. “The film star? Though I knew him before all that.”

“We’ve never seen a film,” said Elvie. “We haven’t even heard jazz. Miss Watanabe won’t have it in the parlour, but I’ve read some about it.”

“Oh, you poor lambs,” Heenie gushed. “You don’t know what you’re missing! I wish I had my records, but I had to sell them all to get here.” Maude tapped a rhythm against the wall, Heenie joining in, “Baba-baba-baby-mine baba-baba-bing-bababing-bing-bing-bab.” Her singing voice was breathless, and when she finished, she ruffled her peroxide hair, the roots showing a strip of black, and smiled widely. “Maude here knows her jazz, at least! I wonder how she learned it?” Cissie thought she knew, recognizing the melody from Miss Watanabe’s bedroom. “Where were the broomsticks at the orphanage all this while?”

“In the broom closet,” Cissie confirmed.

“I inadvertently liberated them when I made a scarecrow,” Elvie answered. Heenie blinked. “I took out the iron nails.” Heenie’s eyes grew large.

“Iron nippers on our brooms? I didn’t know they did that. Jeepers, Maude, I’m sorry. If I’d known, I’d have done a bunk with you! You too, Gracie. What Gussie would have thought...”

Elvie’s eyes now grew large. “Gracie carried *the* Gussie Latur?”

“Sure. Maude used to fly with her right-hand witch, Mattie, but after Mattie was lost in a dog fight over Mauritius, Maude was so despondent she wouldn’t accept another witch. Gussie thought she’d have to retire her, which would have been a darned shame. But then I joined up and Maude and I hit it off. I guess they kept the brooms together.” She stroked Maude, a far-away expression on her face. Elvie longed to interrogate her further, but Cissie put a hand on her wrist, shaking her head. Cissie was generally the more empathetic of the two and Elvie had learned that it was wise to heed her signals.

Heenie picked up Baba and undid the little button placket on her dress with one hand. Baba gave a contented cluck and began to feed. Cissie stared in frank curiosity, despite being kicked a few times by her flame-cheeked friend.

A tear trickled onto Heenie’s cheek, but she brushed it off, leaving a trail of soot, and smiled at Baba, whose blue bonnet ribbons were cleaner and nicer than anything else in the chicken shed short of the macadamia nut’s contents.

She finally put Baba up on her shoulder and patted her back, resulting in a satisfying burp that made the chipped crockery rattle.

“I’ve been thinking. You’ve come all this way, brought along Maude and Gracie, I should at least show you a good time.” Elvie’s face said everything she was thinking. “Oh, I know I haven’t two pennies to rub, but I’m not friendless. It’s impossible to live in the city, but I think a visit would be okay.” The broomsticks clattered. “The Cat’s Meow, I think. We’ll stop by Stella’s and leave Baba with her.”

Elvie felt her heart skip a beat, butterflies multiplying in her tummy. However, she was also desperately aware of her shapeless dress and apron decorated in uneven cross-stitches. “We couldn’t!” she gasped.

Heenie looked her up and down and laughed. “Oh, sweetie. Stella will rig something up for you.” She grinned. “Stella is a treat with a needle! Can’t believe they dress orphans like dowdies.”

But Cissie had other concerns. “There are only two broomsticks!”

“You’ve never ridden tandem?” Heenie slapped her forehead. “Of course not! I’ll show you. Just let me put my glad rags on.” She disappeared behind her screen. “Close your eyes a moment!” The radiance of her rags flared and then dimmed, and she danced out from behind the screen, her white-stockinged legs jangling. Her face was done up. A scarlet cupid’s bow had been painted over her lips. Her eyelids were heavy with mascara and green eyeshadow. Her cheeks were dusted white and then stained apple-red. She framed her face with her hands and fluttered her goopy lashes. “Quite a dish, right?”

They were shortly on their way. Cissie and Elvie doubled on Gracie, pointing their toes to adjust speed and direction as Heenie showed them. The witch allowed herself to glow more

brightly upon her broomstick, speeding along like a star that refused to fall. People's wishes sparkled from her fingers and toes, hopes and dreams twirling in her slipstream. She had securely knotted a piano shawl around Maude, making a cosy nest for Baba. Its fringe bounced and swayed, providing the baby with entertainment. Although Cissie had been concerned about the safety of the knots, Heenie had waved away her doubts by insisting that Maude was keeping an eye on things, figuratively speaking.

They landed in a small suburban street in Bulimba, where there was a large weatherboard house painted in a warm cocoa colour. Over the front gate, there was a rickety sign: Terra Firma Boarding House for Retired Servicewitches. There were no lights on. Heenie led them through the overgrown hibiscus and pumpkin vines towards the back of the house and up the stairs, everyone moving on tip-toe, even Maude and Gracie. Heenie scratched upon a pair of French doors that led out onto the verandah.

A gas lamp flickered on, and a moment later, the doors were flung open by a woman in a pair of black silk pajamas and a pink turban. Her face shone through a layer of cold cream, the pointy nose precise, the black eyes perfectly round, the small mouth prim. The primness melted when she saw Heenie.

"My dear! I didn't expect to see you for a long time yet!" She brushed by both Heenie's cheeks, kissing the air. Elvie and Cissie exchanged puzzled looks, assuming Stella had missed her aim. "And Baba!" Baba was still wrapped in her piano shawl, but was now in Heenie's arms, gently gurgling as she inspected her toes. "Eleven toes. Excellent."

"She's perfect," Heenie said proudly. "Worth the wayward adventure. Speaking of which, these two young witches

are orphans from Gussie's island. Maude and Gracie brought them right to my door. I thought I'd take them to the Cat's Meow."

Stella's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "There's a new picture palace in the neighborhood. They're showing *The Charming Man*."

Baba's face contorted, and a strong smell spread in an atrocious miasma about the babe. Heenie held her out, wrinkling her nose.

"If that's what you think of your father..."

"She has good reason," Stella remarked. "Give her to me. A quick wash, a few dabs of powder and perfume..."

"Stella, she is not a Sheba. But would you mind her for me? And, if you could... the orphans can't possibly go anywhere fun dressed like this."

Stella tore her gaze from the noxiously beautiful babe to fully regard Elvie and Cissie, rumpled and bedraggled as they were. She tapped her chin thrice.

"Did you know that some witches double as fairy godmothers?" She hustled everyone into her room, hushing them as she disappeared into her wardrobe, peeping out now and then to measure the young women with a gesture of thumb and forefinger. In a few moments, she had two wooden hangers in her hands, which she hung from a curtain rod. "There are some who think the details of fashion are frivolity, but I tell you, they're the most important part of the adventure." She smiled like a sphinx. Taking up a pair of scissors, she sat the pair down at her dressing table.

"First things first," she added. She picked up a brush and attacked the frizzy tangle that flying had produced upon Elvie's head. Soon, the hair was smoothed, falling like water from the

bristles. Then Stella snipped, and the hair rippled as the length fell away, disappearing into the floorboards. “No time for a set, but...” she fingered Brilliantine through the short hair, and in a moment, Elvie stared at a reflection of a fashionable young woman with hair crisply crinkled to her chin, gloss upon her cheeks and lips, and large kohl-rimmed eyes. Cissie’s brown tresses were snipped off quicker, framing a cherry pout and virescent eyelids. She whistled as she bobbed her head.

“I’m plain, I know, but jeepers, don’t I look swell!” As she turned, she realized the wooden clothes hangers were now supporting two scintillating dresses. One dress was a fabrication of soft velvet in darkest blue, spangled in silver. The other dress cascaded in silver fringe from a low-slung, rose-beaded bodice. Stella wove her silver sewing needle back into her cuff for safekeeping.

“Wizard! I have a nineteenth-century figure, you know,” remarked Elvie, slipping the velvet over her head. “I didn’t think I could wear a dress this thoroughly modern. I envied Cissie her figure.”

“See what I can do even without your gorgeous hips.” Cissie gave her hips a waggle, the fringes flying. “Isn’t it marvelous to be released from a shapeless get-up? I’ve never been so shiny.”

Stella had already halfway disappeared into a trunk. She tossed out silver shoes. Cissie thought for a moment that one of the shoes changed course midway, as though batted away by an invisible force. “Can’t go barefoot! They’re cheap, so don’t go anywhere too brightly lit!”

Cissie put on shoes that were too big for her, but she stuffed a handkerchief around the heel and it was fine. Elvie’s were a bit too narrow, but Heenie was able to use a bit of elastic to at

least ease the T-strap and advised that in the morning, a soak in some Epsom salts would do wonders.

Stella clapped her hands authoritatively. "You're ready! I can't give you a coach, but there's a ferry—the boat kind, not the kind with wings—just down the road."

"Thank you, Stella, my friend," Heenie said, giving her an enthusiastic hug. She kissed Baba wetly on the forehead and left a scarlet imprint. "Be good for Auntie Stella or she'll curse you." Baba clucked with delight, her dimpled hands waving. "Okay, my orphaned witches, let's go be hanged!"

"Be hanged?" Cissie whispered uneasily. Their childhood had been filled with rumours about what happened to orphans who ran away to the mainland. She had had particular nightmares about being thrown into a barrel filled with knives and rolled down a hill. Hanging seemed gentler, but no less undesirable.

"Dancing," Elvie reassured her, being more up-to-date with the slang. She was a great reader of very bad serial fiction.

They left their brooms, which rested by the door, and Baba, who was already lying on the bed, gurgling in bliss among the silks and satins. The night air was cool, whipping off the winding river. Heenie turned away from the river, however, walking rapidly towards an illuminated building nestled among eucalypts and palm trees, wooden cottages, and elegant houses, from which gramophones could be heard.

"The river is the other way," Cissie said. "I can smell the water."

"I'm going to check out this picture."

"Is Baba's father really a film star?"

“I don’t lie,” Heenie answered simply. “He wasn’t a star when we met a year and a bit ago. He worked at the garage, all oil and grease, but with a ticket to Hollywood in his jeans pocket. He sailed not long after we met, with my blessing. *May you be the most handsome, the most charming. May you shine like a star.*”

Fletcher Moxley, whose real name was Eugene Pigg, was “discovered” when he pumped gas into a film producer’s Rolls. He threw away his greasy rag and moved into a studio-owned house. His life story was rewritten, his face remodeled.

Fletcher was captured on a thousand glass negatives. He was locked into a contract, silenced in film.

In interviews, Fletcher was always accompanied by his devoted Welsh terrier. His fans were charmed by photographs of the suave actor and the fuzzy tan dog. The terrier’s name was Heenie.

The three witches snuck into the picture palace, dodging the ushers and ticket sellers, keeping to the shadows. It wasn’t so difficult, since *The Charming Man* had reached its final reels. A man and a woman were dancing on the screen, just slightly out of sync with the very real man below, who continued to play the highly polished upright piano with gusto. Heenie stared as Eugene Pigg’s face next filled the screen, gasping involuntarily as though hit in the stomach. Eugene was silent. His lips moved, but his voice was absent. *Will you marry me?* The words joggled on the screen for a moment. Then Eugene returned. He emoted dramatically. Heenie ran outside.

Elvie and Cissie followed her, although Elvie moved reluctantly, her eyes large as she stared at the fascinating silence of the actors. She was tugged away by Cissie’s hand. Outside, Heenie

leaned upon a wooden fence post, glowing softly as she stared at the crescent moon.

“If I could just fly up there, sit within the crook of the moon, imagine how happy I’d be? I wouldn’t be hungry. I wouldn’t be scared. I wouldn’t feel so ashamed, even though I know I did nothing wrong, but love someone with all my body. I would be far away from it all.”

Cissie folded her arms upon the fence, kicking her heels, wondering if the people inside the house were in bed dreaming of steak and duchess potatoes. “You might be offered a nice cheese plate, too.” The fried bread and tomatoes seemed a long while ago.

Elvie looked contemplative. “I thought you the happiest, most glamorous of witches.” She eased a shoe off slightly, propped up by a eucalyptus like a spangled koala.

Heenie gave a half-hearted cackle. “I’m convincing, aren’t I?”

“Fletcher Moxley is a very handsome egg. I wouldn’t mind having a crack at him with a bit of toast.” Heenie glanced at Elvie, appalled. “What’s wrong?”

“That’s Baba’s father you’re talking about!” Elvie smiled a little. “Oh, that’s how you deal with *your* tragic life. You make a joke out of it. I put on the ritz, make a little whoopee... well, you get the picture. It sure covers a lot of grime and ignominy.”

Elvie nodded slightly, not sure what ‘ignominy’ meant. “Come on. Let’s go dancing. You promised and we’re all decked out in glad rags. I want something to justify the blisters I’ll have tomorrow.”

Heenie took one last, melancholic look at the moon, and together they began to walk down towards the river where the

ferry was still taking passengers. The boards of the jetty rattled under their feet as they sprinted the last feet, clambering on board to squeeze in among the other passengers as the boat set off.

They passed over the dark waters, the little ferry bobbing and weaving. On the other side, they ducked out, having still not paid a fare, and they proceeded to walk towards Queen Street, where the Cat's Meow was located in a basement. Along the way, Heenie wiggled and shimmied, knocked her knees and waved her arms, showing the orphans how to dance. Passers-by looked on in amusement and distaste, but Heenie paid them no heed. She sang the popular songs, advised on the best cocktails, and reassured them that many 'good-looking eggs' would ask them to come onto the dance floor.

Cissie was quite distracted and kept staring back at the dark streets, certain she could hear footfalls behind her.

Couples were still coming and going, passing through the bright lights of a blue marquee, painted with the logo of an elegantly elongated black feline, a cigarette holder held in the curl of her tail.

Heenie gave an excited leap and hurried forward, greeting the doormen, waving to various interesting figures within the throng. Elvie noticed that she grew more dazzling as her hips swayed into the nightclub, picking up the rhythm of the jazz band. There were other witches too, incandescent sparks upon the dance floor, their legs moving as though independent of their bodies, their arms holding glasses of colourful, intoxicating liquor aloft.

"Would you like a drink?" a young man in a loose suit asked Cissie.

Frantically recalling Heenie's tutorial, Cissie gazed up into the man's brown eyes. "A gin rickey, please." She watched as he

inclined his head and hurried off to the bar. “Gee, Elvie, isn’t this swell? Men just buy you drinks!”

“Beats giggle tea,” Elvie agreed, nodding to a man who fetched her a martini. She sipped. “A gentle shake, I hope?”

“Of course...?” the man fished lazily for a name.

Elvie threw him back. “I rather think we should dance, Cissie.”

Cissie, twisting when something brushed by her, saw no one pass by. She put down the gin rickey, following Elvie towards the dance floor. They did not want for partners among the crowd of witches, eggs, dames, and sheiks. Elvie even discovered she could make her glass float, conveniently at hand for refreshment, earning respect among the dance floor’s witches. Cissie thought she’d never be happy again if she weren’t wearing scads of fringe. Her toes lifted off the parquetry, pirouetting.

Heenie was gorgeously knocking her knees when she glanced up. Around the dance floor was a black-and-silver-papered wall, covered in photographs of famous patrons, each autographed boldly. There was even a photograph of Gussie Latur, astride her broomstick, her opera coat snug about her ears. But Heenie wasn’t looking at that photograph and its loopy signature, all contained within the solicitous ‘g.’ Her ears rang with memories of bombs, smoke, and spilling engine oil, alternating with the little amorous whispers that still lingered around the lobes. Her fingers clenched and unclenched. She briefly disappeared in a white cloud, thunder rolling just out of sight.

As she emerged, her golden T-strap went flying across the room, crashing heel-first into a frame, shattering glass. It spilled everywhere, tinkling onto the dance floor like shattered slippers.

The black and white paper image of Fletcher Moxley floated down to the ground, released.

The waiters and doormen advanced upon Heenie, who stood defiant in a dance-floor spotlight, shimmering with rage and frustration and loneliness. She glared at them, removing her other shoe, her peroxide mop falling forward over her face as she arched her back.

The band stopped playing, instrument by instrument, till only a single trombone gave a last brassy honk. The silence was filled with whispers and nudges.

Witches, eggs, dames, and sheiks parted to allow a tall figure through. He didn't twinkle, but he was a star. He ran his hand through his Brilliantine locks, loosening a curl over his forehead. He had a slim moustache and wide, white smile, walking right through the circle of waiters and doormen, one of whom asked for an autograph, and straight to Heenie. He grabbed her hand and carried it to his lips.

"And that is Fletcher Moxley in the flesh," announced Elvie, ignoring her current dance partner.

Fletcher Moxley then picked Heenie up in his arms and carried her off the dance floor.

"Grease monkey," she said into his shoulder.

"Witch," he said in response. He had a broad Australian drawl. He put on his hat as they left the club.

Cissie turned quickly, hoping to catch whoever was right there on her heels, but there was no one there.

Abandoned, the orphans continued to dance and only left as the crowd thinned. They followed a trail of lost golden spangles back towards the ferry terminal and caught the last ferry, huddling

in the back and snoozing upon each other's shoulders. From there, they traced their way back to *Terra Firma*.

Stella flung open her French doors and yawned dramatically as she waved them inside. Without asking, Cissie and Elvie promptly collapsed onto her bed, limbs sprawled. Stella observed them placidly. Elvie rolled a little, propping herself up.

“No Baba?”

“Heenie and her movie star picked her up. They're staying in a ritzy hotel tonight and then they're off for a quickie wedding and Hollywood.”

“Good.”

Stella sat upon her velvet fainting couch, draping an embroidered piano shawl across her shoulders. “It was about time she shattered her blessing,” she mused. “No sense in a witch not living happily ever after.”

Languidly shifting her body, Cissie thought about her warm feelings of happiness. “I feel quite dizzy, but in a good way,” she noted. “And like someone has been following me all night.”

The air beside Stella shimmered. There sat Miss Watanabe, her steel-grey hair pinned up primly, her knees pressed together. Both her good eye and her glass eye stared at the orphans, which, thought Elvie, was more unsettling than when they looked in different directions.

“Zozzled. Can't take you back to the island like this.”

“Do you want to take them back?” asked Stella. She leaned back and picked at the pins in Miss Watanabe's hair, letting the twist slowly unfurl down her back.

“They’ve escaped. Couldn’t possibly tell the board of directors they’d made off to the Cat’s Meow where they danced to jazz music and drank cocktails they didn’t pay for.” She blinked, shocked at her own volubility. “It’s taken them long enough to do all that, though.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t cut your hair,” remarked Stella. “It’s so glorious.”

Miss Watanabe batted away her hand. “Appointment’s booked for next week. Although I could use your help with a new dress? The orphans used it to scare magpies, and it just doesn’t look the same anymore.” She rolled the full sentences around her mouth, savouring the freedom of glibness.

“Of course,” said Stella, smiling with satisfaction. Cissie staggered up and hurried outside, leaning heavily over the rail. “A little hair of the dog might be required for the orphans, though.”

“Is there a place at *Terra Firma* for them?”

“Oh yes. Mags just left to travel around Peru. They can take her room. There’s even a roomy cupboard for two courageous broomsticks.”

Cissie returned, her hand trailing along the timber frames and walls, her eyes squinting. Elvie rolled over, working her shoes loose.

“We don’t have to go back?” Elvie asked. She began to wonder if some of the trumpets from the Cat’s Meow hadn’t set up in her head. “You’re really a witch?”

Miss Watanabe nodded curtly. “You thought witches wouldn’t set one of their very own to watch the orphans? We have no bureaucratic powers—not yet—but we are learning, infiltrating all arms of the Victorious Governments. Just you wait. Victory

tarnishes, a witch doesn't." She smiled then and turned into a column of smoke, floating out into the night, drifting back to the glass island and her charges.

Elvie blinked. "I guess this means tomorrow we'll have to look for a little job."

Cissie groaned.

"Maybe not tomorrow," said Stella. "I hope there's still some tomato juice in the icebox."

"I'd rather pineapple," Elvie responded, feeling a little green herself now.



‘Starlight’ Artist’s Statement

Melissa Hudson (she/her)

My art is human-crafted. It is an expression of the search for transcendence. I want anyone sharing it with me to feel connected to the human spirit that conceived of and painstakingly executed this piece. I was guided by a deep internal conviction that this art needed to exist so powerful that I was willing to invest many hours of my one and only precious mortal life to bring it into being.

The thing that truly captivates us is *not* the uncanny perfection of an algorithmically generated image. The thing that draws the eye—the thing that elevates the human spirit when looking at *human* accomplishments—is the wonderment that hands not so dissimilar from your own could capture such a fleeting thing as the way a filament of light passes through sheer fabric. The wonderment of art is seeing the human frailties and vulnerabilities we all know ourselves to share being triumphantly and momentarily overcome by one of us, for all of us. That is what I bring to you as an artist. Share my joy at a well-rendered line or the curvature of a muscle under flesh. Be enraptured, as I am, by the wonder of human-created art, rendered by human eyes and hands. Join me in that ephemeral feeling of personal revelation, inspired in some part by Bouguereau’s weightless floating figure and fabric from “Evening Mood.”

Gretel

Stephen Goldfinch (he/him)

TW: Gore, Grimm-typical violence

Gretel wondered what it would feel like to be eaten by wolves. She tried to imagine the sensation of teeth penetrating her flesh. A moment of tension as the skin resists, and then the release. Would it be fast or slow? How much would it hurt? She wondered if she would fight back or go limp and give in. She watched the flickering shadows amongst the trees at the edge of the clearing, glanced down to check on her brother. He smiled beatifically, asleep by the fire she had built. He had smiled as they made their way back to the cottage the first time, following the trail of shiny, white pebbles he had dropped as they were led into the forest. It was the smile of someone who knew that everything was going to be alright. He wasn't scared of wolves, but his bravado wouldn't keep him safe. Hansel had always been protected: by their mother when he was a baby; by Gretel as soon as he could walk. She had told him that he was brave and strong, and he had misread her quiet watchfulness as anxiety. She let him believe he looked after her, his naivety too pure to spoil. When the wolves came, he would die believing he was protecting her, smiling and deluded. She could give him that gift. When she had first noticed the birds were eating the breadcrumbs he dropped, she hadn't said anything. She had wanted to let him smile for a little longer. They were going to die anyway. Was it so much worse to be eaten by wolves than to starve, to be eaten from the inside? So she had allowed herself to be led.

Eventually, she slept. Wolves ate her again and again. Sometimes she ran and was caught. Sometimes she lay still. Once she had enjoyed it. Once the wolves had the faces of her mother, her father, her brother. She woke in the morning gloaming, the fire reduced to ash. A raven perched on a low branch nearby. It cawed and cocked its head.

Gretel?

It's okay, Hansel. The birds have eaten the breadcrumbs, but this raven will lead us home.

The raven cawed and flew away.

See? It wants us to follow it. Walking will warm us up.

But it flew that way.

Only its body. Its spirit flew this way. Can't you see it? It's on that branch, there.

I can't see it, Gretel.

It's hard to see something so far away. It's waiting for us. Come on! We can look for berries as we walk. I know which ones are safe to eat.

Hansel rubbed his eyes and yawned as though he had slept in a soft bed, and a full breakfast waited for him in the kitchen. Gretel forced herself to be patient. Perhaps if they ate poisonous berries they would become poison, and the wolves would die too. Hansel smiled at her. Gretel found where the sun was rising between the trees, took her brother's hand, and walked towards it.

It was almost dark when she saw the thin trail of chimney smoke. They had drifted too far eastwards, walked beyond the cottage without realising. The forest is deceptive. You walk in a straight line, step around a tree blocking your way, then another,

and inch by inch, still believing you are going straight, you end up lost in the woods.

Where is the spirit of the raven now, Gretel?

This way. It says we are almost home.

Won't Father be pleased!

Gretel remembered their parents' conversation two nights ago. She had woken from a dream of wolves to the gnawing emptiness of her stomach, heard voices in the kitchen and crept to the door. She had listened as they discussed the inevitability of her death and Hansel's. She had been sure Father would put his foot down. Then Mother had said that he'd agreed to it before, so he must agree to it again. Gretel had thought that was stupid, but Father had given in.

I can see it!

Hansel ran towards the cottage, flung open the door and burst inside. She followed, saw Father's two-handed axe and small hatchet leaning against the wall, but only Mother was there, one arm around Hansel as he clutched her skirt.

Where is Father?

He has gone to the village to sell the wood we gathered. He will be back tomorrow with what food he can afford. There is nothing for you here tonight.

We will be safe from the wolves, and warm, and have a bed to sleep in.

No.

Yes.

Hansel still clung to Mother's skirt, smiling up at her with love. She still had an arm around him.

Hansel, come to me.

No, Hansel. Go in the other room.

He obeyed, and Mother closed the door. Then she closed the door Gretel had come in by. The room was hot. The fire blazed. Father wouldn't have used so much wood. Mother picked up the large axe.

I didn't want to do this.

Gretel was silent. She circled the kitchen as Mother moved closer. The axe was heavy, and Mother had never swung it at something living. Gretel dodged easily, moving toward the door.

Go.

Gretel picked up the hatchet, sidestepped the axe and advanced, slashing with it. Mother stepped back and tripped, dropped the axe, and fell backwards into the fire. She screamed and struggled to right herself. She managed to find her footing. As she started to stand, Gretel pushed her back down into the flames. Mother writhed and wailed. Each time she tried to stand, Gretel pushed her back down. Each time Mother was weaker, and Gretel found it easier. When she stopped moving, Gretel dragged her outside and locked the door.

She went into the other room. Hansel shrank against the far wall, crying.

It's okay, Hansel. That wasn't our Mother. It was a witch. I killed her. You're safe.

What happened to our real Mother?

The witch killed her. Now go to sleep. Tomorrow we will find food.

Hansel slept. Gretel watched the wolves eat Mother from the window, listening to the crunch of bone. She held the hatchet in her hand and wondered what wolf meat tasted like.

I Can Do Nearly All the Magic I Used to Do, But I Do Miss Having Thumbs Instead of Paws

Juleigh Howard-Hobson

I used to be a witch, but recently
things
have changed. Midlife crisis? Not likely
to bring
about what I've been through. I went to
sleep as me,
woke up as something else. Grew
whiskers, had fleas,
drooled at the thought of cat
food cans being
opened. I know what
this sounds like, but seeing
my reflection:
black fur, pointed ears, sharp teeth,
I've begun

to disallow all disbelief,
accept
that I am Felis catus, that I'd
slept,
and somebody cursed me. Flea-d. Fanged. Green eyed.

Artist's Statement

My poetry has appeared in The Deadlands, 34 Orchard, Midnight Echo, Star*Line, Siren's Call, The Audient Void, Silver Blade, Vastarien: Women's Horror (Grimscribe Press), Under Her Skin (Black Spot), various Rhysling Award Anthologies (Science Fiction Poetry Association) and many other places. My latest poetry collection is Curses, Black Spells & Hexes (Alien Buddha).

I'm an active member of the Horror Writers Association, The Science Fiction Poetry Association, a Million Writers Award "Notable Story" writer and have been nominated for the Best of the Net, the Rhysling, an Elgin and the Pushcart Prize. I was named a Laureates' Choice prize winner in the 2024 Maria W. Faust Sonnet Contest.

Intrusion

Hedieh Gharrat (she/her)

It was an unusually quiet night in Tormish: the small village lay still in the bleak winter night, not a sound stirred the chilly air, not even the usual hoots of owls or the whispers of the wind. It felt as if the village had fallen into a deep slumber. All Rajab could hear was his labored breaths as small puffs of fog escaped his mouth. He got off his mount with a frustrated sigh, tugging hard on the mare's reins to urge her forward. For reasons unknown, she had been resisting going any further. Rajab's annoyance grew by the second. Despite the winter chill, sweat was dripping down his back. His shirt clung to his slender frame, and at that moment, he only wanted to get home as quickly as possible.

Throwing the reins aside in irritation, he knelt to catch his breath when suddenly, his lantern light died out. Rajab didn't think much of it. *Probably the breeze blew it out*, he thought—even though it was a surprisingly calm night. Exhaling sharply, he relit the lantern. Cheers echoed through the place as soon as the lantern flickered to life. Rajab was taken aback; he didn't think anyone lived there. There were no cottages, just an empty landscape stretching into the horizon. He stood up, raising the lantern near his face to see better. In the lamplight, he could only discern piles of rocks and stones. Earlier in the day, Rajab had passed the same spot and was nearly sure there was nothing more than these rock piles and a few trees along the roadside. As he moved closer, he squinted to make out the shapes shrouded in the darkness. At last, he recognized the outlines of what appeared to be a cave entrance not far from where he stood.

Rajab pulled the horse's reins again toward the cave, but he faced even more resistance from the mare this time. "What has gotten into this animal tonight?" he mumbled, annoyed, but the horse only neighed, shaking her head as if to warn him. Rajab shrugged and threw the reins aside as he walked toward the cave. The horse continued to paw at the ground, snorting loudly, but Rajab was oblivious. As he stalked toward the cave, the sounds of cheer grew louder. He realized it was a wedding when he reached the cave's threshold. He could hear people clapping, mingled with muffled sounds of ululations, while music played in the background, drifting from inside the cave.

He wondered who would choose a cave as a wedding venue, especially in the dead of night. Although he had felt tired earlier and was ready to head home, he couldn't resist the stories he could share about stumbling upon a wedding in a cave. He would probably have to embellish the tale, as he often did, but it would be worth it; people always seemed to delight in his anecdotes, laughing with him and gazing at him with awe and perhaps envy. Or at least, this was what Rajab believed they felt. Chuckling mischievously to himself, Rajab tiptoed into the cave, following a faint streak of light that led him deeper toward the ceremony's location. As he turned a corner, he discovered a small passage adorned with candles of various shapes and heights, their light dancing on the walls. Flowers were tucked into the crevices of the walls or hung close to the ceiling like banners, their sweet scents filling the small space.

As he cautiously approached the wedding, he noticed someone standing with their back to him. Rajab moved in closer but stopped abruptly when he caught a glimpse of the person's feet. They looked like hooves.

* * *

Something didn't feel right. Heeva sensed it—a restlessness gnawing at her insides, a lingering presence at the back of her mind. It wasn't the usual anxiety that you'd expect to get on your daughter's wedding day. It was the kind that she couldn't quite shake but couldn't just ignore either.

Standing before the tall mirror in the bedroom, Heeva stared at her reflection. She ran her hands over her dress, smoothing the wrinkles. She fixed her hair, tucking a stray strand behind her ear. Lost in her reflection, she thought she saw something lurking behind her—a shapeless dark silhouette—gone as quickly as it appeared. She shook her head. *Only a trick of the mind*, she dismissed, probably fueled by the stress of the big day. It took her a moment to realize her sister had come in and was talking to her, and her face came into focus, pulling Heeva out of her anxiety.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Hmm...?” Heeva mumbled.

Her sister tsked with annoyance, “What's gotten into you? I asked, ‘Do you know when the notary comes?’ He should've been here by now.”

Heeva closed her eyes briefly, taking a deep breath. She checked her wristwatch. “I'll give him a call; he said he'd be here before seven.”

Heeva's sister cast another glance at her, this time with concern. Whatever was on her mind remained unsaid as she turned away and said, “Go freshen up and then come back out; everyone's been asking about the mother of the bride.”

Heeva nodded and forced a smile, but her sister had already left the room. She knew she was acting paranoid, but not any more than usual. Heeva had a long history of perpetual

wariness: always walking on eggshells, always looking over her shoulder as if an invisible and threatening force was chasing her. That day, however, everything had gone smoothly. She had checked and rechecked the list of tasks, and there was nothing else left to do. So, what was this agitated feeling nestled in her gut that something horrible was about to happen?

Heeva left the room to check on the guests and the bride-to-be. Upon entering the living room, she scanned the space, ensuring that all the female guests were comfortable. She made a mental note to ask her brother how the male guests were doing when the groom's mother, who was dancing, hurried over to Heeva, arms wide open, and went in for an embrace.

"Where have you been hiding, my dear? Oh, you look gorgeous!" she exclaimed, holding Heeva a bit tightly. Flashing a smile, Heeva returned the compliment. "Not as beautiful as you! I love your hair!" The groom's mother beamed, gently adjusting her hair styled in a chignon. Just as she was about to rave about her hair salon, someone called her, and she excused herself.

When Heeva finally glanced at her daughter, Tara was already looking at her with the same worried look her sister had. Heeva sincerely tried to give her daughter a reassuring smile, averting her gaze before something gave away her mounting anxiety that threatened to topple over at any moment.

All the conversation dropped to low whispers the moment the notary loudly announced his arrival. With his head bent down, he paced the living room slowly while some women fixed the scarves on their heads and others pulled down their skirts to cover their knees. The notary took his place on a chair close to the wedding table.

In the center of the room stood a table adorned with traditional wedding decorations: a large mirror positioned in the middle, a Quran with a red gilded cover in front of it, and bowls of fresh fruit, nuts, honey, and gold coins surrounding it. Trays of pastries were arranged on the table, and the room was filled with the sweet scent of rosewater. But it was the two enormous candlesticks on either side of the mirror that immediately caught the eye. Towering over everything else, the candles' flames were burning ominously high, which made everyone walk cautiously. The groom helped Tara sit down on the loveseat behind the table, putting a careful hand on the small of her back, making Heeva smile at the gentle action.

When the notary started the officiation, Heeva was determined to compose herself and not do anything that would ruin her daughter's big night. Still, she felt sweat dripping down her spine, even though it was the middle of the winter chill. She gulped some water; her throat was so dry. Blinking rapidly, Heeva looked around the room and fixed her gaze on the notary. He seemed out of breath, dabbing away the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. Such a mundane moment sparked wild and nonsensical thoughts in Heeva's mind. Her thoughts spiraling, she presumed, quite absurdly, that perhaps the notary had eaten nothing since morning and was on the verge of passing out; what would happen if he had an anxious outburst and ruined the whole night?

Heeva had been dreaming about her daughter's wedding for months, perhaps years. She had carefully arranged every detail, from the gold-tinted curtain holders that complemented the beige curtains to the dinner side dishes, ensuring three varieties of torshi were on the buffet. She hadn't trusted any of the wedding planners Tara had suggested because she was sure no one could share her intricate vision for the ceremony. Of course, they still adhered to

the traditions of a Persian wedding, but Heeva had made sure she was on top of everything. Therefore, this anxiety was not a sign of *her* incompetence. The thought calmed her nerves because this meant *she* wouldn't be the cause; there would be somebody else to blame.

Heeva directed her attention to the present and glanced at the wedding table, where Tara's two cousins stood on either side of the loveseat, holding a white silk fabric above the heads of the bride and groom. Standing behind the loveseat, Heeva's sister was gently grinding a sugarloaf, tiny, glimmering particles of sugar dust falling like snowflakes onto the fabric.

The notary softly asked the bride if she was sure of her decision, and as it was the tradition, someone else would respond the first two times. Tara's youngest cousin conjured up some ridiculous story informing the guests that the bride was still unsure, eliciting giggles from the younger relatives and disapproving scowls from the elders. When the notary asked for the third time, there was a moment of silence, everybody holding their breaths even though they all knew the answer. Tara assented with a sheepish "Yes," and the room erupted into a flurry of celebratory cheers and applause. Heeva's smile grew wider, momentarily pushing aside her anxious thoughts as she tightly embraced her daughter. She held back tears, silently chastising herself for her needless worries. How could she ever have doubted anything could go wrong when her beautiful daughter was beaming so brightly?

Turning to the groom, Heeva warmly embraced and congratulated him before guiding everyone out of the living room to the yard for dinner. She had just reached the door when a sudden scream sent shivers down her spine, freezing her on the

spot. Her blood ran cold; this was it—all her worries and anxieties were real.

In an instant, the world seemed to freeze. She turned back and scanned the room, witnessing her mother, Granny Sona, screaming and hitting herself repeatedly on the chest. But no sounds reached her; all voices were muffled—silent, distant. Someone bumped into Heeva, jolting her back to her senses. Voices became sharp, cutting through her like razor blades.

“Fire!” someone shouted, frantically pointing at Tara. Heeva stood in the middle of the room, utterly bewildered, unsure of what to do. Through her blurry vision, she could barely make out a hazy outline of something glowing. Feeling like the room had tilted, tears fell on Heeva’s cheeks, and a dry cough escaped her throat. She heard her sister shouting angrily, “I told you those goddamned candlesticks are too tall,” as she rushed towards Tara. Heeva looked at the table and saw that one of the candlesticks had toppled over, its sinister flames catching on Tara’s dress.

A cacophony of screams and shouts filled the room as everyone was gripped with fear. Heeva spotted the groom with a fire extinguisher, forcefully making his way through the panicked crowd, aiming the extinguisher at Tara’s gown. Once the fire was out, the groom shouted, in frustration, “Everyone stop screaming! It’s out!” he tossed the extinguisher aside and rushed to Tara’s side to check if she was okay.

The room, briefly filled with panicked panting and cries of little children, was abruptly silenced, save for the hiss of the fire extinguisher. Granny Sona, however, continued to sob loudly, uttering incoherent nonsense, mixing words of prayer with “I knew it” repeatedly; her constant wailing only added to Heeva’s distress. She was furious at herself for not acting quickly enough to help her daughter. How could she freeze and not do anything?

Tara was crying but kept reassuring everyone that she was okay, emphasizing that only the hem of her dress had caught fire. To this, Granny Sona let out a louder scream, her words were now clear and frightening. “Oh God help us all! I knew it! God, please protect my Tara, my precious girl!” Her loud and trembling voice compelled everyone to listen with fear. Heeva steadied herself and cautiously approached her mother.

“What do you mean, Mother? What are you talking about?” She patted her mother’s head gently and tried to sound calm but, deep down, she could already see where this was heading.

“I’m betting it’s in the shape of a hand, too! Oh, this will only bring more bad luck, oh God!” mumbled Granny Sona, looking petrified.

Heeva could see everyone exchanging nervous glances with each other. Her mother’s sanity had always been a topic for gossip since she often talked about a *curse* that supposedly had plagued their lives for generations. She would frequently tell Heeva that it was the same curse that caused her constant feeling of paranoia. Of course, no one had ever taken her words seriously, and every time she brought the curse up, everyone would quickly shift the conversation to a different topic.

Heeva’s anger grew by the second. She had pleaded with her mother before the wedding, urging her not to spout her usual nonsense during the ceremony. Yet, here she was, not even caring what the nosy relatives said behind her back.

Tara sniffled and knelt beside her grandmother. She tried to smile to calm her down. “Come on, Granny Sona, it’s not what you think, it happened because—”

“NO! I know what I’m talking about, this is *THE CURSE*! And it cannot be undone!” Granny Sona shouted,

pushing Tara back and causing her to stumble. Heeva and her sister pulled their mother back, begging her to calm down. The groom muttered something in anger as he helped Tara up. Granny Sona freed herself from her daughters and moved forward to inspect Tara's gown herself. She turned Tara around and yanked the hem to reveal the mark to everyone.

There was a collective gasp. "What, what is it?" Tara asked cautiously, her voice laced with concern, only to hear Heeva exhale sharply and say, "The burn mark...it's..."

"It looks like a hand!" someone declared from the crowd, horrified. Tara glanced down, fumbling with the gown to see for herself. She hurried towards the large mirror to see better. The burn mark had an uncanny resemblance to a hand. There was no denying it. It was unmistakably shaped like a hand.

Tara laughed hysterically, desperately trying to brush it off as a mere coincidence. "What does it even mean? It doesn't even look like a hand. Have you *never* seen a hand before in your lives?" she babbled on, then let out a nervous chuckle. Her laughter quickly turned into terror, plastering her face. She turned around to look at Heeva, silently pleading for her to intervene to put an end to Granny Sona's nonsense.

Heeva's head spun; her heart pounded in her chest as she grabbed a nearby chair to steady herself. She had heard about the curse but had never taken it seriously. How could she genuinely believe that her brother's streak of bad luck at work was caused by it? Or that her grandfather and his father, both bedridden with illness for most of their lives, were victims of the curse instead of mere unfortunate coincidences? Even if her mind often wandered to the idea that the *curse* might be the cause, she found no other explanation. Heeva had felt uneasy and on edge her entire life, as if chased by a ghost that would never relent. Yet she had always

blamed it on something else—something more tangible, something that could be seen and perhaps even cured. She always dismissed the curse as a made-up story, an old wives' tale that her mother had concocted to spook the kids. Her mother was senile, unable to think straight. Why would the “curse” still hurt her family after all these years? A curse about which no one even knew the details.

“I know what the curse is,” Granny Sona seethed as if reading Heeva’s mind. Heeva looked at her sideways, attempting to convey that she should stop talking without actually uttering the words. *That’s enough for tonight.*

Before she could say anything, however, she heard Tara asking in a shaky, terrified voice, “Wh-what is it, Granny?”

Granny Sona took a deep breath and closed her eyes briefly. “It was your great-great-great grandfather,” she raised her clenched fists in the air and continued as her voice quivered, “If Rajab minded his business those years ago... none of this would have happened.”

Granny Sona wrung her hands anxiously, her gaze flitting around the room. The other guests left after Heeva insisted that this matter be handled privately among the family. The relatives, initially eager for fresh gossip, left the house with reluctance, glancing back repeatedly as if anticipating something to leap out when they weren’t watching. Tara’s face was streaked with dry tears, yet she was eager to learn the details of the curse. Her eyes continuously followed her grandmother as she moved about the room. Kamran held Tara’s hand, a bead of sweat forming on his forehead as he exchanged worried glances with his mother. Heeva offered Granny Sona a glass of water and sat to listen to her, even though she was quite unwilling to believe the story.

“That Rajab! He was always sticking his nose where it didn’t belong”, Granny Sona began with a sigh. “Weddings, private conversations, even a funeral once! He thought it made him interesting, thought people found it funny. But that night... oh, that night, he picked the wrong gathering to barge into.”

Her voice dropped into a whisper.

“A jinn’s wedding.”

Tara’s gaze immediately snapped to Heeva, who was peering at Granny Sona from beneath her lashes, trying to remain calm and let her mother finish her story. The groom squeezed Tara’s hand, which made her look at him with pleading eyes. He barely nodded and turned to Granny Sona with a mix of anticipation and fear.

Granny Sona glanced around the room, her voice shaky and breathless as she continued, “They were deep in a cave—jinns don’t marry in the open as we do, no. They prefer privacy. And Rajab, fool that he was, thought it would be just another story to tell the next day.”

Granny Sona’s eyes grew wider as she grabbed Heeva’s hands, forcing her to look at her. Heeva looked up at her mother and saw tears welling up in her eyes. “The jinns...they...they are a scary bunch. I remember my *naneh* telling me stories about them before bed—to frighten us, to keep us in line.” Heeva nodded; Granny Sona herself had told stories like that when Heeva was just a child. Whenever she disobeyed or stayed up much later than she should have, Granny Sona would slap her on the back and warn her about the jinns that would come to take her if she didn’t go to bed. Heeva remembered her mother describing the jinns’ frightening faces, with big red eyes that seemed to pierce your soul.

Heeva shook her head slightly, pushing the memories away while she listened to her mother recount the story. “But Rajab couldn’t just leave them alone—no, he was far too stubborn for that. God rest his wretched soul,” she said, swaying slowly to the side and beating her chest with her fist in despair. “So, Rajab crept deeper in. But he was as clumsy as he was curious, and the poor soul stumbled, crashing right into the midst of the ceremony and nearly upending their decorations.”

Tara gasped. Heeva and her sister shared a look, shifting in their chairs. Granny Sona raised her eyebrows. “Do you know what he said? With all eyes in that cave glowing red and fixed on him? He said: *‘Oh, please don’t stop on my account.’*”

Granny Sona beat her chest with greater ferocity. Heeva’s sister pulled her mother’s hand away from hitting herself and grabbed her shoulders. Granny Sona sobbed, “Foolish man—such a godless, foolish man.”

“What did the jinns do then?” Tara asked, her voice small and hoarse, her eyes wide as if she feared her grandmother’s answer. “The elder jinn asked him what he wanted,” Granny replied, tightening the knot on her scarf. “And Rajab said he just wanted to enjoy the happy occasion, the fool that he was. He had to get out of there before it was too late, but—” she sighed deeply. “He was a *kafir*, that one. He never believed anything anyone said about jinns and how not to provoke them.” She looked at Heeva as if she had done such a thing. “The jinns need to be left alone; they shouldn’t be bothered; it’s in the Quran too!” She let out a slight sound resembling a cry and fell quiet for a while. The groom finally broke the silence, and when he spoke, his voice was filled with doubt. “So the jinns let him stay? For what?”

Granny Sona, who seemed to be in a trance, fixed her gaze on the groom, causing him to shift uncomfortably. “I guess they

thought he would be entertaining or at least harmless,” she remarked, her eyes still unfocused. “But Rajab wasn’t done yet. He was always hungry, never satisfied, no matter how much he stuffed into that hay barn. So, he reached for the roasted chicken...” Granny Sona leaned in closer, lowering her voice. “But he knocked over a candelabra, and the flame caught the bride’s gown. That stupid, wicked man! If only he had left the cave and gone his way...”

She paused, holding back a sob. Heeva moved closer and embraced her mother’s trembling shoulders. In a soothing voice, she asked, “Is that when the curse happened?”

Granny Sona sniffled, wiping her tears and shaking her head. “Rajab rubbed his greasy hand on the hem of the bride’s dress.” She looked at Tara, and her eyes fell on Tara’s gown, where it had been burned.

A chill went down Heeva’s spine. She didn’t want to believe any of that. It all sounded too incredible to be real. She didn’t exactly think that jinns were real; she had never seen one in her life. But she had always been scared of them, ensuring she never did anything that might accidentally disturb them. She always whispered *bismillah* whenever she threw away hot water after sunset and never threw stones on the road because she’d heard that it might hit them and provoke them. She had done all this because her mother had told her to do so since she was a child, but she had never seen a jinn. No matter how genuine her mother seemed, Heeva couldn’t wrap her head around it. She knew her mother truly believed the tales she told. It was just that her mother didn’t have the best track record, and besides, what could they possibly do to fix this curse? *Nothing*, she thought.

Heeva's sister finally broke the silence; she had been quiet all night, and Heeva wondered if her sister felt the same way. "So, how did he get out?"

With eyes hazy from crying, Granny Sona looked toward Heeva and her sister, but her eyes were focused on something behind them. "The elder jinn saw the chicken in his hand, and he knew. He grabbed Rajab, and well, Rajab... finally realized he'd gone too far. So, he said *bismillah*, and all the jinn vanished. You all know how many times I've told you to say it before you walk into a bathroom, right?" She was invigorated by a sudden urge to caution them, her eyes darting around the room. Even though it wouldn't do any good, Heeva thought, the curse had been cast; there was no cure, was there?

"So that's all?" she asked softly, but she couldn't hide the doubt spilling from her words. Her mother looked at her, a streak of dried mascara running down her eyes. It was as if she couldn't believe Heeva was still skeptical. "You go and think it's all nonsense. The jinns cursed our family for seven generations. Rajab heard them say it himself. Of course, he didn't take it seriously. People say he laughed it off while recounting the tale, and everyone was terrified to hear it. Everyone told him he was ruined, that he was going to ruin his family, but that evil, foolish man wouldn't listen. Just like how you're being stubborn now, you stupid girl." Granny Sona's face was red with fury, her neck constricted and flushed from talking too long and too fast. She let out a shaky exhale, her eyes filling with tears again. Tara moved toward her and hugged her from the side, "We...we believe you, Granny, we do." She shook her head at her mother, but Heeva was silent. She didn't want to believe it. How could she? How could any of it make any sense?

It was all just a coincidence—the burn mark, the weddings. She had never inquired about the details of the curse from anyone else, as she was fearful that if others confirmed its truth, she would ultimately come to accept it as real. Still, she wondered if there was a way to stop it. Yet, she hesitated to ask her mother; she didn't want Tara to have even the slightest inkling that her mother might entertain such nonsense. If she were to consider the possibility, Heeva intended to pursue it herself. Besides, even if she believed it, she couldn't admit it at that moment, especially not in front of the groom and his mother. This thought heightened her alertness, causing her to straighten her back in panic. How could she have allowed all this nonsense to unfold in front of the groom's mother? Even though Tara and the groom had been engaged for nearly two years, Heeva still did not truly know his family. She glanced at them; they were tending to Tara, whispering comforting words. However, Heeva had no insight into their thoughts. Could this situation lead to problems in their marriage? Would the groom use this hocus pocus against her daughter?

Heeva shook her head and closed her eyes. After taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and forced a smile. "Okay, now, I think it's time for Granny Sona to go to bed, don't you think?" She glanced at Tara, whose eyes widened in disbelief, unable to comprehend how her mother could disregard everything she had just heard. Tara began to disagree, "But Mother, we have to—" "There's nothing more we can do right now; let's all head to bed," Heeva interjected, helping her mother to her feet. Granny Sona's eyes were unfocused, and her eyelids drooped heavily; it seemed she was on the verge of falling asleep. After all the crying and sobbing, she had worn herself out, and it was well past midnight.

As Heeva tucked her mother in, Granny Sona seized her arm and pulled her down. "You must go... you must..." She drifted in and out of slumber, her words barely audible, requiring Heeva

to lean in closer to listen. “What was that?” she asked, despite having had enough of her mother that night.

“You must go to Tormish... go ask for forgiveness.” Granny Sona’s eyes flew open as if revived. “Someone should have done this years ago; we should all have done it long... ago...” Her voice faded as drowsiness returned and sleep finally claimed her. With her eyes closed, Granny Sona soon began to snore softly.

Heeva left the room, but her mother’s words were spinning in her mind. Would going to Tormish, where everything began, truly make a difference? What would she find there? Would the jinns even—

Stop! Enough with this nonsense!

Heeva shook her head and let out a deep breath. There was no curse; the burn mark was just an accident, and her mother was merely senile. The only spell she was under was her prescription drugs. There was nothing to fret about. However, as Heeva stepped back into the living room to calm her daughter, a gnawing feeling settled in her stomach. Deep down, she sensed that this was far from over—that something significant was going to happen. Though she recognized it, she chose to disregard it.

* * *

Tara’s scream echoed through the empty hospital corridors. It was just after two in the morning when her contractions started, and everyone rushed to the hospital. Heeva had stayed with her daughter during the last two months of her pregnancy, just as her own mother had when Heeva was pregnant with Tara. Heeva paced anxiously by the door where Tara was delivering her baby boy, choosing a natural birth instead of a C-section. Heeva admired her daughter’s decision, but hearing Tara’s piercing screams now made her wonder if her daughter still

believed it was the best option. Kamran couldn't sit still; one moment he crouched down, and the next, he was pacing back and forth. Heeva smiled at him. "It's going to be over soon," she said, and he nodded, his brow furrowed as he stared at the closed door where his wife was bringing new life into the world.

The screams stopped abruptly, and Heeva's ears pricked up. A baby's cry filled the corridors, and Heeva sighed in relief, happy tears streaming down her face. Just as she grabbed the doorknob to open the door, she heard a short, stifled scream from inside. The door swung open, and a nurse stepped out, a mix of anxiety and something like... *pity* on her face. *What is going on?*

Heeva pushed the nurse aside and entered the room. Two other nurses stood by the bed, wearing the same expression as the first. Heeva trudged towards the bed, her steps heavy. The harsh fluorescent lights caused her head to spin. As the nurses cleared a path for her, Heeva's tear-filled eyes caught sight of her daughter, flushed and breathless, holding her baby. Tara sobbed, mixing tears and sweat upon her lovely face. Heeva smiled despite her confusion over her daughter's tears.

"What's wrong, my dear? Why are you—" But before Heeva could finish her thought, she saw the baby boy in Tara's arms. He looked like a normal baby, except there was something wrong with his tiny leg. It was twisted inward as if it hadn't fully grown. Heeva shook her head. "No... no, it's not..."

Tara's cries grew louder; she couldn't stop her tears. Kamran stood by the bed, looking terrified, unable to summon the strength to come closer. Tara grabbed her mother's thin manteau, dragging her towards the bed. Heeva's eyes were locked on the little boy and his deformed leg.

“It’s the curse, Mom,” Tara said, her voice trembling, her brown eyes red with tears. “It’s the damn curse.” She sobbed loudly, causing the baby to start crying as well.

Heeva sank to the floor, her knees giving way beneath her. Nurses hurried to help, but she could not hear anything around her. Sounds seemed muffled, and everything felt distant and terrifying. The only voice piercing through was her mother’s, urging her to go to Tormish to bring it all to an end. Still, Heeva had resisted. Even when Granny Sona lay dying a year ago, imploring her daughter to heed her warnings, Heeva had turned a blind eye. She had never wanted to accept or embrace her mother’s tales.

As she sensed herself slipping into unconsciousness on the cold hospital floor, her daughter’s cries faded in the distance. Her mind whirled with memories, with images of her father’s frail, sick body at the hospital that had felt like his second home; her brother’s eyes, hollowed out by overwhelming debts that never seemed to cease, always piling on. Her own husband’s brutal battle with cancer that had turned him into a withering soul, draining Heeva’s life as she looked after him, yet he died before he could even see his daughter’s wedding. Heeva’s eyes prickled with tears as the image of her beautiful daughter in her wedding dress, ablaze, seared into her brain and wouldn’t disappear no matter how hard she shook her head.

She no longer felt faint; a sudden surge of urgency revived her as she lifted herself and turned to her daughter. Tara had stopped crying, her gaze distant, the baby cooing in her arms, his large black eyes looking at his mother with such innocence that it shattered Heeva’s heart. She couldn’t stand it any longer; she had to do something, if there was a way to stop this from escalating; she had to try, even if it all seemed too late. Heeva grasped her

grandson's small, soft hands, and his fingers instantly wrapped around her index finger. Tears ran down her cheeks as Heeva glanced at her daughter. Tara's eyes were drooping, slipping into what would surely be a restless nightmare.

Heeva heard Kamran quietly sobbing as he gazed out the window, his back turned to Tara and their son. He hadn't spoken a word since he first saw their baby. Heeva gently patted her daughter's head, carefully brushing the sticky hair off her face. Then, she leaned down to kiss Tara's forehead, softly saying, "I'm sorry I didn't listen, my dear..." Heeva closed her eyes for a moment, "I'm going to make it right..." She paused briefly before turning to leave the room without another word.



‘Will You Stay With Me?’ Artist’s Statement

Karah Snyder

This piece began as a watercolour study on cloaks and figures. To me, cloaks are inherently adventuresome, and so the rest of the fantasy-esque scene quickly unfolded. You’ll notice that the sky is heavy and grey while the mountains stretch ominously before the two rabbits; it will be a long journey. This is not the happy scene at the culmination of an adventure. Rather, this is the beginning. They stand by a tree with green leaves, perhaps the last truly wholesome sign of life they’ll encounter. Beyond it lies the Unknown. Aren’t we all like this, teetering on the edge of Home and just a bit fearful of what comes next? I imagine the smaller rabbit saying to the taller: “Will you stay with me?” And he replies, “Yes. Come what may, I will be by your side.” May my art portray that hope for you, too: a small marker on your journey to know that you are not alone.

The Body and the Boggart

Steven French (he/him)

TW: murder, mention of sexual assault (off-page)

Taking a sip of his first coffee of the day, as he leaned back on the kitchen counter, Bill McPherson – a.k.a. ‘Billy-boy’, although only those who knew him ‘back in the day’ now called him that – reflected on the events of the night before. He had noticed something that no-one else had. A spot of blood. On Freddie’s shoe. His right shoe to be exact. And thinking back now, Bill felt that some measure of exactitude was required under the circumstances. Freddie had clearly been very drunk and boisterous and loud and his companions were not much better, even the men his father had sent out to keep an eye on things, or, more particularly, on his boy. Men who couldn’t quite look Bill in the eye on their return.

They had all burst into the club, after hours, well after in fact, with Freddie at the front, pushing past the cleaners who were sweeping up the plastic glasses and general detritus scattered across the sticky floor. After helping himself to an expensive bottle of Becherovka from behind the bar, Freddie had slumped down in the dimly lit VIP alcove across from where his father sat. Two of the young man’s friends had done the same, and one of the bodyguards had made to follow suit but then caught Bill’s fierce glance and straightened, taking his place behind the others. Dave Bateman had looked up with a tired smile, his hands wrapped around an empty whisky glass.

“So, you had fun?” He asked.

“Oh sure pops, sure, we had fuuuuun, alright!”

One of Freddie’s friends laughed in a way that Bill thought held a certain brittleness.

“Where did you end up?” Bill asked.

Freddie gave him a look and swigged on the bottle of liquor before answering.

“Oh, you know, here and there, that club in St. Peter’s Square, then, I dunno, somewhere else...”

His friend giggled again, reaching for the drink, then making a face as Freddie held it away from him. Pushing his glass to one side, Bateman sighed and stood up.

“Well,” he said, “it’s late. Or early. Whatever. Time for me to get to my bed.”

Patting Freddie on the shoulder and nodding to Bill, he left, passing through alternate pools of light and shadow as he walked away. Bill watched Bateman go before indicating to his men with a nod of his head that perhaps they might like to escort the son’s friends off the premises. As they did so and with Freddie back behind the bar, engaged in a further raid on the array of bottles kept there, Bill took one of the men, Anders, by the arm.

“So, what happened?”

“Nothing much, boss, just the usual, you know...”

“Do I?”

“What do you mean?” Anders replied, flustered.

“You said I know. But do I? Know, that is?”

Anders looked down at his shoes. “I meant, you know what he’s like. The boy ...”

“Mr Bateman’s son,” Bill interrupted.

“Yeah, sorry ... Freddie, Mr Bateman’s son. Well, he can get a bit carried away ...” Bill nodded at that and thought about the last time Freddie had ‘gotten a bit carried away’ and how he, Bill, had smoothed things over with one of the club’s more valued customers, offering to pay his medical bills on behalf of Mr Bateman. He motioned for Anders to continue.

“There was a spot of trouble.”

“A spot?” Bill asked, leaning in a little.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle. Just some girl who, you know, wasn’t keen ...”

“Wasn’t keen?”

“Yeah, you know what Freddie can be like. Going off-piste an’ all. But we sorted it, no worries ...”

The next morning, while standing in his kitchen, Bill was replaying that conversation and had just recalled noticing the blood, when his mobile phone rang. A few minutes later, he placed the phone down next to his coffee and put his head in his hands.

“Crap,” he muttered. And then again, with more force, “CRAP!”

#

The opening to the forensic tent flapped in the gusts of wind as D.I. Jane Frost stepped through. With her short blonde hair scraped back, the turned-up collar of her coat framed her pinched-looking face, which was set in a ‘brook-no-dissent’ frown.

Already that morning, she'd had to deal with the Chief Superintendent pressing her about the case of some college student who'd been assaulted and whose parents were understandably distraught. And, after having to park a couple of streets away from this sad little patch of waste ground, when she'd finally arrived at the scene, she'd then had to bark at a pair of gormless uniformed officers to push the onlookers back even further. Inside the tent, she found two people already there, one kneeling beside the body, the other standing above it.

“Boss!”

“Sergeant”, Frost replied, nodding curtly. Then, to the person examining the corpse,

“Dr Kerr.”

The pathologist, bulky in her noddysuit, didn't even look up. In the flat matter-of-fact tone that Jane knew had been cultivated over many years, she said,

“Time of death, six to eight hours ago, so some time between two and four a.m. ...”

She paused, then before Frost could ask, turned and looked up at her. “Cause of death looks to be a single stab wound to the chest. By what, well, that isn't clear. Whatever it was, it involved a significant amount of force. I would hope to be able to tell you more after I've done a proper examination, but honestly, I wouldn't bank on it.”

Leaning in over Kerr's shoulder, Frost peered at the body, then recoiled suddenly. “Oh no ...” she groaned, as Kerr looked up again.

“I take it, you know this man?”

Frost nodded and the young Detective Sergeant standing beside her took the opportunity to interrupt: "He still had his wallet on him, boss, full of cash, so not a mugging ..."

Frost gestured irritably. "It's Freddie Bateman," she said.

"Is that ...?" Kerr asked.

Frost nodded. "The son of Dave Bateman. Top man in our most notable local crime family." She sighed and stepped back out of the tent. "Crap, crap, crap ..."

#

Back in the day when hipsters were getting grief for eating avocado on toast, the coffee shop used to be too crowded for Mick's liking. Now, though, things had calmed down a little, and with its distressed brickwork and mismatched wooden chairs, it offered a quiet and comfortable environment for a coffee and a pastry-based sugar boost. Still, it retained enough of its millennials-favour-this-establishment aura to ensure that he'd be unlikely to bump into anyone he knew from his past life. Until, that is, D.I. Frost sat down across the table just as he was about to take another sip of his flat-white.

"Hey, Mick," she said with an attempt at a smile.

"No," he replied bluntly, placing his cup back in the saucer.

"I haven't even asked yet!"

"I don't care what it is. After that last 'consultation', I am definitely not interested. At all," he added, for

emphasis, drawing together the bushy eyebrows that his wife had always nagged him about, when she was his wife, that is.

“I get it, and I’m sorry things got a bit ... sticky ...” He raised one of those eyebrows at that. “But this is really important,” she continued, pushing her hair behind her ears before placing her elbows on the tabletop and leaning forward. “I mean, we’re talking some serious crap ... and I could really use your help.”

Mick finished his coffee and pushed the empty cup to one side. “With all the resources at your disposal, all those detectives and sergeants and constables ranked up behind you, and you come to me, your former colleague, mentor, some might say...” She raised her eyebrows at this, “...for help?”

“Oh, sod off Mick,” she retorted, leaning back in her chair.

“Charming,” he muttered.

“Sorry, but you really are the only person around that I can turn to about this.”

“You haven’t told me what ‘this’ is yet.” Jane folded her arms and smiled again. “Yeah, yeah, you don’t have to look so smug,” Mick told her. “Still doesn’t mean I’m going to help you.”

She leaned forward again and lowered her voice. “Yesterday morning, a body was found on some waste ground between the art college and the Playhouse. Freddie Bateman. Stabbed to death.”

“Crap.”

“Indeed. Papa Bateman is of the belief that this can be laid at the door of some rival gang and appears intent on finding out which by any means possible.”

“No surprises there.”

“Right. But the thing is, the post-mortem shows that whatever our Freddie was stabbed with doesn’t correspond to any known bladed instrument. I mean, none. In fact, the pathologist thinks that whatever it is, it’s closer to some kind of claw. Except she doesn’t know of any animal that could have claws as long as that or could strike with as much force as that. Definitely not here in the UK anyway.”

Mick sighed. “And that’s where I come in,” he said, looking around the café, with its half-dozen or so scattered customers, as if merely acknowledging that fact would draw unwanted attention.

Jane spread her hands. “I just need you to ask around. You know, in those unusual little nooks and crannies that you’re more familiar with than the likes of me could ever be.”

“I’m only ‘familiar’ with them, as you put it, because I got dragged into one of them when you asked me for help last time. And although, yeah, sure, you didn’t know what kind of case it actually was at the time, still, I’m the one who had to deal with it. And with the fallout ...”

“I know, I know, and I appreciated it then. Still do. But you used to be a copper, Mick, so you know what it’ll be like if Bateman goes on the rampage. Please, I’ve got nothing ...”

He looked at her closely, then nodded.

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do.”

#

And that is how Mick found himself standing in Mabgate after midnight as the moon played hide-and-seek with the clouds and a cold wind plucked at his overcoat. He could still smell something tasty from the Somali restaurant behind him, although it had long since closed for the night. Across the street what used to be a warehouse, but which these days housed assorted ‘artisanal’ businesses, was briefly illuminated by the moonlight. As the clouds passed over again, he felt movement to one side and a black clad figure stepped out of the shadows. Inclining a sharp-featured face at an angle, the figure looked inquisitively at Mick.

“Mr Policeman,” it said, with a thin-lipped smile revealing just a hint of sharp teeth. . “We really are going to have to stop meeting like this.”

Restraining the impulse to remind the figure that he had long since left the Force, Mick began, “I need to know something,”

“Do you now.”

“A man was killed.”

The figure put its long-fingered hands behind its back and looked up, watching the clouds scud past. “Men die every minute of every day. It is not our concern.”

“This was not a natural death. And the father of the victim is, not surprisingly, reacting in ways that could end up being... disruptive.” The figure said nothing but turned its head to look at Mick directly, who sighed impatiently. “Did She have anything to do with it?” he asked, bluntly.

The figure placed its hands on its chest and managed to look affronted. “I am shocked that you would even think that!”

“Does She know who or what did?”

“There is little Queen Mab does not know about. In your realm or ours.”

“Fine. So, tell me, does the great all-knowing Mab know who was responsible for the body that was found between the theatre and the art college? Because when I use the term ‘disruptive’, I mean not just for my ‘realm’.”

The figure cocked its head and moved away slightly, as if listening to some other voice, then turned back and looked Mick up and down. “You were fortunate last time, Mr Policeman. But in this case, Mab may not be able to extend any charity should things become ... difficult for you.”

“I’ll take that chance,” Mick said. “Just tell me what you know.”

At this, the figure raised an eyebrow. “Someone was defiled. In what was and remains a protected space. Justice has been exacted as a consequence.” There was a pause. “And Mab believes that the weight carried by that is, and will remain, greater than whatever ‘disruption’, as you call it, may result.”

Mick stared at the ground and shook his head. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

But when he looked back up, the figure had gone.

#

Back in his office on the upper floor of the down-at-heel shopping centre which sat across a busy road cutting it off from the now more fashionable stores, Mick picked up the phone and called D.I. Frost.

“Come on, Mick,” she said in response to his opening query, “you of all people should know how many violent assaults we’ve had here over the past several days.”

Mick sighed and ran his hand down his face. Of course he did. Then he sat up straight. “He used the word ‘defiled’, which is a bit of an odd term, even for this character. What about sexual assaults? Especially any that seem particularly nasty.”

There was a brief silence at the end of the line, then Frost spoke up again. “Yeah, there was one just recently. A young woman. Ellie Timpson. Assaulted during a night out and then dumped at the hospital by a person or persons unknown. Unfortunately, all she can remember is that she was at a club in St. Peter’s Square and some bloke was bothering her, but then everything after that is hazy. She has no recollection of who did it, and all forensics has been able to come up with is that it happened somewhere behind the new art college.”

Mick thanked her and hung up. The college had opened for business just that year and had been built next to the local Playhouse on the other side of the flyover from Mabgate. Leaning back in his chair he stared up at the ceiling and put his hands behind his head. There was something rattling around at the back of his mind that he couldn’t quite get hold of. As the circular water stain from years past came into focus above him, he suddenly sat upright. He’d gone to the theatre a couple of times with his wife, as then was, although the only performance he could remember anything of was some Shakespearean number. But now he recalled something he’d noticed as they’d gone in, something that had caught his policeman’s eye and he’d filed away in his head: a blue plaque by the entrance, referencing an older building that had once stood on the site of what was now the art college.

Rummaging through the drawers in his desk, he found what he was looking for, something he'd bought in the course of his previous 'consultation' – an Ordnance Survey map of the city as it was two hundred and fifty years before. Even before he had unfolded the map completely, he saw it, where the art college now was – a small thinly inked outline with a very specific name. Sitting back with satisfaction, he thought about what he should do next.

#

There was a heavy knock on the door, but before Mick could say "Come in!" it opened and, not for the first time, he thought he really needed to get a receptionist. And, indeed, a reception area.

"Hello Mick. May I come in?"

"Looks like you already have Billy-boy," Mick said, gesturing to one of the chairs in front of his desk which creaked ominously as the large man sat down.

"I understand that you are once again doing some consulting work for our good friend D.I. Frost," McPherson began.

Not bothering to deny the fact, Mick nodded. But then he added, "You know I can't tell you anything, Bill. Professional ethics and all that. Not to mention not wanting to upset our 'good friend', as you call her."

It was Bill's turn to nod. "I get that, Mick, of course I do. I'm just here to impress upon you the seriousness of the situation." He paused and looked directly at Mick. "It's his *son*,

Mick,” he continued. “The man is distraught. And you and I both know what that could mean.”

“So, you’re here to ...?”

“Urge you, Mick, that’s all. To get this sorted. Quick as. Before Mr Bateman finds a way to take matters into his own hands, to the detriment of all concerned.”

As McPherson got up to leave, he glanced over at the map, still sitting half-unfolded on the desk. Mick inclined his head, and Bill gave one last short nod, then turned and closed the door behind him.

#

If only colleges didn’t have students, Mick had long since thought, life would be a lot simpler. And quieter. It wasn’t until three in the morning that the last worse-for-wear young person managed to recall the security code on the front door of the halls behind the main building and disappeared inside. Even so, Mick left it for another fifteen minutes until he was reasonably sure that the courtyard would remain empty, at least for a short while. Fortunately, the head of security was also ex-police and had agreed to delay the usual rounds for half an hour after Mick had explained that he needed to view the scene unimpeded for some ‘consultation’ work he was doing.

Still, he felt more than a little self-conscious as he placed a fresh loaf of bread and an open bottle of beer on the paving stones at the centre of the space.

“I offer these as a courtesy,” he said, trying to pitch his voice loud enough to ring out but not so loud as to cause lights to turn on in the block behind him.

Some minutes passed and, feeling even more foolish, he bent down to retrieve the bread and beer and head home for a rethink, when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

“You may leave those,” came a harsh, gravelly voice. Mick stepped back as a squat, greenish figure with abnormally long arms emerged from the shadows and into the glare of the streetlights. It shuffled over and sniffed the bread appreciatively before taking a long drink of the beer. Belching, it bit a large chunk out of the loaf.

“Good bread,” it noted.

“Baked this morning. Over at Gilchrist’s,” Mick said.

The boggart nodded and, with a mouth full of crumbs, while waving the beer bottle in its other hand, asked,

“How did you find me?” Mick pointed to the Playhouse behind him.

“There’s a plaque on the wall over there. Refers to ‘The Old Boggart House’.”

“Ah,” said the boggart. “I did not realise people were so indiscreet.” It took another bite of the bread, then continued, “So, I understand you have questions you would like answered.” And it waved the beer bottle in Mick’s direction as an invitation.

“A man was killed ...” Mick began.

“Men are killed every day,” the boggart interrupted.

Mick sighed. “Yes, I know,” he said, “but this man was stabbed.” And before the boggart could remind him that men are

also stabbed every day, he continued, “By a very unusual weapon.” And here he looked at the boggart’s impressive claws. The creature in turn put the beer bottle on the ground to better examine its hand, while still biting chunks out of the bread held in the other.

“Was that you?” Mick asked. And when the boggart simply looked at him, not answering, he added, “Who killed that man?”

The boggart finished the bread and took another drink from the bottle before taking a step towards Mick, who stood his ground this time. “He did a terrible thing,” it said, as if that were explanation enough. Mick nodded. The boggart looked around the courtyard before continuing. “When people believed in us, they thought we were tied to particular families, or to their houses. But we’re not. Our roots are in the land.” It looked down at the flagstones. “And if such an act is committed on the land to which I am tied, even long after the house has gone and the family is all dust, then I am still obliged to...” It stopped. Mick waited in silence. The boggart cleared its throat, then carried on, “I should have prevented it from happening in the first place. But I was slow. I’ve been asleep for too long...”

It paused and after a while, Mick swallowed, then extending his hand to encompass the college buildings, remarked, “So, this place is under your protection.”

“As it ever was,” the boggart stated. “Thank you for the beer and the bread.”

Mick nodded in acknowledgment, then jumped when he heard a noise behind him. When he turned back around, the boggart had gone.

As Mick made to leave, another shape detached itself from the shadows and stepped out into the lamplight.

“What the...! I wish people would stop doing that!!” Mick exclaimed.

Bill McPherson held up his hands. “Sorry about that, Mick, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I’m guessing you heard all that then?”

“I did, yeah.”

“And now you’re wondering how you’re going to persuade your boss not to react in his usual abrupt manner?”

“I am, yes.”

Mick moved closer and looked up at Bill’s broad and battered face. “He can’t win this one, you know that.”

“Not with his hands, or mine, no. But I’m guessing there are other ways.”

“There are,” Mick agreed. “However, that might prompt certain other parties to intervene. People who aren’t quite people, if you get my drift.”

“Ah, yes, I do, Mick, I do.” McPherson paused then and looked over to where the boggart had been standing moments before.

“I’ll do my best,” he added.

“All we can do, mate. That’s all we can do,” Mick replied, as he wondered how he was going to explain things to D.I. Frost.

Smoking Mirror

Dilip Devadass

Academic Journal of Xu Shengbo (徐昇博), Courtesy name Zi Yang (子陽), Style name Yun You (雲), dedicated to exploration and discovery:

First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 5, morning/midnight:

I leave the Han Lin academy, a fresh and ambitious graduate, eager about my journey ahead! I have had the honour of being selected, amongst 100 others, for a mission of unparalleled scientific and historical significance. I must begin my writings, of course, explaining the nature of our mission.

It was right at the sunrise, 35 days ago on the Double Ninth festival, that The Celestial Door reappeared at the foot of the KunLun mountains, abode of the Gods, for the first time in 100 years. A miracle so momentous saw an Imperial procession headed by the Emperor himself travel all the way from the capital in NanJing to the mountain range, accompanied by an escort of the sovereign's personal fortune tellers and the Empire's finest academics and scholars.

The Emperor's arrival to The Door only piqued his curiosity, as what lay ahead, across time and space, was a seemingly never-ending expanse of tall, imposing trees, their canopies so dense and ample they seemed to form their own separate ecosystem. The faint calls of all sorts of animals could be heard,

though none similar to animals known in the Empire, or even known by the most well traveled of the academics. Hoots, caws and howls, all blended into a symphony of sound that accompanied that unfamiliar world lying before them. Frantically, all fortune tellers present were commanded to divine the nature of this new world, its potential as a threat, or as an opportunity. And every single fortune teller present save one, at various points of their ritual processes, dropped dead. Some with a scream, some completely silent, some had eyes wide open as if they were staring into the mouth of a drooling, famished wolf. But they maintained similarities in the following three things: All of them dropped dead with no visible injuries. All of them bled gold from their eyes, ears, nose and mouth. And right at the moment of their deaths, all of their eyes had turned murky, as if dark smoke had clouded them over. The sole survivor had not fared much better. He lived, yet his eyes had turned murky as his colleagues. When he was not screaming, he was babbling incoherently. And when he wasn't babbling, he ranted of a great city, beautiful and resplendent, housing enough gold to form an entire mountain, nestled deep within the jungle ahead. He knew its location, he said. He could take them all there, he said.

The Emperor was torn. On one hand, there was no misinterpreting the clear danger of what lay ahead. Any expedition sent would be facing threats the Empire was unlikely to have seen before. And yet on the other hand, being the first Emperor in history to reject The Celestial Door would be of unprecedented shame. Not to mention, while ominous, the gold blood dripping from his now dead fortune tellers could not be a clearer sign of riches ahead. Naturally the nobles and court officials present argued heavily in favour of an expedition. "For the glory of the Empire and in the pursuit of scientific discovery" they said. Naturally any profit or valuables found in the process would be a

mere, “secondary” boon. Of course *they* would agree. They wouldn’t be the ones going after all.

And thus, 35 days later, begins our expedition. I write this on our first day as we, 100 of the Empire’s most academic and scholarly, depart for this unknown world, uncertain yet eager to meet what lies ahead. In my excitement, I confess my own overpreparation, having brought three notebooks, six brushes and sixteen inkstones to ensure I never run out of paper. The fortune teller is kept away from us academics, under the command of the captain of our 300 strong military escort. I hypothesise this is to keep him from scaring us away from this mission. Even in the tightly compact formation of heavily armoured soldiers in front, I can still faintly hear his incoherent babbling. I try to ignore it.

I converse enthusiastically with my colleagues, hypothesizing what we might find, what animals might be responsible for the calls we previously heard, if we might even find people, but any form of communication ceases immediately as we cross through The Door. All of a sudden that faint cacophony of animal cries becomes instantly clear and twice as loud, as if hearing a noise while resurfacing from a body of water. We practically collide into the heat and humidity of the environment, an overwhelming wall I feel as if I must claw through, compared to the crisp and icy air of the KunLun Mountains. I am grateful to have discarded my heavy furs before entering, else I surely would have perished from heatstroke a few days in, drowning in my own sweat. As we are greeted by a deep inky yet starry night sky, our captain considers it a better idea to make camp and proceed in the morning. As we departed in the middle of a bright sunny day from our lands, I myself feel no need to sleep, though I recognize I must adapt to this quickly if I am to remain rested in this new world. The daylight filtering through The Door is somewhat distracting, but I understand the captain. Better to have an exit ready in case of

the worst. And so, our first day ends as quickly as it began and I finish this entry eager for the journey ahead.

First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 8, midday:

There is no end to the marvel of this mystical new land! As we steadily traverse the dense jungle I find myself enraptured by the sheer number of creatures I have never seen or heard described in my life, moving around the canopies as if unaware of their own marvel. Monkeys with dark fur and great pouches under their chin howling like a pack of frantic wolves. Beautifully coloured parrots and even other birds flit overhead, displaying dazzling reds, blues, greens and yellows. Strange grey and black creatures with long, pointed claws and even longer, pointier snouts scurry out of the way as we pass. At night, when we make camp, I confess to have spotted a small, nimble cat-like creature with a spotted coat, darting amongst the trees. Additionally, the scouting parties swear they sometimes see an animal akin to a leopard, yet far bulkier. Though frightening, it does not attack when they are in groups. In the breaks of the canopies I occasionally see giant grey and white birds flying overhead. At a glance they appear to have similar talons and claws as eagles, though their size and the crest on their heads is not akin to any eagles I have ever seen. And I swear it on my life, on my very sanity, I once saw a creature just like a squirrel, gliding overhead. Truly, this is a wondrous land unlike any other I have ever seen before!

**First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 11,
afternoon:**

Evidence of human life and activity. We have found arrows embedded in the side of a tree, with tips made of bone. Unclear what animal the bones might belong to. Will write more under more opportune circumstances.

**First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 12,
morning/evening:**

I truly cannot describe the excitement with which I write this entry. Upon the morning of our eighth day, the captain made the call to organize a scouting party of fifteen to ensure our safety in our travels ahead. Having had military experience in our war against the Mongols I volunteered. I am in no small part eager, if a little wary, to potentially meet these native peoples. And my eagerness paid off! Scouting ahead, we heard commotion, yelling and snarling. We found a hunting party desperately fending off a ferocious pack of wolves. Finding it a good opportunity to introduce ourselves, we leapt into action, aiding the group and fighting off the wolves. While grateful, the hunters were undoubtedly confused by our clothing and differences in facial features compared to theirs. When the rest of our expedition arrived, they were even more bewildered by the lamellar armour our soldiers wear. As best we could, we explained our origins from a distant land and proclaimed our friendly intentions. At this, the party gestured for us to follow, which we are. Will write more when we reach our mysterious destination!

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I pick up where I previously left off. Following the hunting party, we were led to a most wondrous city, built of the most excellent stone. Roads, canals, and aqueducts were organized in an impressively efficient manner and a great, imposing square pyramid rose from the centre, where beautifully uniform steps led to the top. The difference between our architecture and theirs was clear, yet the beauty of their infrastructure held me in the same wonder as our most prestigious palaces. Some of the people wore gold and jewelry, forged in such beautiful forms I wager none in our Empire could have ever conceived. They were friendly and open, though perhaps that was due to the hunting party making it loud and clear that we had worked to save them. For our part, there were those among us wary of these new peoples. Our fears were somewhat dimmed, however, watching the fortune teller amongst that throng of troops. I noticed, and let the others know, that he completely ignored this new city and peoples, seemingly close to wandering off were it not for the soldiers blocking his way. Whatever danger he had seen outside The Door, it wasn't them.

We were brought to their leaders at the foot of this great pyramid, who initiated negotiations with our captain and our most prestigious academics present, with those few linguists among us translating as best as possible. I will admit the presence of some worries on my end, as while there was eventual agreement for our expedition to stay a few nights to rest and resupply, this was only after a few events. First, initial negotiations seemed quite wary on both sides, quite understandably so. But then, one of the leaders, whom I now understand to be a high-ranking priestess in the city, pulled the others aside to talk, excusing herself politely to the captain and our academics. They huddled in a circle to prevent us from hearing but I am quite certain that as she spoke with them, I could see her looking avidly and subtly pointing not at us, but our metal armour and weapons. She was especially interested in our

fire lances, which we had been forced to use to scare away the wolves earlier to prevent incurring too many losses. The scouting party had not brought halberds for mobility, and close range conflict with swords is never promising when fighting wild beasts. I steadily put two and two together. The ornate carvings I had been admiring on the sides of the buildings were of bloody battles and possibly even human sacrifice. The guards on the way were armed to the teeth, with decorated battle suits and ornate wooden clubs and swords, embedded with obsidian blades.

Thus, I present my hypothesis:

These people are conquerors. Our weaponry and armour interests them as they believe an alliance with us can help them conquer their neighbours. These leaders might help us in the short term, but I worry in the long term they may aim to sway our objective, directing us to fight their foes without our knowing. At least the citizens themselves are quite friendly and they strike me as more eager to learn, a trait always welcome to scholars like myself.

A few of us academics and some members of our military escort gathered at night to discuss the day's events. I must confess I came out of this quite unhappy. Most in our expedition, myself included naturally, were eager to exchange knowledge with these people and learn more of their culture. And yet the captain, a noble from quite a prestigious family, calmly put forward the idea that we, with our fire lances and steel armaments, could make quick work of the guards and loot the city. After all, he too had seen their gold and jewels. I disagreed openly, saying their home advantage and strength in numbers would put us on the back foot, not to mention we would gain more knowledge and value from mutual cooperation. Yet he swiftly shot me down, treating me as if I had no military expertise in comparison to him. It irritates me when those in the military treat me with such condescension

regarding martial matters, as if my academic background renders my own service invalid. I have seen those battles. Been in them. Despite my scholarly inclinations I know them far better than those officers and generals who proclaim themselves “gods of war” and “military geniuses” yet have never been so much as eighty steps near a front line. Yet, such criticism cannot be applied to the man before me. It is for this that he disgusts me.

When most men return from an experience as harrowing as battle, they are numb at best. During the battle itself, when adrenaline runs high, your next few moments are life and death, the sheer rush does not permit reflection. But when the dust clears, the clashing steel subsides. The air quiets. The ground is filled with bodies, torn to shreds. It hits you then.

But not him. This man revels in that gory, bloody world. I can see it in the feverish light that possesses his eyes when he speaks of the war, just its mere mention. He recollects no battle to us, no specific experience. But I know. Officer or not, noble or not, this man has seen more than I ever have, more than I ever want to. He has been on those front lines, faced the savage foe, watched his comrades slaughtered as he in turn savaged those before him. And he enjoyed it. He wishes to return. He may not ever utter these phrases, ever even realize it himself, but deep down he yearns for an eternal war, day after day of senseless, agonizing slaughter. I see it in him. He is an addict to that rush. He feels it even when the battle is over, he seeks it everywhere in a manner almost deranged. And yet, almost masterfully, it remains hidden. Masked by a generous smile, a quiet voice, a polite note of our military options. By his cautious approach to our exploration and sensible plans of scouting parties and hunkering down during the nighttime you would never guess. He sickens me.

Quite frankly, the situation almost amuses me. On one hand our captain, politely suggesting that the enslavement and raiding of this city is a mere *possibility* open to us. On the other, the priestess, hoping to guide our armour and our weapons in the right direction, which just so happens to be in the same direction as their enemies. Truly, no matter our cultural differences, we and our new hosts are one and the same. Power corrupts here just as it does back home.

**First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 18,
noon::**

I write this entry completely shocked and discomposed. We have been permanently banished from the city. The days leading up to this were very enjoyable. We exchanged knowledge, traded goods, even taught recipes to one another. I know more about the animals of this area and have even picked up a bit of the language. This has been even more enjoyable than our time spent in the wild. And yet early this morning, I awoke jarringly to a dissonance of aggressive shouting and cries outside. I looked out to see the captain and his guard in nervous formation, weapons drawn but not pointed. They opposed a violent sea of guards and townspeople, headed by the priestess furiously shouting and pointing to someone behind our soldiers whom I later recognized to be the fortune teller, still babbling away. I learned from one of our translators that, this evening, the priestess, intrigued by our “differently sane” guide, had sent a few spies to investigate, as the soldiers had always ensured they never got a good look at him. They took one look at his smoke-filled eyes, heard his gibberish, and bolted back to the priestess to relay the details who at that very instant rallied the citizens to march over and forcefully expel us. I realized then what I had really seen from her that morning. She was

sweating, yet the morning was cool. When she aggressively gestured at the fortune teller her arm shook. Her screaming wasn't just furious. It was positively frenzied. It dawned on me with growing unease that having seen our smoky-eyed fortune teller the priestess wasn't angry with us. She was scared. They all were. We follow our babbling guide as he drags us deeper and deeper into the woods. I worry.

First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 21, afternoon:

I hear the animals less and less. I swear the trees and the light are getting not darker, but... dimmer? More clouded?

First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 23:

Most of our supplies are missing. We don't know how, or what took them. It happened last night, yet those on watch saw nothing out of the ordinary. What supplies we have are running out. Hunting parties of our own often prove unsuccessful.

I am unable to detail the time of day. The sky is so grey, the canopy so thick, I can't see the sun anymore.

First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 25:

We are beginning to suffer deaths. Water we are forced to collect from rivers and streams—it seems to be poisoning some of

us. Hunting and scouting parties are getting attacked more frequently by wolves and those creatures like leopards but bulkier. The city's people called them *ocelotl*. If I wasn't banished (and I knew the way back) I think I would've deserted for the city days ago.

First Year of the HongXi era, 11th Lunar Month, Day 26:

I hear things at night. Little rustles. Twigs ever so faintly snapping. Quiet, quiet rhythmic rustling. Like footsteps. It keeps me up. When I do go to sleep, all I dream about is war. The battles I've fought. The blood, that sheer volume of noise, of clashing steel and pained, shrieking wails. The eyes of the enemy. Ferocious, primal eyes. Pure bloodlust. I dream of the battles I could've fought had I stayed a soldier. A future I am forever grateful to have escaped, but I can't seem to get rid of here. I can't escape this dread.

First Year, 11th Lunar Month, Day 28:

A scouting party was attacked again. But this time by people. The sole survivor tells us they wore ornate turquoise masks resembling frightening visages with teeth bared. They danced around our hunters, darting in and out of trees and cackling like mad ghosts. They threw spears in the blink of an eye, impaling indiscriminately. They even targeted the weak spots in our soldiers' armour, as if blessed with a hawk's eyesight. Less of a fight than a massacre. The fortune teller's babbling has grown louder and even the captain begins to worry. He enjoys the enemy right in front of him, loud and ferocious. One that strikes and disappears like a shadow, one he cannot fight back against, worries him. They

worry me too. Everyone wants to turn back, but to where? Our only guide is a madman leading us further and further into what I fear more and more to be our doom.

Month 11, Day 29:

We're close. I don't know to what, but I know we're close. The fortune teller is practically screaming his gibberish to the rest of us, an unwilling and fearful audience who have no choice but to listen. Any attempt to quiet him down fails miserably. The captain went so far as to strike him behind the head to knock him unconscious. He didn't even notice the blow. The attacks are getting more frequent and I fear the influence of unnatural forces. What few survivors return tell us of ambushers practically shrugging off lethal blows from our soldiers, taking a fire lance to the face and hurtling away into the woods. No mortal being, human or otherwise, should be standing after such a blow. They tell us black smoke leaks what wounds they strike onto the ambushers. The captain, perhaps unable to do anything else in the face of such overwhelmingly abnormal details, refuses to believe them. The canopies are darker and denser now, we run on less and less sleep and we are hungry. Surely they are imagining things, believing an overactive imagination in their delirium. That's what he tells them.

Month 12, Day 1:

They're attacking our main convoy now. Lightning quick ambushes, skirmishes lasting just a few seconds, then they disappear. We can all see it for ourselves now, even the captain. Any blow landed, no matter how deep or heavy, doesn't faze them.

If knocked to the ground, they simply pick themselves up and run off. Too fast for us to capture a single one. We're all scared. We don't know what to do. We just follow the fortune teller mindlessly. Without question. We don't know what else to do. One might wonder whether it is the fortune teller who is mad, or those who follow him.

My dreams get worse. I hear whispers in them now. Faint giggling. As I watch battle after battle unfold in my sleep, sometimes as a participant, sometimes as an observer, they whisper *to me*. They whisper of a god of war. A god of kings. "*The Smoking Mirror*," they whisper.

Day 3:

Massive attack. Soldiers overrun. Those not slaughtered, running away. Fortune teller missing, captain missing. Brief respite now, but I hear things in the trees. Must keep running. Write more later.

Day 4:

I write this desperately hiding in a nook in one of these great trees. I have no food, no water. I have not slept and I fear for my life.

They were fast. So fast our troops on the flanks didn't even have time to react. Spears, darts, slinging stones. Some even rushed our soldiers and tackled them to the ground, slitting their throats or ripping their helmets off to split their heads open with clubs. What horses we had panicked and fled and the academics,

most of whom had no military experience, fled as well. The fortune teller was screaming. Laughing, even. I don't-

Something's watching me.

12 Lunar Month, Day 6? 9?

I write this entry dazed and confused, but nevertheless alive. I awoke today, finding myself in a stone dwelling, surrounded by people all staring at me. Apparently, a hunter had found me in the woods and brought me back to their city. They're quite friendly and bid that I rest before venturing out, but I can't help feeling suspicious. I don't know how long I've been unconscious and they won't say. They tell me they know nothing of the other members of our expedition. When I ask them about our ambushers they say they don't know anything. There were *a lot* of them in a room for just one man. And the way they looked at me. It was intense. Almost obsessive. I'll rest now and see the rest of the city tomorrow.

First Year of the HongXi era, 12th Lunar Month, Day 7, noon:

I still cannot see the sun, but the people here seem to know what time of day it is. I have no choice but to trust them.

The city is a lot like the other one, similar architecture and building materials. It's bigger and there are a lot more pyramids, taller even. The colours seem grayer however. Even the sunlight feels dull and filtered. They use a lot of obsidian for jewelry and the middle of their city bears an impossibly tall obsidian slab. Everyone is friendly, yet they strike me as almost uncanny. Like they're

excited. By what, I'm not sure. Their leader, whom they refer to as a "speaker" (from what I've gathered with my broken understanding of the language) invited me to dinner. He seemed eager to hear of my travels. The food was good but maybe a bit dull. Flavourless.

I had a dream while unconscious. A strange dream. I was in a dark, inky black space. The floor was cold and though I was facing upwards lying down, I could see no ceiling. I couldn't move. And there was this being beast creature thing in there with me. I struggle to describe it as I couldn't see it properly, but it was impossibly large. It was shifting around, like it was moving something. I think I saw a hand next to me? Like I was lying next to someone.

First Year of the HongXi era, 12th Lunar Month, Day 8, evening:

The speaker invited me to dine with him again. He's obsessed with my tales of our weaponry and armour, of our battles with the Mongols. He asks me of our history, our conquests, our civil wars. He is fascinated by them. He reminds me a little of the priestess in the first city but worse. I don't like him. I tried to glean some more information from him about my comrades but to little avail. I want to leave soon, to try to find The Door and get back home. He promises that when I'm completely rested, he'll provide supplies and guides. I don't know if I can trust him.

**First Year of the HongXi era, 12th Lunar Month, Day 9?
Evening:**

I feel as if I'm being watched. All the time. I hear giggles. When I move my head I swear I see shapes darting back around corners. It feels like I'm going insane.

Their slab unsettles me. It's so large, yet so smooth. Shaped like a long, rounded point. I think I'm going to start exploring tomorrow. See what I can find.

**First Year of the HongXi era, 12th Lunar Month, Day 12,
afternoon:**

I try to speak to the citizens during the day now, as best as I can with my incomplete understanding of their language. Trying to gather information, to learn more about this place. The hunter who found me is very open to talking. He tells about the history of the city, how it's been around for hundreds of years. How obsidian is sacred to them. Everyone's daily routine, what food he likes to eat, what animals he has a preference for hunting. My understanding is imperfect, but he describes this ancient city's foundation in astounding detail. Who was in charge, how it was built, what rituals and celebrations were held. Normally to know that much someone would have to have been there themselves. Perhaps he's simply very academically focused and reads a lot on history. To that, I can certainly relate.

Day ??, evening:

I SAW HIM. THE FORTUNE TELLER. I went investigating checking different buildings and houses. I climbed up

one of their pyramids, seemingly unguarded, and found him at the top. He was seated in the middle of the room on the floor, eyes closed, quiet. I tapped his shoulder and he practically jumped. His eyes widened when he saw me. He told me to run. To leave the city. His face was disfigured, his eyes now clear but bloodshot and runny. His skin was rough and patchy; there were dark lines going down his face like he had cried the smoke out of his eyes. They had dressed him in black robes and obsidian jewelry. His breath smelled like decaying meat. He sobbed at me to run. He told me
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I have collected myself. My hand shakes a little less now. The fortune teller told me we were playthings. He gritted his teeth as he said it, like just saying it gave him extreme pain. I need to leave, but to run out of this jungle alone would be suicide. I'll try looking for others. I don't think the citizens are onto me. It's odd that they wouldn't notice me going up their pyramid but I went when there were many people on the streets. Perhaps that's why. The fortune teller told me to look into the "smoking mirror". I don't know what that means and the fact I dreamt the same words unsettles me. Tomorrow, I'm going to go find more people.

Day

It's so odd. I see nothing out of the ordinary during the day. Regular people doing regular things, going about their business. I trust the fortune teller but I can't find what scared him so.

12th Lunar Month, Day Night 1

I understand it now. It's at night. They do things *at night*.

Loud commotion woke me outside. I snuck out to see citizens gathered around the pyramid, watching the speaker at the top chanting in a strange tongue. His eyes were rolled back, his mouth twisted in a savage, carnivorous smile. His long black hair was braided with obsidian. He held an obsidian blade. At an altar before him the fortune teller was chained. He was screaming, desperately trying to escape.

As a peach falls off a tree, with that same speed and purpose, the knife fell. It plunged into his chest and he screamed even louder. The speaker carved it open and *ripped out his heart*. The crowd was chanting, singing in horrible, uncanny synchronization, like they were so used to singing this chant it was practically second nature to them. I need to escape. I think they only bring my comrades out at night, so I'm going to start investigating then. When do they sleep?

I have realised something unsettling. As I headed back to my accommodation I heard the fortune tellers' cries again. Or to be clear, they hadn't stopped. From the moment I stumbled upon the ritual, up to now, *even now*, I can still hear his agonized, manic cries. How? They ripped his heart out. I saw it happen.

Our ambushers did not fall when struck. They couldn't die.

12th Lunar Month, Night 2:

I saw the captain. I heard commotion from the other side of the city and ran to investigate. I found a massive arena and

snuck in. There were fifty of our soldiers in the centre, twenty-five facing off against twenty-five. One of them was the captain. He was smiling like a deranged *yaksha*. I swear his teeth were stained with blood. At the sound of a horn, the men rushed each other, baying like rabid dogs. They butchered one another, slicing flesh, cleaving through armour. Any whose weapon broke kept fighting with it, or they would use their fists. Whoever lost their hands used their teeth. They screamed in pleasure at their carnage, eyes wild, practically rolling back in their heads in ecstasy. The captain in the centre, cleaving his way through, bathed in blood. The crowd was deranged, cheering in manic excitement.

No one died. Not a single man. They butchered each other, cut each other apart, into literal pieces. And yet not a single man fell. They just kept going. I don't know how it ended, I left before I could see. Thankfully no one saw me.

Why did no one see me? Why am I even alive? Why do they let me wander freely? If they wished me harm they could've simply done so while I was unconscious. It confounds me to the point of obsession.

I don't want to escape with him. I must find someone else.

Night 3:

I'm writing this in hiding. I want there to be a record of my actions, in case something happens to me. I awoke to another ritual. Sneaked out, to watch it behind a nearby building. The fortune teller, chained again. But just as the knife was to drop, the speaker stopped. He put the knife down. He looked at me. Looked straight into my eyes. Pointed and laughed. And everyone turned to face me. They encircled me. Every single face in that crowd, dozens if not hundreds of eyes just looking at me. Laughing. All of

them laughing. The fortune teller was crying silently, eyes to the heavens. They didn't try to capture or follow me, they just stood there and laughed and I ran, desperate to find somewhere to hide. I fought my way through even if they didn't try to stop me. I dealt blow after blow. I felt bones crunch under my fists, watched blood spill as they fell over. Smoke came out of their wounds. Even the ones I felled just *laughed*. Laughed as I struck them. Laughed as they collapsed to the ground. Laughed endlessly, their eyes not once leaving me. I'm on the top floor of one of the buildings closest to the city walls. I don't know what to do. Escape? Still try to find others? I don't know.

Night 4:

Someone spoke to me in my dreams. They whispered to me, yet their voice sounded loud like ten thousand men speaking with inhuman synchronicity directly into my mind. Like if a thunderstorm had a voice. They showed me the war. The battles I fought. They asked me if I missed them. If I missed the rush. The thrill. I told them I was not so disgusting as to enjoy battle and they laughed at me. Softly. They told me to meet them in the Smoking Mirror. What does that mean?

Is it the Obsidian?

Night 5:

I snuck out of the top floor. The streets were unsettlingly empty. I went to the obsidian slab at the centre of the city. I touched it and my hand went through. Something moved in there. A shape. It shifted. I ran. I dared not look inside.

Night

They said they were looking forward to meeting me again in my dreams. I'm going to look into it tonight, just to see what it looks like. I must be brave if I am to save my comrades. If I see one of them, I'll go inside and rescue them.

...

Turquoise pupils, irises of dark smoky iron, Eyes that swallowed up my soul. Eyes so large I could fit inside them

Eyes that nestled an eternal bloody war, Eyes that reflected one hundred million snarling fiendish creatures chopping, slicing, biting, stabbing over and over and over again

I saw His Face. I went to the slab tonight. I looked inside that shard of inky void and I saw HIM. He looked back at me. He smiled. Teeth like shards of the Moon.

*I felt the thrill of battle as I looked at him. The Rush.
THAT ADRENALINE-*

I am disgusted with myself.

He told me everything, whispered truths in a voice like ten thousand men speaking at once. He told me that they brought Him here. These people, these devils, fought and killed and conquered so many and through that worship they brought Him here and He gave them a reward. Or a punishment.

He told me they were bored. That's why He brought us here across the Door THAT'S WHY THEY LET ME LIVE, why they let me find the fortune teller so easily. They were playing a game with us. With me. Playing this game because centuries and centuries of endless war and hedonism and blood BORED THEM.

We were brought here for their fun. THEY WERE-

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They found me. Brought me to the slab. I figured it all out so I suppose I'm no fun for them now. I see one of them go in and bring out one of my fellow academics, unconscious. His turn, I suppose. The revelation means nothing to me. I feel numb.

He told me I liked it. That rush, that adrenaline on the battlefield. *He* told me I enjoyed it, hunted for it. That I left the military not because I hated war but because I hated enjoying that feeling.

Those who love war, who enjoy it disgust me. More than any other people.

The captain watches me as I'm about to go in. Emotionless. Like a puppet. Like this is uninteresting. The speaker watches too. He smiles at me. Teeth like an *ocelotl*'s.

No one will find my writings in here will they? No one will find me.

Tezcatlipoca. The Smoking Mirror. Patron of kings. Of warriors. God of the Great and Terrible. Of the bloody war and the dark night sky. I am trapped by *He*, trapped in an inky world of black glass, with no ground to walk on or sky to gaze at. My life ends and yet I am not dead.

nanulak

Sophie Lee (she/her)

a nanulak is the rare ursid hybrid between a grizzly and a polar bear

i witch compulsively

i wear bear skins and
roam around pine needle woods
my weasel skull pendant
chatters softly in the wind

i catch glimpses
of polaroid foxes
between the ferns
frost white wraith tails
beckoning

i hear creaks and croaks and
whispers and rustling
muffled sounds of paws on moss
a creature drawing breath abaft

and when i turn i see

a kodak moment
captured through
moonsilver twigs
in all its grizzly glory
behemoth gentle ghost

and as i lay in my own blood
mauled dead in a crocus bed
mother mooncalf
up above

i sense the coming of spring

Artist's Statement

Sophie Lee is a writer from berlin. as a graduate of the university of glasgow's creative writing program, she writes mostly short stories but, if pressed, will admit to dabbling in poetry. sophie lee would like to write a modern bestiary, comprised of biological hybrids like nanulaks and ligers as well as imagined creatures, the stuff of accidental taxidermy and urban legends. currently, however, she is elbow-deep in the research process for her thesis on hagsploitation, the 1960's horror subgenre involving zero bears but many witches.

The Girl with the Monster Inside Her

Joni Maguire (they/them)

TW: body horror, internalised transphobia, gender dysphoria, self-harm in final scene

Time functions differently for those who live on the Island. It is not something you let passively occur; you must pursue it with everything you have. The ferries cross the Harbour every day, back and forth, back and forth, though Islanders complain that the schedule is illogical and inconsistent. Never enough ferries during evening rush hour, not to mention during the ever-expanding tourist season, when the docks are so packed that the only way for residents to avoid waiting for a later ferry is to elbow their way mercilessly to the front of the line. The boats are ancient, and one tough winter away from falling apart completely, leaking from the roof and the hull, having to be taken in for servicing every season just to stay running, fainting at the slightest crust of ice on the water. The sheer amount of broken-off propeller blades littering the bottom of the harbour could rival a kelp forest. Yet every morning at 6:45 a.m., the ferry pulls up to the dock to let off the school bus drivers and staff changes for the fire station and let the early-morning commuters trickle in, bleary-eyed and scarfing down a hastily-prepared bowl of yogurt during the fifteen-minute journey to the city. And every evening at 11:45, it bids a honking final farewell to the Island, and you'd better have made that last boat because there's nowhere else to go. The Islanders know that this means no late night concerts or parties, no staying late at a

friend's enjoying yourself so much that you let the time get away from you, because once the last boat has gone, then it has gone and there's nothing you can do about it. They have made peace with this. They are the type of people who will build a new clubhouse with their own hands when the old one burns down and bring groceries to whoever can't make the trek across the harbour. But the clubhouse burned down for a second time in the summer, and the old crowd is too tired to build a new one themselves, while the youth never stay for very long these days.

And yet time moves on. The Islanders do not live by the rhythms of the ferry schedule, they dominate it. To do otherwise would be to let time win. The girl has never had to be told this explicitly because this is what she was born into; the knowledge grew up as she did, inseparable from her very being. Even when she ages out of the local school and starts commuting to a high school in the City, the Islander cannot be shaken out of her. It pounds in her veins as she leaps from her desk the moment the bell rings, bag already packed and coat half on, and sprints out of the building, all the way to the subway, throwing herself into a seat and cursing every delay. There is a 4:00 ferry that she can just make if everything goes smoothly, and a 4:30 if not. She never takes the 4:30 if she can help it. That extra half hour wait isn't just a half hour, it's humiliation. Failure. Every second spent sitting in the concrete greyness of the City-side ferry docks is smarting, because she could be at home among the trees and the water, and instead, she is here, upset enough that she could cry. She is an Islander through and through.

When the girl was little, her parents noticed a lump on the left side of her abdomen, right over her stomach. It was small, just a small, hard knot of ... something. They took her to the doctor, who booked her in for surgery where the mass was removed. No one could figure out exactly what it was and why it had appeared where

it did. In reality, it hadn't just appeared; she had been born with it, but it had been too small to be detected. The mass had been growing with her. No one thought to ask why. What mattered to her parents was that it was now gone, and their little girl was happy and healthy again. The little girl doesn't really remember this; she was very young. She only knows what her parents have told her.

Then one day, the lump comes back. It takes longer for the girl to notice it than it might have for someone else, as she has never been accustomed to examining her body in the mirror. When she showers, the process consists of a military strip and as little time spent under the water as possible, then shivering for a few seconds on the wet bath mat before hauling her clothes on as soon as possible, the fabric clinging to her still-damp skin. The mirror is always hopelessly fogged, and she makes no move to wipe it clear. It is easiest when she never has to think about the foreign flesh surrounding her from all sides, jarringly different from the image of herself she has in her head. The girl first feels a little nub pushing against the skin over her stomach while she is standing in her room, paralyzed by the choice of bra before her on the bed. The standard padded cups that bulge strangely under her shirt, or sports bras that pinch because she outgrew them in middle school, but feel much better regardless. She loops the straps of the padded bra over her shoulders, and that's when she feels it, shifting beneath her skin. She glances down, and it takes a moment for her to locate the source of discomfort, pinching the flesh of her belly so that the lump protrudes. It is small, maybe the size of a marble, and no different from the rest of her save for its unyielding density as she pinches it between her fingers. Then she shrugs, fastens her bra, covers it with a shirt, and decides not to think about it. And yet, the lump grows.

A few months later, the girl gets a rash across her chest, just above her breasts, reaching towards her shoulders. It spreads to

her back. She doesn't think about this either, just scratches at it mindlessly as she lies in bed at night, which is when she can't take her mind off the burning itchiness beneath her skin. Eventually, her mother notices and pulls down the collar of the girl's shirt so she can examine her. Angry red lines branch in all directions beneath her daughter's skin, like webbing or a network of veins.

"It's all over your back too, look," she says, and the girl reluctantly stretches her neck to see in the mirror behind her. The grasping lines reach around to her shoulder blades, encircling her. They are a bloody red, raised slightly against her skin as it puffs over the top of her too-tight sports bra. Her mother tells her she'll make her a doctor's appointment. The girl would rather live with the discomfort than have someone else examine her body, but she doesn't protest. A jolt of pain shoots through her when she lies face down on her bed, the lump pressing into her organs. She sits up and there it is, stretching against the skin over her stomach, the nub, the mass, the lump, except it is not any of those things because when she pinches it, she can see the shadowy form of something curled up inside of it. Her skin has taken on a translucent quality as the thing inside of her stretches it thin. It has swelled to the size of a golf ball without her noticing, but now that she has it is impossible not to feel it there. A creature, deeply rooted to her flesh, tendrils of nerves anchoring it to her stomach and twining themselves throughout her body. She pulls her pyjama shirt down and resolves to sleep on her back from now on.

Because the population of the Island is so sparse, the few kids who do live there don't have a choice but to know each other. There is only one other person who was born in the same year as the girl, and their name is Spike. They also happen to live down the street from one another. There are two possible outcomes to such a

situation: a lifetime bond of friendship or a total lack of communication, and it is the latter for the girl and Spike once they age out of the local elementary school and are no longer forced to spend every day together and every morning and afternoon biking to and from school.

The girl tells herself that they have nothing in common, that Spike is goth, while she is just average, that Spike has behavioural issues and has dropped out of school, while she is a straight-A student who has never touched a drop of illegal substances or gone anywhere without her parents' approval. Spike wears inch-deep eyeliner, black fishnet stockings, and skirts that reveal more than is appropriate, while she inhabits her mother's old jeans and doesn't have any more knowledge of putting on makeup than of driving the ferry. So though the girl sees Spike walk by her window every morning, walking their dog, and they are forced into daily proximity by the ferry, they never talk. And now Spike is going around saying that their name is Spike and that they aren't really a girl, and what is the girl with the creature growing on her stomach supposed to do with that? It claws at her, inflaming the skin on her chest and back. She pushes her splayed hand against the creature, watching Spike and their dog through the window. It is a dense mass, like scar tissue. She can feel the pressure it exerts on her insides when she does so, and gets the sense that if something is going to give, it won't be the creature.

She had gone to the doctor like her mother wanted, but he had only looked at the spiderweb of angry nerves running under her skin and prescribed her an antihistamine lotion. He hadn't tried to examine her further, and for that she was grateful. The girl is afraid of the thing growing inside of her, but she is more afraid of people finding out. It is more than a growth, it has intertwined itself with her very flesh, demanding that its ravenous appetite be fulfilled. She is always hungry now. It isn't easy for a girl to have

such an appetite while living with her parents in a small house that was really built to be a cottage, not to mention on the Island, with one restaurant that is only open during tourist season. It was also in the clubhouse that had burned down. So the girl smuggles snacks home, buried in the depths of her backpack, and stores them in a growing stash in her underwear drawer. Chips, chocolate bars, anything. The creature likes sugar. She does her best to stave off its hunger, but the more she eats, the more it wants. She has also noticed that the creature likes warmth, and if she is outside in the cold for too long, it wriggles around in protest. It is not only growing outward, a stretched pouch of skin bulging out of the left side of her belly beneath which the vague form of something stirs, but growing inwards as well, reaching its tendrils through her body like a parasitic spider. The rash has spread to her limbs, red lines branching down her legs and arms, itching to the point of madness when she doesn't scratch them and burning like fire when she does.

It is only growing stronger even as she is growing weaker – her skin thinning, hair coming out in clumps, hungry and tired no matter how much she eats and sleeps. It can no longer be called a creature, this thing consuming her, now large enough that she can make out the bony ridge of its spine, its shrunk head, its body cocooned in a crumpled expanse of something that might have been wings. It is a monster. Both the girl and the monster know that they are caught in a war for resources, with her body as the battlefield. So when the girl with the monster inside her sees Spike walk past her house, something inside of her breaks. Spike is decked out in black as usual, face white save for the dark rings around their eyes, and in place of their curly hair, they now have a skull full of stubble. “Is she sick or something?” her mother asks, glancing out of the window. The girl shrugs. Spike’s shorn head

trudges on past their house, a beacon of everything that is wrong with them.

That evening, the girl with the monster inside of her takes her father's home haircutting kit and locks herself in the bathroom. Her hair collects above the safety guard of the buzzer in mousy tufts, falling like snow around her. The tiled floor is a crime scene, the aftermath of a cat's dinner, little mounds of fur piled up here and there. Most of her hair is gone now, leaving only a half centimetre covering her scalp, except for a few longer, wispy strands that the buzzer didn't catch. The remainder is patchy, bald spots dotting her head as though she had been in a terrible accident. Reaching red tendrils branch under her skin, wrapping around her skull, pulsing just beneath the surface. She expects to hate it, this change into something ugly and unfathomably strange. She doesn't. The monster has won the first skirmish.

Winter comes late this year; the first snowfall only happens well into December. Islanders remember when the world used to go into a deep freeze for months, snow pillowy on the ground, the Harbour a sheet of ice, the ferries shut down. They complained about it endlessly, but now they miss it. People mutter about climate change and the good old days, and how the youth these days lack a sense of community. The clubhouse is still a barren field of ash, churned to grey in the snow. The neighbourhood association says that they're waiting for the insurance money. But even then, who will rebuild it? Spike and the girl with the monster inside of her? They don't talk to each other, and they have no one else to talk to. On the ferry, people huddle, shivering, belowdecks and out of the worst of the wind.

The girl is grateful for the cold, because it gives her an excuse to bundle herself in her baggiest sweaters to hide the creature ballooning out of the side of her abdomen. Her parents

are already worried about her after the head-shaving incident. As soon as the school bell rings, she barrels down the street, eyes unseeing save for the white light of salvation beaming from the crosswalk light. It turns to blinking red, and she begins to run and makes it just before the timer winds down to zero, only to remember that she won't make the next light anyway, and the blinding urge to throw herself across the street hadn't made a difference. She misses the 4:00 ferry and sinks onto one of the cold stone benches in despair. The eyes of the Islanders burn into her as they slowly trickle in. It is one thing to arrive purposefully early, and another to be stuck waiting there for a full half hour because you tried to make the boat and failed. She pulls up her hood over her head and retreats into her coat, hoping none of her parents' friends will sit down next to her and start talking to her. She is so committed to keeping her eyes trained on the ground in front of her that by the time she has boarded the ferry—still one of the larger summer ones instead of the Ongiara—and looked around, she realizes she is sitting practically across from Spike. Her neighbour is staring fixedly at their phone, headphones over their ears with the volume turned up so loud that the girl can feel the bass thudding in her chest. "Hey," she says.

Spike pulls off their headphones and frowns at her.
"What?"

"I just said 'hey.'"

"Oh, hey."

She presses her lips into a weak smile that is not really a smile, just the absence of a frown, and they take turns to glance at each other warily before Spike goes back to their phone and the girl stares at her shoes. The monster over her stomach claws at her, restless in its captivity.

When she gets home, she pulls off all her layers of clothing and stands exposed in front of her bedroom mirror. Her body is a warzone. The same lumpy shape that it has always been, with too much of it here and not enough of it there, with the addition of the monster that has sent its nerves throughout her body, running under her skin in all directions. They are starting to creep up her neck, choking off her air supply. The monster is about the size of a doll now, the American Girl doll that she had begged her parents to buy for her when she was young, only for her to wind up in the attic a year later after a botched haircut had rendered her useless for pageantry purposes. It rolls over in its pouch, rearranging itself. A beady eye blinks from beneath the filmy barrier of her skin and stares out at her from the mirror. The girl is the first to look away. She wants it gone, its tendrils purged from her flesh. They both know that if this war rages on, one of them is going to die.

Once night has settled over the Island, all the tourists gone and everyone fast asleep, the girl with the monster inside her takes a kitchen knife and steps out into the freezing darkness. The world outside is in the middle of a cold snap, and the Harbour has frozen against all odds. She walks in the opposite direction, away from the City and towards the lake. The sand has crystallized, and her steps leave no impression as she crosses the beach towards the chunks of ice rolling up on the shore, clinking together in a symphony. Raised ridges of solidified lake water cast their shadows over the beach in the moonlight, waves frozen before they broke. Strands of algae and plastic packaging have been frozen into them. She scrambles over the lumps of ice and stands on top of the lake, precarious on the slippery hill of ice frozen in the act of crashing. She is shivering violently as she takes off her coat and lifts her chin, and the monster growls its displeasure and burrows deeper into her side.

It doesn't take much to perforate the distended pouch it has made for itself, just a shallow slash of the knife around its edges just before the place where it melds into the flesh of her belly. Clear fluid runs out, steaming as it freezes on the ice beneath it, like the popping of a blister. The monster slides out of her with a squelching sound as the girl falls to her knees, clutching her stomach. Its veins tear themselves out of her flesh, unravelling her, leaving her hollow. Red tendrils are splayed out on the ice in a circle around the monster as it thrashes to and fro in its attempts to unfurl its wings and free its stunted arms. As the last of its web leaves her, she finds herself unmoored, lying face-down on the frozen lake, a girl once more. The monster staggers to its feet, body glistening with the residue of fluid. It raises its leathery wings and shakes them, opening its fang-lined snout. The red tendrils float in the air around it as it takes a step towards the prone form of the girl, empty now. She blinks at it but doesn't have the strength to fight as the tendrils reach towards her, wind around her wrists and up her chest, wrapping around her like spider silk, mummified linen, growing up her neck like vines and into her mouth, opening up her throat and letting the frostbitten air rush in. They lift her off the ice.

With one sharp snap of its wings, the monster launches itself at the girl and wraps its wings around her, cocooning her, twining their bodies together until she is the monster and the monster is her and they are one beast, one being, rising over the frozen lake. They open their mouth and let out an ear-piercing shriek, not a scream and not a shout, but a screech that sends cracks through the ice in the Harbour and rattles the windows in the houses. They are nails on a chalkboard and the squeal of streetcar tracks and the ear-piercing howl of the coyotes that live in the woods, as they hover over the Island. They screech even though everyone is sleeping too deeply to hear it, and the noise of the City

drowns it out. They screech and screech until their vocal cords shatter and there is no more air left, and then they take another deep breath and begin screeching again.

Elysha's Prologue

Chonnipa Bunjirakul (she/her)

TW: Abduction, imprisonment

“—believe it. Those people are insane.”

An unfamiliar voice comes to her ears as pain flashes back to her wrists and ankles. That, too, is unfamiliar, since those pains are supposed to come with the *weight*.

Her body is lying on something soft, and her head on something even softer. *A bed?* White lashes lightly move as she carefully opens her eyes only enough to see parts of her surroundings. Small room with a low ceiling made of fine wood, nearby bustles and clamours, strong scents of raw fish and silver coins, jumbles of movements echoing through the wood-plates. *A ship, at a harbour.* The sunlight from the narrow window is shining towards the half-open door that is located on the other side of the room. Two figures standing inside are talking not so far away from her bed; one in a vivid blue coat, the other in a brown vest. And the chains—the chains are lying on the floor.

Her hands and feet are free.

“Woah woah woah!” The man in brown yells when the weak figure he thought was still unconscious darts out from the bed towards the door. Her swift movement is readily suspended by the figure in blue that grabs one of her arms and easily pulls it back. In the brilliant deep-blue coat, the female human frowns as her azure eyes look at her prisoner, then turns to the man in brown sailor garments and orders:

“Close the door, Alby.” The door is shut. It is then that the girl clothed in pink garments loses all of her strength. The frail body collapses and almost hits the hard wooden floor if not for the hands that once held her back giving her support.

“Water.”

A glass of water is held in front of the girl while she sits unmoving on the floor. The human in blue kneels down while holding the glass, her slightly troubled eyes trying to meet the prisoner’s, who is refusing to acknowledge the act of kindness. The weak figure in pink only scans through the fine blue coat, the sword, and the feathered blue hat that indicates the woman’s status. *The captain*, she concludes. “Where am I going?”

The captain hesitates for a moment then turns to hand the untouched glass of water back to the man named Alby. “We are taking you and some other *gifts* to the Eastern sea, to Zathur.”

The captive turns her gaze to her own shadow on the floor as her mind races to recall the name. *Where is that?* Yet, the captain still speaks. “I’m not sure what elves prefer, but there’s some food and water there if you’re—”

“The council pays you?”

Silence overtakes the room. The captain sighs heavily as if accepting defeat and straightens her posture before answering in a stern voice. “Yes, they’ve commissioned us.”

The elf does not reply. Her eyes wander then rest on the pile of familiar chains placed on the side of the bed, away from her feet. The sailors probably broke them off after they got her, since there were no keys.

After a momentary pause, the captain stands back up while grabbing the chains from the floor and turns away towards

the door. The man follows without speaking, and as they are leaving, the captain takes another look at the ‘gift’ she is supposed to deliver.

“The door will be locked.”

Warm rays of afternoon sun bathe the room, draping over the exposed shoulders of the motionless figure still sitting on the floor. The light has moved a bit since the two humans left. The sound of steps and shouts from the deck above are mixed with clamors from the harbour, all moving about while she is locked inside.

“—isha!”

Her feet stumble over the long sheer robe that was put on her at some point as she jumps to the small window looking out to the busy harbour. Her eyes widened in sudden excitement running over countless creatures moving around, searching for the source of the voice she just heard.

“Aisha! Aisha! Don’t run out like that! You’ll get lost!”

The light in her eyes dims when she finds the source of the voice to be a middle-aged female human calling out to a small girl running around in the docks. *It’s that girl’s name.* Her eyes return to their static state while she backs away from the window, slowly slumping back down on the floor.

Elysha.

That is what she thought she heard. That is what she wanted to hear. Her name. The name she herself almost forgot.

The low hum of a sweet melody slowly fills the room. Long fingers begin to glide as the unchained hand moves with the body rising softly to the song. Her hair, as white as the bright sun, flows with the rose-coloured skirt embroidered with delicate

patterns of blooming flowers. The dress, just like any others she had worn, was forced on her by her previous **master** to decorate his little songbird. Most dresses are not so different from those she would have to wear in the village anyway, so she never cares.

The village...

The thought of her original home leads her feet to brush past the floor, taking the carefully choreographed steps she had learned by heart on the dancefloor made of strong afternoon sun, just as she remembers it.

What she remembers...

A wooden cane cut through the air when the wave of impact crushed onto her left arm. The pain quickly numbed her for a second, but her hand still gripped the cane, preventing the assailant from swinging it twice.

“You insolent child! Let go this instant!” The cracked voice of an old elf shrieked as Elysha held onto her cane. She screamed again when the young twisted the cane to loosen it from her grasp and threw it aside, where other elves started to gather. “You hurt me!”

“You were about to hurt him over some nonsense.” Elysha raised her voice without screaming. The defiant pale-red eyes stare straight towards the figure in decorated white robes who grabbed the wrinkled hand that is still perfectly intact. An elf’s physical appearance can be deceiving after all.

“How dare you call it nonsense! That human was insulting our lord the Sun!”

Elysha heard gasps and murmurs that immediately circled her and the man she was shielding. Her eyes swipe through the

familiar gazes of judgement and ridicule only for a moment before returning to the Temple's elder.

"Elio only complimented my dance. Nothing more," she said firmly. It's clear that the elder was not satisfied with her answer and planned to say more, so she raised her chin and cut the old elf's words. "I don't imagine our benevolent lord to be so fragile as to take offense over such a thing, headmistress."

Now the headmistress indeed shut her mouth. Instead, she walked up to Elysha with her hand held up as her dark green eyes flared with anger. The young elf knew what was coming and did nothing but stare back with an unmoving gaze, ready for another impact that should end the commotion.

That's all she could do.

"You ungrateful little—"

"Please don't!" A man interrupted, placing himself before her. Alarmed, the headmistress took a step back while some other armed elves were ready to draw their weapons. "I apologise. I did not know," Elio said as he opened his empty hands to show that he did not have any weapons. The tall figure of a middle-aged human man who was still roughly bandaged tried to bend down a little. The elves around appeared less worried but still cautious, some eyes now shifted to the headmistress to await her response.

"Let's go."

Elysha lightly tugged Elio's arm and helped him walk away from the Temple's gate, heading towards the path outside the village. Glares and whispers were all around as they walked, yet many of them weren't directed towards the man who was supposed to be the outsider.

*'Again?' 'Can't she just disappear?'
'Such an aggressive girl.'
'She's causing trouble again.'
'Thought she could keep her mouth shut.'
'She's just like that mad woman.'*

*'What did she think would happen?'
'Who'd want to be near that?'*
'What'd bother.'

Incriminating as they are, the young elf did not react to any of those words at all. Her eyes were still staring at the path they were heading down while other elves who were in the way stepped out, eyes still staring and mouths still whispering.

"Are you okay?" Elio started when they were some distance away from the village. Even the guards didn't check on the elf whose bruise on the arm started to turn green. Elysha only took a quick glance at her bruise before returning to the path as if nothing had happened. Her face was still, but he could see that her eyes wavered a little.

"I guess the wood elves are not as fun as the stories say." He shrugged, trying to lighten the mood. He heard a soft chuckle from the young elf, who decided that he could now walk on his own just fine. Her eyes turned to him with a half-amused, half-tired look.

"Which wood elves did your bards talk to?" The human still shrugged jokingly, making her land a light slap on his arm. "Even an elf who's never been outside of the forest still knows there're too many of us out there for you to just say 'fun', Sir Adventurer."

"I'm sorry, my lady elf. Our ignorance knows no bounds, but I do know a place," he said, smiling.

Elio took her hand and led her away from the path, through the forest. Elysha knew that it was far past the village's scouting area, but the warmth of his hand stopped her from pulling back. Finally, they reached a small flower hill that had a view of an open field with a human town in the distance. It was beautiful because she had never seen a human town before. The flowers were also dancing with the gentle breeze of the wind as they sat and talked

until sunset. Sometimes she danced too, and Elio would say that she was the best dancer he's ever seen and that she shone as bright as the sun. The same thing that almost got him in trouble with the old elf at the temple. They would come to the flower hill every day to just talk, dance, or even sit in silence. Until it was only her.

*She found his body at the river near the hut the village elves had built for an outsider to reside. Though he had saved one of the patrol elves' lives, that did not mean that such a secluded community would easily open its gates to him. There was no evidence, no trace, just the smell of copper and the diluted red that ran with the flow of running water. When she said Elio was gone, the elves said that the human is better off dead, so she never says anything else. It was then that she abandoned her old name altogether, leaving only the name he had given her. **Elysha**.*

She still visited the flower hill every day on her own; even when it rained or snowed, she would still dance. On sunny days, she sometimes sings, thinking about the songs and dances from the outside world in Elio's stories. Thinking about leaving and never coming back.

Is that something she can do?

"Hm Hm Mm Mmm..." Elysha began humming a song as she raised her hands to start another performance on the flowery hill. Glimmering eyes slowly shut to take in the sun and her movements along with the flowing wind that dances through her fingers. Her lips move with a smile as the sweet melody overtakes her body that moves along with it. The steps started to take momentum, swaying and turning, tracing the soil beneath the soft grass. A small skip to a leg that raised high and swung back into a turn down low so her hand felt the petals along the ground, then rising—

It went dark.

“—stupid! I specifically told you not to hurt it!”

Awakened by the incessant shouts of an unfamiliar voice, a wave of pain crushed her head. Elysha moved, trying to open her eyes and push herself up from a hard surface, and failed at both. All of her strength hadn't returned to her, and all she could see were flashes of gold and grey.

“You're finally awake! My little Papilio!”

Startled by the cold hands that suddenly grabbed her shoulders, she flung her eyes wide open only to be greeted by the face of a man, widely smiling. His body reeked of strong perfumes clashing with the smell of tobacco smoke, and the smell got even stronger as he spoke right in her face. “You're even prettier up close.”

A cold chill went through her spine as Elysha slapped the hand that was caressing her cheek away in fright. The smile dropped as the man shifted his eyes to look at his own hand, decorated with golden rings and colourful jewels, similar to the golden cage she was sitting in.

“A feisty one, I see,” he said with a tone of weird elation, the smile, twisted with unknown intent, returned to his face as he grabbed her face when she started to move, this time far less gentle than the first.

“Now, sing for me, my beautiful fairy. Like you did on that hill.”

He whispered with anticipation. Horror struck when she finally realised that she had been taken away. Her vision blurred with tears that started to pool out of fear while her weakened hands tried to claw the man's grasp off her face.

*“I said **SING!**”*

The strike threw her face downwards onto the shining floor. Drops of crimson fell from the cuts on her cheek created by those sparkly rings. Elysha saw her reflection, eyes wide with shock and fear. It was not the wounds that petrified her, but rather the crushing weight on her ankles, caused by the chains that bound her at the center of the golden cage.

“You fools! Look at what you’ve done! It’s too scared to sing now!”

The man stepped out of the cage and screamed at two other tall, muscled men in hunter’s garments while locking the cage door shut with a golden key. She could hear her heart still beating quickly as she stared at them, leaving the stone room that enclosed the cage. One of the huntsmen was carrying a big stone hammer.

Only silence remained after. No matter how hard she tried to pull away or hit the chains, she couldn’t set herself free. It seems like the chains were enchanted with some sort of spell, one that also drains all magical powers an elf like her may have. Finally, she sat motionless in the cage, staring at the sunlight that seeped into the room from an opening too small to be called a window. There was no sound, no movement, nothing to tell her where she was. Nothing.

There is nothing she can do.

Withered on the floor, her sweet melody that has turned into a haunting lullaby stops after she hears a quick thump of a heavy object dropping on the wooden floor. Her eyes move up to stare at the crack of the door that slowly extends with a faint creaking sound. Two heads poke out of the opening with curious eyes. One is a green-faced creature with half-up braids, decorated with small colourful flowers. The other is a small lizard-like face hidden behind a skeletal mask with a black top hat on its head.

Though it is obvious that both are non-humans, she has no idea what they are. Not that it matters.

“Uh—hi.” The green creature says shyly. Its—his dark green eyes look at her while lightly waving his hands with a soft smile. “We just heard your song and it was really beautiful, so we followed it down here.”

The lizard man nods in agreement while Elysha still stares at the two strangers who step into the room. They introduce themselves, “I’m Grav,” says the big green guy, “I’m Lucis,” the seemingly disproportionate lizard in a big trench coat follows while bowing wobbly. *Guess he has back problems?* She thinks, but brushes the thought away as she tries to quickly assess the situation.

There is no doubt that they broke the lock without the captain’s permission, or else they would have had the key. Yet, there were no sounds of commotion from the deck above, so it must not have been a raid. These two strangers probably have the permission to be on board, but do not work directly under the captain. She smiles.

“Elysha.”

Maybe there is something she can do.



‘The Cycle of Death’ Artist’s Statement

Jayesh Manoj Pawara (he/him)

The piece is titled ‘The Cycle of Death’. I made the sketch using some ink markers in my A6 size sketchbook. The artwork depicts a post-war scene in a fantasy world. The war between the two biggest human factions of the region happened some time in the past, causing the land to become infertile and deserted, except the remains of the war have caused two new species — similar to those only seen in fantasies — to become invasive. The first species is called the Silverwing, it sits on top of the sword impaled in the remains of a victim ravaged by war. It is said that the butterfly-like creature always existed, but after feasting on the innumerable dead souls of the war victims, it became huge and eerie. The second species is called the Gilded-death Azalea, they are similar to decomposers, you can see the golden-grey plant slowly devouring the organic matter around the skull. Yet, the plant does show signs of intelligence. The plant’s crystal-like centre works as a heart for its cells and body, and the flower-like parts look for organic remains in the vicinity.

I took inspiration for the story of the art-piece from different fantasy works. Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) had the influence of making me think about the effects of World War II on the world beyond the political scenario. With this piece I wanted to depict how life could grow from human war in a fantasy world. As for the inspiration behind the elements depicted in the piece, the Gilded-death Azalea is similar to the Monster

Plant from the video game *Resident Evil 2 remake* by Capcom, in the sense that it is sentient and that it feeds on organic matter. I chose to sketch a mutated-butterfly because I wanted to imply that something as small as a butterfly could become so huge with drastic sudden change in the environment, this — combined with my fascination for butterflies — resulted in the creation of the Silverwing. I used some pictures on the internet as a reference: butterflies, skulls engulfed in flowers and a wooden sword. All this came together to form the piece ‘The Cycle of Death’.

Beyond The Fields We Know

after Lord Dunsany

Zara Williams (they/ them)

Beyond the borders of our world,
there lies a land with beaches pearled.
A land with forests evergreen,
and strips of field that lie between
cool twilit stands of tall oak trees,
that shiver gently in the breeze;
and from their tops the magpies rise,
and take to flight in gauzy skies.

The fields of this far-distant place
are draped in magic, fine as lace,
that turns the air a lilac hue,
and hides all ugliness from view.
Walking beneath that purple sky,
with gossamer clouds floating by,
one feels the magic on one's skin,
and, with each breath, one draws it in.

Fields stretch as far as eye can see
in that lilac land of Faerie.
On one occasion trav'ling there,
I caught sight of a horned white mare,
racing across the fields of blue
towards faded, far-flung hills, through
patches of sweet summer flow'rs,
whose petals scattered in bright show'rs.

Met eyes, we did, and she stopped short.
A diadem of silver wrought
sat balanced on her slender brow.
Knees shaking, I bent in a bow
beneath the gaze of her clear eyes,
the same pale lilac as the skies.
When I looked up, she'd gone away,
but from the hills I heard her bray.

Know you this, and know it well:
it is all true, this tale I tell.
I saw it with my own two eyes:
the fields of blue; the lilac skies;
the horned mare with her glossy coat,

who had my breath catch in my throat.

But if my paltry words won't do,

come, now, to Faerie, and see it, too.

