

Tree And Stone

QUEER AS F*ISSUE

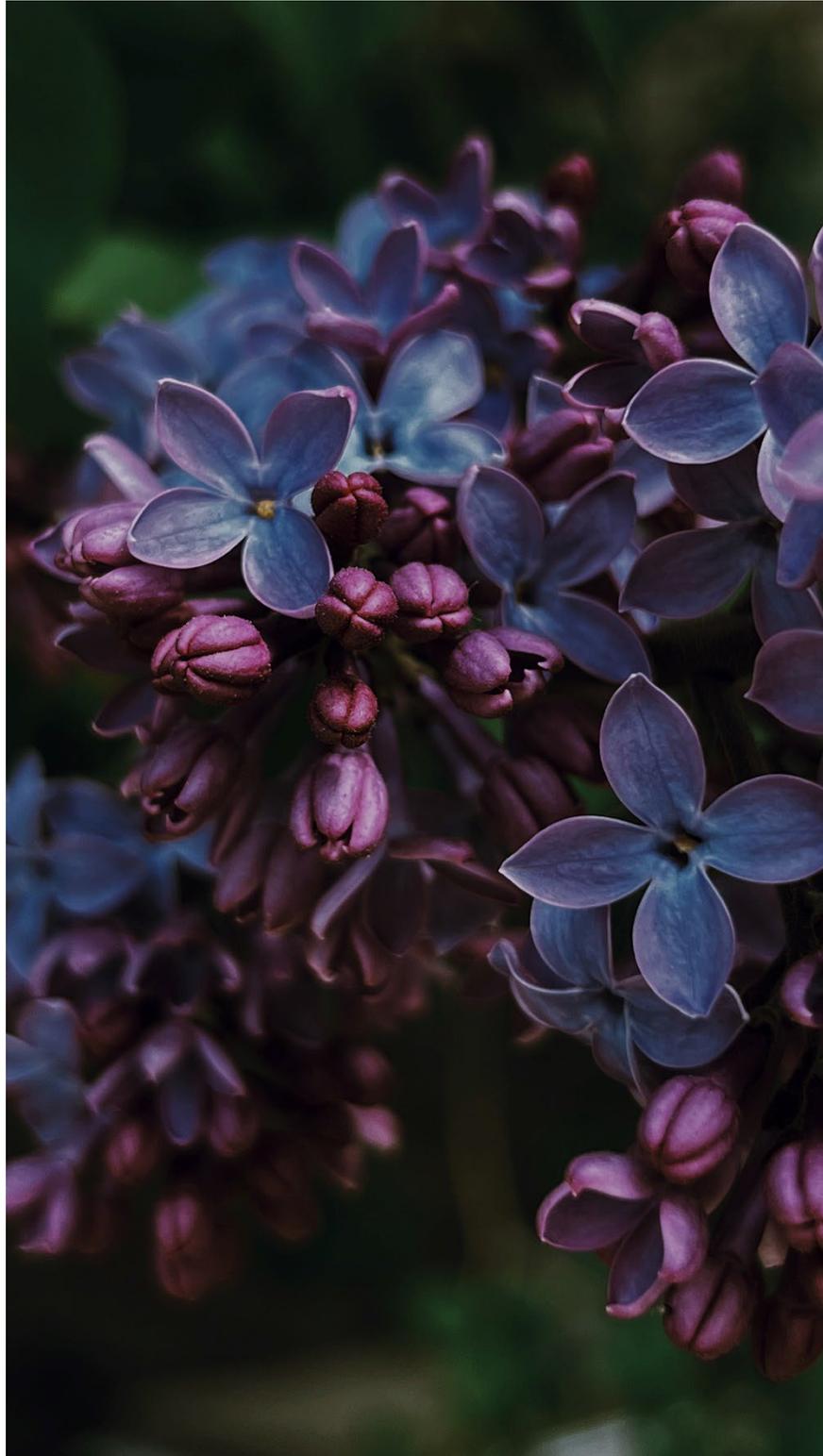


Tree And Stone Magazine

Queer As F* Issue

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Patreon and Ko-fi Supporters

This magazine would be nothing if not for our amazing contributing writers and artists. I want to thank our incredible Patreon and Ko-fi supporters for their contributions.

Rod Mannix

Carol Scheina

Kathryn Reilly

Amy H. Robinson

Gwen Whiting

Jennifer

L. E.

Rachel Handley

Wynward H. Oliver

Absintherian

Letter from the Editor

Black Lives Matter

Trans Lives Matter

Black Trans Lives Matter

I still carry some shame around being gay. It's taken time to come into myself, to recognize who I am, and while I am proud, I still feel the shame, the fear of being excluded. And at the same time, I don't want to be included into "normal" society. I want to be me, love how I want, live how I want, I don't want to be like anyone else. The term "Queer", one our community has reclaimed, has helped me recognize I can and helped empower me.

Gay carries baggage for me. I can't use the word without cringing. I must still bear the scars of hearing friends and family say, "that's so gay" or calling someone a "marica" [f**] or "pajarito" [a little bird]. Gay was never something one was supposed to be and I didn't want to get in trouble, get hit or punished at home, or beat up and ostracized (more) in school. I learned how to watch the boys change, how to glance at their sleek bodies, maybe steal a peek at the plump asses I always admired, and how to avoid certain people or dodge questions about girlfriends and comments like "hey, check out this naked chick on my phone." It didn't end when I got older either, until I had to come out.

I resented the notion of having to "come out"—I still do. Straight people don't have to "come out" and declare their attractions. It's the default. So, I acted like my gayness was the default and, ironically, used it as a way to mask my shame. I didn't have to proclaim my gayness because it was my default and I lived in vehement disagreement to the society norm of heterosexuality, the living embodiment of "f*** your straight ass". But I did it in silence. If you didn't understand I was gay, if you couldn't see how gay I was, then you were probably too stupid for me to talk to, too narrow minded and simple for me to spent time with, and it's how I survived. I had to do that. I couldn't be like them. I never would have gotten out of that place and been able to live.

This issue celebrates queer lives, to empower my fellow queers and to show that we can be unapologetically queer.

And there will be more stories to follow this issue. Mark my words!

Kevin M. Casin

Editor-in-Chief/Publisher

Flash Fiction



The High Priestess of the Crescent Moon

Marisca Pichette

The moon loved her, and she loved it back. When she was ten, she looped necklaces over its nose and balanced tiaras on its face. She marveled at how the beads glowed.

When she grew older, she took periwinkle thread and sewed the moon into the hem of her robe, so wherever she walked, its light should guide her steps, letting the fireflies know who it was who passed them in the night.

With the moon she aged, ambling through fields and cathedrals, pausing when the roughness of the road bruised her feet.

And where she sat the moon sat with her, clinging to her ankles.

When once she walked from moor to meadow, she shuffles now from window to garden, knotted fingers curled around a cup with three chips in the rim.

Still the moon goes with her, even as the thread fades from periwinkle to grey.



In this story it is always nighttime. The priestess finds her way with her big toes, alone on a chessboard illuminated by sensation. The moon is made of itself, dust and cold and the distance between one blade of grass, and the stars.

In this story, there is no loneliness.



When night passes to night, she climbs the stairs to her bedroom draped in cornflower curtains, its corners seeded with Spanish moss. She draws back the covers and slips out of her thinning robe.

She falls asleep in the minutes between nights. Her robe lies across her feet, its wrinkles remembering the curve of her flesh. As she sleeps, the moon slips away between the threads she tied to hold it in place.

It flits from one room to the next, filling the house while it waits for her to wake.

About the Author

Marisca Pichette is a queer creator of monsters and magic. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Fusion Fragment*, *Apparition Lit*, *PseudoPod*, and *PodCastle*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from Android Press in Spring 2023.

Wok Lung Hei

Wen-yi Lee

The little girl and her dragon wake as the lights go on and the dragon market comes to life.

People come from all over the world to fill their bellies with food with dragon breath in it. She likes to watch them stream in when the gates open: empresses in silk on convoys shaped like phoenixes, men with a thousand braids and eyes like the starry night, young lovers with endless hunger.

They pay her no attention. She's just a little thing with a ribbon of a dragon, and around her there are fifty-eight full-grown dragons coiled up and breathing living fire. Tucked against the tail of her father's stall, the girl scratches her own dragon under its chin. It curls itself around her. Its growing whiskers and feathery red scales are whispers on her skin. She tickles it, giggling, and it huffs tiny spurts of heat like a candle being blown out.

One day Ruby Peach will be as big as Papa's dragon Scarlet Willow, as long as a river when it sleeps and tall as a house when it cooks. Papa floats over it on his whirring clockwork kitchen. All the metal in the kitchen gleams: the chopper, ice boxes that store the meat and the leaves, the teeth of the stove, and of course, Papa's wok, big as a shield and tossed with both hands over the dragon's fiery breath. Everything goes into it: budding vegetables that glisten with frying garlic and oyster glaze; flat rice noodles that unfurl to the flame, thickening and charring and

soaking in sauces; rice tossed with the silver yolk of nightingale egg; meat that crackles and leaps in its own fat; all lowered down on clicking gears to the hungry patrons below. When Scarlet Willow tilts its head back and breathes, fire leaps over the wok like dancing pillars reaching to the heavens, the roar loud enough to reach the gods. When the fifty-eight dragons of the market all breathe at once, it is like the sun has come down to earth.

Not all the dragons are roarers, though. The blue dragons are languid, though just as watchful as to their food's consistency. They drape themselves half in the lake, and instead of pure fire they show their teeth and hiss out geyser steam. You go to the lake for meat buns and rice cakes, savory radish slices and crystal dumplings with tissue-thin skins that hiss like hatchlings when broken.

The yellow dragons, meanwhile, have sharp, noxious flame, the kind that swallows food whole and spits them out crispy: battered fried bananas, sliced golden cutlets in sweet and sour gravy. The green dragons simmer, a low, lazy breath that turns pig hearts and spiced peppers and wintermelon husks into soups that shock the body awake and porridges thick enough to sculpt. The black dragons don't even need crockery; they exhale onto hunks of meat skewered on spears and rolled in the heat, until the whole cut is golden brown and dripping fat for eager hatchlings to lick off the ground. And the white dragons in the cool shadows use no flame at all. Their silver-mist breath chills jellies and puddings and wines, keeps jellyfish tubers as cool as when they were harvested from the ice floe sea.

Papa lets her run around. "While you still can," he winks, halfway up the ladder to his clockwork kitchen, big hands calloused and shoulder-towel fluttering in the breeze. When she's a bit older and Ruby Peach burns a bit hotter, he will start bringing her up with him. He will teach her the family recipes and wok techniques, giving her a little flat bowl and showing her how to flick it back and forth over Ruby Peach's candle breath. She will have to learn to feel out dashes of wine and sloshes of sauces, how to judge the crisp of vegetables and how to make sure the rice never sticks, until all these things are as ingrained into her muscles as fire is to her dragon's belly.

For now, though, she runs wild through the market with the other children and their hatchlings. They blur past the patrons in six-color streaks, miniatures of the markets' giants. The patrons love them; they laugh and sometimes offer them little bites, which the children snatch gleefully. (Even when they aren't offered, some of the naughtier children will steal dumplings and jellies when the customer isn't looking.) The children explore every corner of the market, memorizing the routes between their favorite stalls and taking what samples they can get. Papa says that this is learning too. "Eating well is the first step to being a chef," he pronounces solemnly as he sets dishes on their own table. These are the moments when the market is closed and everything is quiet and it's just her and Papa and her grandparents and all their dragons, passing down wisdom and woks.

One day Ruby Peach will roar. One day she will cook. Today they are still just the children of the dragon market and it only matters that their bellies are full and learning, inhaling the flavors before they one day breathe them out.

About the Author

Wen-yi Lee is from Singapore and likes writing about girls with bite, feral nature, and ghosts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *Pseudopod* and *Augur*. She can be found on Twitter at @wenyilee_ and otherwise at wenyileewrites.com.



Furling

Lyra Meurer

"So, what should we do with the body?"

Standing over the mass we'd fished out of the pool, we shared a nervous laugh at my joke. What else to call it? It was shaped like a human body, with arms, legs, torso, a head-like lump growing fleshy looping shelves, like iridescent polypores. It had grown in the neglected pool like a moss ball, congealed from chlorine, spilled alcohol, carelessly scattered fertilizer, and whatever had been falling in the rain recently.

It had never been human, and its manner of life was unlike any we had seen or heard of. Lying inert by the pool, the cilia on its extremities stretched and coiled towards the grass, while its flatworm edges sucked at the concrete.

"It's...furling." said Jer, voice squeaking uneasily.

"Well, if the landlord sees it, we're fucked," I said.

"We could just stick it in the shed," said Nic, shivering in their windbreaker. None of us had expected to spend so long outside.

"No way," I said, "They're knocking it down tomorrow. Have you lost your mind?"

"Yeah, and that'll destroy it!"

"But what if they go inside first, or something?" I said. "We'll lose our fucking security deposit for sure."

"It's bullshit," muttered Jer. He imitated the landlord's gruff voice. "'Take care of the pool. I plan to sell next year, so I expect you to care for this house as if it were your own.' Fucking bougie shit. As if we know anything about pool care."

A flash of an idea crossed Nic's face. "Fuck. Okay. We wrap it up in something, stick it in the car, and throw it in the river."

"A horrible idea," said Jer. "What if someone sees us? They'll think we're murderers. How are we supposed to explain that this thing grew in the pool and we just had to deal with it somehow?"

We stood in such silence I thought I could hear the roiling of those indefinable parts, the flapping of those translucent ruffles, slightly the wrong color to be flesh-like peaches, but also the rain-dappled leaves of the peach tree.

"Donate it to science?" said Jer, tentatively.

"Oh, to one of the national defense labs around here?" I retorted, "I'm sure they'll know what to do with it."

Nic fetched a stick and prodded the body's "leg," leaving an imprint in the edematous tissue, which sluggishly returned to its natural shape. Otherwise, the body showed no response. The cilia wriggled and flopped in the grass, the mottled wet skin continued its inscrutable scrunchings. I was reminded of how a worm

writhes in your hand—not from fear, apparently, but due to an automatic chemical response to the salt of your sweat.

I drew in a deep breath and said what I'd been dreading. "Cut it up. Put it in a trash bag. Throw it in the dumpster they're gonna use for the shed. No one will notice it in there with all that debris."

This was only feasible because Jer still had his woodworking equipment, from before he sold all his free time to retail. Even though he hadn't been able to touch it for months, we had to beg him to use it. We promised to treat his tools gently, clean them, and reminded him this was the only way to keep our security deposit when we were forced out of this ridiculous house in a few months.

We dragged the body into the garage. It was cold and limp, though with an internal structure, as if it had bones. Our huffing and heaving elicited little response from the body's multifarious parts. The cilia retracted while the labyrinthine folds continued their aimless flapping. The skin sucked at our hands as impassively as it had slurped at the concrete.

Nor did it respond when we put it to the bandsaw, which chewed through the arms, the legs, the torso, with ease, tattering it to pieces. Inside, we found structure. Not like organs—no, the torso was solid all the way through. Just meat, or something meat-like, wrapped around wet, spongy rods. It oozed odorless pinkish juice, like steak drippings, which we had to mop off the concrete.

We stayed up late that night, cutting and cleaning. We sighed and mumbled, heaving those around wet, inscrutable chunks of matter. We told jokes in the

moments between the bandsaw's screeching barrages, such as, "Now we have practice for when we need to chop up a real corpse." Laughter was a poor plaster for that sick feeling, that we were craven beings working by the stark light of the old desk lamp, our bared teeth flashing, our glittering eyes reflecting each others' desperation.

In the darkest hours of the morning, we tied up the two garbage bags of parts and hid them in Nic's closet. Even then, we could see the imprints of tendrils searching the plastic. This continued into the following night, when we buried the garbage bags in the dumpster, amidst the rubble of the shed.

Bone tired, I laid down after the disposal, hoping to catch a full night's sleep for work tomorrow. No use. I circled restlessly over the thought of the body and what I wished I could've done. I imagined rolling it in a rug, carrying it to the car, and unrolling the rug into the river, where the body would fall in with a splash. I'd heave a sigh of relief and watch as it floated away, confused cilia finding their purpose at last with the stimulation of the current, the folds fluttering with joy until it disappeared, never to be seen again.

About the Author

Lyra Meurer is a sentient muscle spasm with a restless hunger for writing. They live in Colorado with their husband, pet rats, and ever growing stacks of journals and books. They have short fiction published in Night Terror Novels' anthology *This is Not a Horror Story*, *Twenty-two Twenty-eight*, and upcoming in *Cosmic Horror Monthly*. Lyra's contemplations on insect body horror, the things they find on sidewalks, disability, and other bizarre phenomena, along with pictures of their doodles, can be found at <https://lyrameurer.blogspot.com/>.



Super F*cking Queer

Paula Hammond's art was inspired by an article in Pink News which quoted Dr Sarah Taber's tree sex-ed 101: "Trees do not respect the human gender binary... the reason we have so much pollen is not landscaping, capitalism, or 'botanical sexism', it's just that trees are super f**king queer..."

Paula Hammond is a professional writer & digital artist based in London, England. Her fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and a British Science Fiction Association award. Her photography has featured in numerous magazines and non-fiction books. She reads too much and sleeps too little. Twitter: @writer_paula.

The February Fairies

Eve Morton

When Vanessa found out she was pregnant, she wanted to know the due date right away. She took the test at three in the morning after springing out of bed from a cryptic dream where a faceless woman led her through the woods. As the earth turned from black to brown, the woman's faceless figure turned and declared she was not alone.

"A baby for your future," she said. "And a babe is like a poem."

Vanessa ran her tongue along her gums. They were sore, like her breasts. Her period had been delayed. She took the test she had in her apartment, left by an old roommate and not thrown out for emergencies like this one.

Positive. Two single blue lines standing sentinel. *Positive.*

Vanessa felt below her navel, remembering a pagan chant from her youth spent dabbling in occult books. Her dream came to her in loose shards, potent with symbols. This was her axis mundi, the point of the world where all life began--and she needed to know the countdown the best she could.

Online charts and calculators, plus her doctor's scientific hand, all confirmed she would be having a baby in the middle of winter. February 18th. She thought of her mother's penchant for fairies that came out in February; the kind that she left bread, milk, and honey for on their doorsteps, since winter was long and cold and even these magic creatures needed help sometimes.

Vanessa left nothing on her own balcony, but the dream forest she'd been led through changed with the trimesters: from summer stalks of wild flowers to fall leaves covering the tree trunk's bases to the thick fragrant evergreens and snow-heavy boughs. Vanessa lived in that forest under the surface of her conscious mind with that faceless woman who had still not revealed herself. Her regular life evolved as it always would--jobs changed, the father avoided messages--and so Vanessa drew strength from the dream dictionaries that lined her shelves, notebooks she was filling with her own observations, and her dreams of the fairies' forest at night.

Soon after she selected a midwife, she ran into an old girlfriend.

"That's Audre Lorde's birthday," Barbara said when she told her due date over non-alcoholic drinks together. "And Toni Morrison's. Amy Tan. That's quite possibly the best day to be born."

Vanessa insisted any day would be the best day, since she could hold it all to herself and create something new out of time and space. She'd bought a blank leather book she could carve into her own grimoire, instead of the family Bible, and she'd started to draw her family tree to prepare. The child would have no father, only a mother; the child would be like Athena from a forehead or Adam from the earth.

Yet this news, especially as Vanessa read and devoured Audre Lorde's poems about her own babies, seemed fortuitous. Her child was no longer a myth, like the February fairies from her mother's stories, but real and strong and true--like the legacy of strong women born on the same date.

As Vanessa read more poems, the snow piled outside for her last month. She held her belly as the baby twisted and turned inside her own axis mundi. The gender was a surprise, but as she tangled through her dream woods, Vanessa knew the child would be a girl. There was no logic to the thought; only lines of spare poetry, and the feeling she felt when she looked at the earth covered with snow.

"Only ten percent of babies are born on their due dates," Barbara warned her whenever her optimism spilled over. She was a scientist now, and so she liked numbers and facts and figures. "It probably will not happen then."

"Someone has to be the ten percent."

"True. And we already are, so maybe the luck will continue." Barbara had recently read a study about the gay population being ten percent of the total. "But I don't think they know how to count us yet."

"Or Audre. Or Adrienne Rich. Susan Sontag..." Vanessa listed off other poets who were mothers, poets who loved women, but who had also been with men and created an entire world from those occasions. They became a fantasy class of people, real but not always seen. "Like the February fairies."

"What's that?" Barbara asked.

"Nothing. Just a nice story to think about."

On the morning of the 18th, Vanessa left out bread and milk on her apartment balcony. Barbara was still sleeping, so it was only the birds and the squirrels that

shared the bounty with her. She sipped her coffee. Felt a sudden flip from the child inside, and a burst from her centre.

"Oh." The gasp was its own poetic line, a caesura.

The pain would begin in an hour. She'd already devoured ten poems by then. And as she breathed and moaned her way into a new life, she remembered her dream from the night before. The forest was covered in snow, but a sudden flower had burst from the cold and frozen earth. The shadow of the woman who led her there turned around, revealing her face as a fairy. Then Vanessa could only speak in rhymed words she did not remember as her child tore out of her.

When her daughter was placed on her chest, Vanessa called her Audre. A familiar face, a familiar name--yet the tale was only at its beginning.

At home, the bread and milk for the offering was gone. While Barbara held Audre in her arms, Vanessa opened the first page of her leather-bound book.

She wrote the date. Her daughter's name. Then the dream poem's verses spilled from her, a gift to pass on to another generation, a gift from the one who had come before in Lorde, but also a gift from the fairies who were like them, and had served them both silently, most after all.

About the Author

Eve Morton is a writer living in Ontario, Canada. She teaches university and college classes on media studies, academic writing, and genre literature, among other topics. Her latest book is *The Serenity Nearby*, released in 2022 by *Sapphire Books*. Find more info on authormorton.wordpress.com.

Guest Rights

Kae Wilson

Tomas was not cursed, this was just the way he was. Of course, he didn't like being miserable, he didn't like always seeing the deaths of all around him without being able to see the good, but that was just the way of it and there was no use crying over it. Anyway, even if it had been a curse, who would bother to save him? He had lived with his Sight for over forty years, and he imagined he would live with it until his own death came for him.

It earned him no friends in the small village, but sometimes someone would come from far away to seek his help. Usually, it was some young folk who wanted to know if a great evil would befall them on their quest, or someone old and frail who wanted to see their end. Sometimes he saw a long life and a quiet death, and sometimes he saw terrors he had no words for, but he always told the truth of what he saw.

The man who arrived outside his cottage a week after his forty-third birthday was neither young nor old. He had bark-brown skin and his dark hair was pulled back with a strip of leather. The brass buttons on his coat caught the light as he jumped lightly from his horse, who neither moved nor complained at the sudden movement. There was something otherworldly about him, and his eyes were cold and green.

"The village is a little further on," Tomas said, hoping the man was just looking for directions.

The man raised his eyebrows. "And how do you know that it is the village I seek and not your Sight?"

"You're too old for adventuring, but too young to be wondering if your death is near," Tomas replied, bluntly. Then the man's eyebrows rose further, but one cheek dimpled in a slight smile.

"Perhaps I only ask for my guest rights?" he said, dimples deepening.

Tomas was suspicious of course—he'd been taught to be wary of half-Feys and the forms they took—but he could hardly turn away a guest, even one as strange as this.

He nodded for the man to follow him into the little cottage.



Three days and three nights the man stayed. He didn't give his name, so Tomas kept his to himself as well. No-one had seen a true Fey for over a hundred years, but their half offspring were just as dangerous and Tomas was a wary man.

They ate their food together and at night Tomas curled up in the corner while his guest took the bed. They did not touch, and Tomas found himself being extra careful: half-Fey or not, he did not want to see this stranger's death. In the evenings

his guest told such stories that even Tomas smiled once or twice, and on the fourth morning he would be sorry to see him leave.

“Three days and three nights and no questions asked,” the man commented over breakfast, “such strange customs you humans have.”

Tomas swallowed his fear along with a mouthful of tea.

“You are not human,” he said, softly.

“I am not,” the creature confirmed, sipping his own tea. “It is strange, this is the first time I have admitted that to a human, but I have found I have enjoyed your company very much.”

Tomas had never thought himself a coward before, for all that he had hidden himself and his Sight away all these years, but he knew himself for one now.

“I cannot—” he started “—I cannot stand to see your death.”

“Tomas,” the not-man replied, “I am Fey, and we do not die.”

Then he stepped around the table and pulled Tomas into a kiss, and Tomas saw no horror, no death of this strange creature that he had come to love; only the deep green of the forest, verdant and alive and forever.

About the Author

Kae Wilson currently resides in Paris, but has previously lived in London and Tokyo. Kae enjoys making clothes, cooking, and studying languages. Kae can be found on Twitter @kwilsonwrites

Answers Beyond Garden and Sky

Jenna Hanchey

How shall we answer the princess's question? A thousand butterflies launch in our chest as we hear it, taking flight at her curiosity, gently lifting. But soon, the fluttering spreads too far, pushing against the confines of our flesh. The pressure of a thousand wings, slightly off-kilter from one another, frantically beating, verging on hysterical. It is difficult to breathe.

We tug at the tight ring of lace about our neck, sitting straighter as if the building tension might exhaust itself through an expansion of vertebrae.

"Mother, did you hear? Why is the sky purple?"

"We heard, darling."

It would be simple to answer, "It is as the Father decreed."

We try, once, but the words stick in our throat.

We rise, now, expending energy in walking. Moving away from the popular parts of the Garden where all might hear toward the wooded shadows near the curving wall, where the plants grow wilder.

She follows, with some servants at a distance.

We turn to them. "Go to prepare supper in our chambers."

All leave except for Sadie, who has been with us since the beginning. Without whom we would never have survived the Melt. Without whom we simply would not

survive. We exchange a glance with her, and she shakes her head slightly, warning us, even as the warmth of her gaze fills our heart. We breathe deeply, restraining ourself.

We pause by the lone rosebush, blooming dainty and pink. While the princess inhales each individual blossom, we examine the thorns.

She knows the story, could tell it as well as we could. Better, even, since she has grown up knowing nothing else.

In the Beginning, the Father created Sky and Garden. And the Garden was dark and dank. Nothing grew there until the Father declared, "Let there be light." And the Father saw that the light was good. And the Garden began to produce, and the vegetables to multiply. And the Father saw that the Garden was good. And the Father made the Sky purple to signify His promise to his people: that they would never encounter the Melt again, because he would protect them.

Because before the Beginning was the Melt, when the heathens who walked outside scorned the fruits of the Earth, and the Earth so burned with anger that it melted all the ice in the world, flooding the ground and drowning the blasphemous.

But whosoever believed in Father was saved, because Father was the creator of the Garden, where Earth's final children might live safely indoors, free to eat and drink and multiply under the generator-produced light. And Father took three Queens to represent the three tenets of the Garden: the Queen of Obedience, the Queen of Order, and the Queen of Growth.

So, it was written. By Father, of course. So, it was told, obeyed, repeated, and planted in the minds of the children.

The butterflies now rage inside us, as if the remembrance of a past where they were solid and real is enough to work their spectral form into a frenzy.

We glance up at the purple of the grow lights lining the ceiling, and then look again at Sadie, our love. She knows how we will answer the princess's question, and we know she is terribly afraid, but she makes no motion to stop us. We pour our feelings into the barest smile, the most the Queen of Obedience can dare to show.

Kneeling, I make sure the princess sees my eyes and the weight of the implications they hold as I finally answer her.

"That, my darling, is not the sky."

About the Author

Jenna Hanchey is a critical/cultural communication professor by day and a speculative fiction writer by...um...earlier in the day. Her stories appear (or will) in *Nature*, *Martian Magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Apex's Patreon*, *Stupefying Stories*, and *Page & Spine*. Follow her adventures on Twitter (@jennahanchey) or at www.jennahanchey.com.



Elf

E.E. King is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist - She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals.

Death and the Gambler

Bryce Baron-Sips

The gambler I met when I was too young to understand. He had eager eyes and an easy demeanor, and nobody liked him for either. I saw him without his eyes, since he was too tall for me to look up at, and oftentimes I couldn't see his face whatsoever, since he wore a natty scarf over his nose and mouth, like a real bandit. He called for games like an old crooner that everyone thought was singing to them specifically. He'd lose to some pretty youngster at faro, then crush their parents' earnings into his pocket. Elderly people watched him on the street corner, smiling at the beneficent mischief of it all.

It came to pass that Death swept the streets in his tattered, well-loved clothes. He noticed the gambler was still out that night, leaning on the wall of a brick house beneath a single blinding streetlamp, and stopped to speak to him. When the gambler learned he had met Death, he shook his hand and clapped the other on Death's arm once, twice.

"You will bet?" asked Death, pulling out a deck of cards, not needing to remind him the wager would be his life. We took those kinds of things for granted back then.

"How about we play for this whole household of mine?" said the gambler, patting the wall he was resting against.

Death agreed, wholeheartedly. They played faro, and the gambler lost. Death said he would come to take his winnings tomorrow.

The day passed. The old people sat in their chairs and the young people hustled against the tide of rent increases, until one of them had to knock on the judge's door. When they didn't get an answer, they banged on the door, and when that got them no reply, they broke it down and found the judge and his entire family dead where they had been seated for breakfast. Everyone was outraged, and there was an inquest of course, but it was just one of those random little tragedies that come for us all.

When Death walked the streets that night, he saw the gambler in front of the judge's house again and stopped to meet him.

"You said the judge's house was your own!" cried Death.

"I didn't, I said 'of mine' with affection. We bet on that house, the one I patted," said the gambler, "Don't feel bad, I think great things will be coming. Progress is not made without some sacrifice; I've had my eye on the courts for quite some time."

"Well wager me *your* household," said Death.

"Alright. My house is the one past the new docks, down where the cold air leaks in like liquid nitrogen," said the gambler, pulling his scarf up and shivering as if to emphasize the point.

Death then pulled out a checkerboard. He was no good at chess, for he was not much of a strategist. They played and Death won, and he said he would come to take his winnings at dawn.

Dawn came and the young people were still drinking, and the old people were snoring through memories of their old parties, until one of the revelers had to knock on the brewster's door. When they didn't get an answer, they banged on the door, and when that didn't get them a reply, they broke it down, and found the brewster and her kid dead in their single bed. Everyone was quite worried, even though none of them had liked her very much. They jabbered over how horrible it was, how horrible their lives would become without their beer. The gambler nodded sympathetically and took their minds off the lack of drinks with another game.

When Death walked the streets that night, he saw the gambler against the wall again and stopped.

"You said you would give me *your* house!" Death cried.

"It is my house, but I do not live in it. I let that home, like many others, to the brewster, and I have my own apartment in the city center, said the gambler, checking his nails, "I'm only passing the time until I return."

"And how do you think you will fare," said Death. "When the living realize that you're a cheat?"

"If people choose to put themselves in my hands," said the gambler, "Then what does it matter if I make a fist and toss them out? It's perfectly natural, and very popular nowadays."

"Natural? I am Death! I am the most natural thing in the world!" the being cried. He gestured to his reaping costume to remind the gambler, who just smiled under his natty scarf.

"Dice then," said Death. He pulled out a pair and gave them a few rolls to show that they were fair.

"Wager?" asked the gambler.

"The first person who sees your corpse," Death said, "Which will be in about fifty years."

They played, and Death won, and he said he would take his winnings whenever it was convenient for him. The gambler nodded and turned to leave.

Then, with one imperceptible slit across his throat, Death cut down the gambler with his hand scythe. With one hand, he pulled the corpse all the way down to the gambler's house, the one down by the new docks, where he dumped it unceremoniously as soon as he crossed the threshold.

A few days, and then fifty years passed. Not one person had to knock on the door of the gambler, since he usually came to them to collect his debts. The young people forgot all about him and the old people called it the end of an era when his crooning ceased, but the city center was awfully far away, and so nobody bothered

to check up on him. At the fifty year mark a young speculator who had never met Death came to inspect the land, collapsed on the bones of the old gambler, and passed. And so Death walked the streets uninterrupted.

About the Author

Bryce Baron-Sips is a trans writer and ecology student from the Chicago area. He loves opera, fairytales (he insists on spelling it as one word), and hopes to study mycology. He has been published in *VIBE*, *deLuge Literary and Arts Journal*, *Wrongdoing Magazine*, and elsewhere. You can also find him on Twitter @bric_a_bryce.



Blue Iris Burning

Alexis Kaegi

Lightning struck the tallest trees of the woodland, and they caught quick, like burnt offerings on an altar of moss. Whichever storming divine took trunks for kindling left before their rains could put them out. The last time I went to Gamma's grove, she was ash and bone in a closed aspen casket, buried in the charred roots of her old god's trees.

She wouldn't have had it any other way. Her beliefs had always held fast, like a sticky sap that settles in the cracks of the floorboards or wedges deep under fingernails.

"You can always put your faith in the flowers," she once told me. "See how they return?"

She got real close to the blue irises out back and squinted, as if she saw some semblance of god in the stamen. Though I was named for those flowers, I could never see what she did. Maybe god was in the bees, I thought, or in the pollen of the bees. The honey the bees produced, the sweet sweet syrup we drizzled atop apples before crunching a bite. That, I reasoned, was divine.

"I saw god once," Gamma used to say. He was one of a dozen gods people worshipped in our little landlocked country, and I believed her. He made sure the forest grew, and it grew a lot so I knew he was strong. Auntie Jisa believed in a fire

goddess, but before the wildfire I'd never seen flames bigger than the hearth. Stone always kept it in check, and there was probably a god for that, too.

After the burial, I searched far and wide for the storm deity, but such a god did not exist. The northern lake goddess was the closest, but she would sooner drown me in grief than send forth a mighty storm on behalf of anyone. Auntie Jisa showed me her fire oracles, but they concerned themselves with bigger futures than the forest.

Still, they should have seen it coming.

Desperate for explanation, I hitched a ride to the eastern quarries on a winding hillside road. My rage ebbed with every mile traveled, and a deep anguish took over. I pushed the masons for answers, cried at their feet, anxious to know what the stone god preferred in tribute—or better yet, how I could more severely curse him for his deadly apathy. (Could earth not smother a flame?) But, as one young woman explained, the masons had long forgotten their god. They toiled in the earth, not in matters of the spirit. They believed in their hands. They believed in No One.

At home, I picked blue irises and whispered to every bee I passed. I gave my tributes and I buried my seeds and followed every doctrine Gamma had taught me. The forest faithful praised my devotion and told me that things would grow back to normal, they always did.

Auntie Jisa took me to see the seedlings that sprouted from the bleak woodland earth the following spring, but the god of my childhood wasn't there. Their dainty leaves fluttered under the barest of breaths, and I plucked their roots

from the earth with ease. The god Gamma saw had gone away, burned to ash, and as the years passed my faith did too.

Such a thought had once frightened me. I had sworn myself devout; to abandon belief invited only distress. For a while, honey lost its savor and rain its beauty, but the pain quietly dissipated over time. I didn't decide the twelve gods amounted to none so much as I settled on the prospect. Unease, at first, then relief. Where faith had given Gamma strength—and I believed it did—it had only brought me heartbreak. And so I drifted until I found my own solid ground: rich soil, ready for new roots.

I find I owe the old gods one final prayer of thanks. Because if it weren't for my desperate hunt, I never would have met her—the one fiery-haired mason who'd heard me out. When I returned to the eastern quarries, no longer a girl desperate for answers, her steady company allowed the last of my grief to burn away. She inhabited the hollow space within me that had smoldered in the years since the wildfire, where smoke had once risen like a beacon of need.

I believed again, this time in her hands, her embrace, her being.

Gamma would've loved her.

A hardened woman of the earth. Bright-eyed and free. And bound to No One.

No one, that was, but me.

About the Author

Alexis Kaegi is an author of speculative short stories, flash fiction, and a novella-in-progress. Uncommon adventurers take to the roads of her fantasy worlds, where water motifs often wash up all on their own. She has published fiction in *Deep Magic Magazine* and has a story forthcoming in *Abyss & Apex*. Alexis holds an MFA in popular fiction from the Stonecoast Writers Program and currently resides in Austin, Texas with her spouse and their excitable pup.



Queer House

Ashish Kumar Singh

There's a house at the end of the road, yes the one with large garden and a little red barn at the back which has been abandoned and has stayed liked that, like an injured ghost, for nearly sixty years. Last year when I went there with a boy I secretly liked, it was occupied, it almost seemed by the nature itself. On the stairs of the front porch, the vines looked not like actual vines but roots - brown and twisted like when one wrings a wet towel. It had crawled right through the front door as though they owned it. This python skirted through the hallway, spread all over the kitchen counter like a mother more concerned with dinner than checking whether the roof was still there or had been blown away by the last night storm. "But don't worry, sir is already there fixing the roofs" I almost said. We couldn't find anywhere to lie our bodies so we went upstairs, avoiding the whole time the green vines on the stairs because we were genuinely afraid they would scream if we stepped on them. To be honest they seemed more like children, running over one another to choose the best room for themselves but instead when we checked the rooms, they were happy and grappling each other on the floor. We found the bed, quite heavy with dust but we flipped the whole duvet and as soon as we got naked, we realized the children had stopped fighting and were staring, mouth half opened and eyes ready to fall out.

About the Author

Ashish Kumar Singh (he/him) is a queer poet from India and a post graduate student of English literature. Other than writing, he reads and sleeps extensively. Previously, his works have appeared -or are forthcoming- in *Chestnut Review*, *Mason Jar Press*, *Native Skin*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Tab Journal* and elsewhere. Twitter: @Ashish_stJude. Instagram: @ashish_the_reader



The Hollowness Between Ribs

L. P. Melling

I'm in the bath when I spot my missing part. Soapsuds clump and slowly scud across the bathwater's surface and reveal what lies below in throat-tightening clarity. Where my stomach was moments before is only a hole now: a gaping, funeral-dark lack of light and colour splayed across my ribs, running to the rims of my unloved handles and too-small breasts. I scoop palmfuls of frothed-white water over my eyes, rub them hard with my knuckles, but it changes nothing. It looks as if my innie belly button has been stretched out across my stomach, though the darkness is deep and oozing.

My hand strokes over the place where my stomach used to be and it feels as if it's still there, the familiar contours that fill me with discomfort. No matter how much I try my missing part can't be scrubbed clean and clear, and I have to look away.

I pull myself out of the water and towel myself off, wrap my body in cotton so no one can see it. Shaking, I run upstairs. Lock the bedroom door behind me, tears prickling my eyes and spotting my vision.

As my body grows, no matter the hot days, the invitations to pool parties and the beach, I refuse to ever show any skin beyond my oval face, my big feet, my freckled arms.

When I finally let in Jake, sweet Jake—not like the others, not that I know the others—I worry as the single bed sags and groans with our combined weight. After

draining bottle and bottle of teeth-achingly sweet alcohol, my body loosens up. I let him peel off my jumper and skinny jeans sticking to non-skinny thighs.

No, I want to leave it on, I tell him when his eyes and fingers pull on my bodysuit lingerie that's blinding white as my lack is blinding dark. He peels off my panties and kisses my moist, swelling lips, the first person that ever has. It feels a million places between wrong and right, between delight and depravity.

My breath snags as I spot his golden head disappearing underneath my bodysuit, his body following, pulled in, shoulders, to chest, to legs and ankles, until there is no more of him. Before I can stop it, he is sucked into the gravity well of my chest. Consumed by the hunger that lives inside me, that shames and destroys the moment like so many others.

It takes me years to let anyone else near me after that, to let anyone in. Boys and men try, and I block them off before they get too close—to the dirty truth, to their demise.

Until the summer day I meet Bina in the Groupon charcoal drawing class I signed up for and hardly ever went to. Turned out she didn't either, is as useless at it as I am but has a deep appreciation of shading and chiaroscuro.

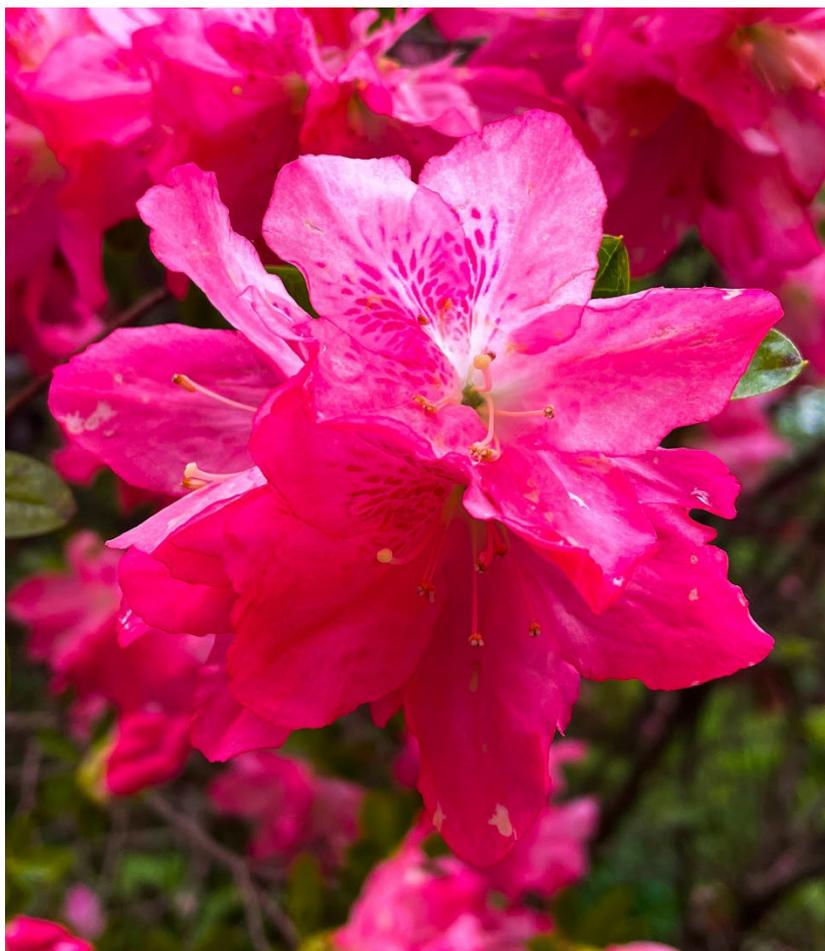
As leaves fall and turn to mulch, I let her in, slowly, section of skin by section of soft skin as we touch and kiss. The day comes to reveal all, of course it does, as it always was going to, when she asks if I want to take a bath together. I give her a hesitated nod, and she must read me as she takes her clothes off first, her body everything mine is not: sleek and slim and supple. And when she lifts up her top I

can only stare, stare into the nothingness that means everything as it fills with colour.

About the Author

L. P. Melling currently writes from the East of England, UK, after academia and a legal career took him around the country. His fiction appears in such places as *Dark Matter Magazine*, *Flame Tree Press*, *Best of British Science Fiction*, and *Best Indie Speculative Fiction*. When not writing, he works for a legal charity as a specialist adviser. You can find out more about him at his site: lpmelling.wordpress.com

Short Stories



In This Moment

Koji A. Dae

Susan and I had one of those instant romances. She worked three cubicles down from me at a low-end data entry farm. I found the work soothing. Names and numbers filled my head, leaving no room for daydreams. It kept me in the moment, and I barely needed to hook my feet beneath the bar on the specially-crafted desk my employer had ordered. But like most normal people, Susan had trouble staying focused for eight hours. On my first day in the office, she walked by my desk twelve times. Each time she smiled or nodded or winked or said "just stretching my legs" as if we were already friends.

My second day, she plopped a mug of hot water on my desk and held up three packs of instant coffee. "Hannah, right? I didn't know what you drink."

I took the blue packet in the middle. A 3-in-1: coffee, creamer, and sugar, ready to go. I dumped it into the mug and the small granules swirled in the water, turning it a light brown. The color of her eyes. I stirred, she watched. Something clicked between us. Trying to separate us after that would have been as futile as trying to get the coffee back out of the water.

After that, she perched on the edge of my desk more often than behind her computer. At first she babbled about herself. She was new in town. She'd grown up on a small farm an hour north with two sisters. Imagine that, three girls helping on the farm.

I could imagine it, as long as I didn't imagine Susan as a young girl. I imagined three generic girls right now, today, feeding chickens and plowing the land. It was a pleasant picture. I stared at Susan's small hands around her cup, imagining them caked with dark brown dirt. A flash of her smearing that dirt to my cheek and laughing made me jump. It was just a hiccup, but enough to make my body tense. I concentrated on my breath. In. Out. My butt settled back into my chair.

The next day she asked about me.

"You're one of them star-children, right?" She pointed to the underside of my desk.

Part of me had hoped she wouldn't notice the bar. That I could just be a normal colleague for once. But even my most inconspicuous harness was still visible beneath my suit jacket, so there was no use denying it.

She reached out and placed her hand on my shoulder. A bolt of electricity tingled through me, making my teeth clench and my breath come short. "You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to."

I hooked my toes beneath the bar and gripped the arms of my chair as flashes of my childhood filled my mind. "It's not that I don't want to. It's just difficult to talk about it and stay grounded."

She cocked her head to the side like one of those chickens from her farm. "I couldn't imagine not being able to daydream. I live in my imagination."

I sighed and concentrated on now. The feel of the keys under my fingers. The click when I pressed. The soft glow of my monitor. The silk of my stockings rubbing against each other. My heart racing. The pain when I bit my lip, trying not to think about the way her hips swayed as she walked away.



Another day, another visit from Susan. She told me she didn't mind data entry. Problem was she wasn't particularly fast, and since our bonuses were tied to keystrokes, she didn't expect to make good money. Still, it paid the bills and let her pursue her real dream.

I stopped typing, picked up the mug she'd brought, my coffee of choice already dissolved in the hot water. "What's your real dream?"

Her smile was too wide for her slender face, but her eyes shone like two little diamonds. "I'm a sculptor. I can show you sometime. Thursday evening? If you're free."

She placed a hand on mine. Hers was rough and chapped — the hand of a farm girl turned sculptor.

I swallowed. "Sure."

Keys and letters and the centimeter movement of my fingertips were no longer enough to hold me in place. My mind kept drifting back to the way her lips had curled around 'Thursday'. Or it raced ahead, wondering what it would be like to put our coats on side by side and head into the darkness of winter, close enough to

hold hands. I ached to feel her callouses again. I imagined seeing her statues and loving them. What if I hated them?

My stomach knotted as I realized I could see down into the cubicle next to mine. I shoved my toes beneath the edge of my desk and yanked, concentrating on the strain of the tiniest muscles in my feet.

When I made it back to my seat, I pulled out my tethers. I hadn't needed them in years, but a star-child always carries a set. I hooked the carabiners through the loops in my harness, attached the other ends to four eye-bolts sticking up from the metal plate below my chair, and cinched them down tight. Straining against them was uncomfortable, but there was nothing to be done about it. Better safe than bouncing off the ceiling.



Thursday evening, the windows were already dark and most of our colleagues had left by the time Susan sauntered to my desk. Watching the smirkish curve of her lips and swaying of her hips, I wasn't sure the webbing and steel would hold me down. She turned me into fear and anticipation — emotions about the future.

But as I looked up into soft eyes, I sank into my chair. There was nothing to think of beyond her, here and now.

The streets glistened with the day's rainfall. The sleeve of her olive green parka brushed my black leather jacket. Our heels clicked out of step on the pavement like a heartbeat with an extra murmur.

She lived just a few blocks from work in a real artist's loft, on the top floor of an office building: exposed concrete and a wooden platform with an unmade bed over a tiny kitchen. Scraps of metal and half-completed projects filled the cool room.

"Great space, but heating is..." She shrugged, pulled open the refrigerator, and offered me a beer.

I wandered through her wonderland of rust and joints. My hand reached out to touch this and that, but always hovered millimeters away.

She watched me as I moved, and I liked her eyes on me. Her gaze wasn't heavy with expectation. Instead, it tickled with amusement.

"Come here. I want to show you something." She took my hand and led me to the far corner, where floodlights surrounded a giant head, mouth open, eyes shut, nose perfect. As I neared, I noticed the head, which was taller than me, was composed of tiny scraps of metal welded together. A fountain of curling metal poured from its wide, open mouth.

"It's beautiful."

"Watch this." She picked up a bucket of water and mounted a ladder at the rear of the statue. She poured the bucket in, a trickle at first, then all at once. The

water rushed out the mouth, clinging to the dark metal, and landed on four plates at my feet, plinking out resonant notes. As the water sped up, all four plates sounded at once, creating a hum that shook me to my core. Then the bucket was gone and the sound stopped.

I stared at Susan, waiting for my reaction like a proud kindergartner holding up her finger painting. I shook my head. There was nothing to say.

She clapped her hands. "I want to sculpt you."

I let out a bark that could barely be called a laugh.

"See, that laugh! It's amazing. There's something to you, and I want to capture it. Please."

I said yes, not because I thought I was worth sculpting, but because it meant I would spend more time with her.

Thinking about those long nights to come, I grew light. I left the ground. The rough metal was out of reach before I could grab hold. A squeak left my throat, but then Susan wrapped her strong hands around my calves, pulled me down, and held me to her chest. "I've got you."

Her lips were smooth. Her mouth, soft and warm. She smelled of black pepper and honey.

After we made love, I admitted it was my first time. "It's hard to date," I told her. "At some point, couples start thinking about the future or arguing about the past."

"Not me." She shook her head with a ferocity I didn't expect. "My partners are always telling me I'm too wrapped up in the now. Never thinking about the future."

"You'd be surprised how much time you spend thinking about other times," I said.

"Not when I'm working." She tapped her temple. "When I get a sculpture up here, nothing else exists until it's out. I can forget to eat or sleep. There's no tomorrow in an obsession like that."

"I wish I had that kind of obsession." I stared at her dark ceiling, tracing the lines of the concrete slabs with my gaze. "I constantly have to remind myself to be here now. It doesn't matter if my brain wants to daydream. It isn't safe."

"I loved my childhood." She stroked the outside of my thigh with her short, chipped nails. She looked around the large room. Assessed the height up to the ceiling. "Go ahead. Talk about yours. I'll bring you back down."

I scoffed. "I'd need a tether."

She kissed my ear. "The windows are closed. The ceiling is concrete. I'll be your tether."

I took a deep breath. I didn't even know where to start. "My Grandpa never called me a star-child. He said I had a shimmer, and he was the first one to notice it. Said it was in my laugh, like the tinkling of a bell."

I laughed. Susan's arms wrapped gently around the small of my back, giving me just enough space to float away from her.

"Keep going," she whispered, taking her hands off my skin so I was suspended in the cold, dark air.

"Well, you know how it happens, right? Most souls burn off their celestial garbage during entry into Earth's atmosphere. But every so often, the stardust is stubborn. You've got to be careful with a star-child. Their stardust wants to get back home. It yanks and pulls, trying to reunite with the sky. Turn your back, and your toddler might float on up to the Big Bear or Andromeda. It clings to the soul and tries to take it back into the universe." Speaking in generalities, I fell until I bumped against her naked body and rolled to the side.

She threw a sheet over me. "Afraid to go higher?"

"Yes." I kissed her.



After the first few times, she welded a mesh of wire over the windows to keep me safe.

We spent most nights together, enthralled with our new passion. We'd eat dinner and make love until we were both exhausted. Floating on that post-sex high, I'd tell her about my childhood.

She kept a sketchpad next to her bed to draw me as I floated above her, drifting further from her arms with each tale.

I told her how Grandpa liked to throw me up high so my shimmer could catch the sunlight. But he always caught me and brought me to the safety of his big chest. Always. He had smelled of tobacco and pepper. A bit like her.

I told her about the school where, for the first time, I met other shimmery children, each with their own harnesses and tethers. How we learned reading and writing and arithmetic, like kids at ordinary schools. But while other kids pondered what they wanted to be when they grew up, we learned to breathe in every scent, drink in every sight, and exist completely in the now.

I let myself ponder the way we spent our days clipped to ropes strung about the building, staring wistfully at the older, rope-free kids who had mastered their meditations. Envy inevitably gave way to daydreams of the day I'd be able to walk the world without a tether. As my mind wandered, my toes would leave the ground, and then my teacher would pull me back to my giggling classmates with a sharp tug.

I relished in the memory of testing my control as a pre-teen. Thinking about tomorrow's lunch was enough to give us a boost while running after our friends during a game of tag. Lighter and lighter, then, "You're it!" or too much momentum and you're spinning off into the school yard. The tethers were longer in those years, and our teachers made us get ourselves down, pulling hand over hand until our feet were on the ground.

By the time we graduated from the tethers, I could look at the little first-graders watching us wistfully without remembering my own longing. I was serious enough to keep my mind on the now and my feet on the ground.

Yet somehow Susan dissolved all that discipline. She captivated me. The way she bent over her sketchpad, a few thick curls finding their way out of her ponytail and across her face. The way she brushed them back and smiled at me, as if we understood something the curls didn't. What did we understand? I wasn't sure, but it was ours.

Weeks passed, chatting and sketching. As time went on, I neared the ceiling, and her pencil became slower. She set down her drawings and spent more time staring at me.

When I floated out of her reach, she brought me back down with words. "Hannah, you're here in my room. Tell me what I look like."

I described the mole on her left hip. The curve of her smile. I told her that her hair was greasy and she could probably use a shower. As I talked about her in the moment, I returned to her. Always safe in her arms.



Some nights we wandered her studio. I liked her sculptures. They were heavy. Solid. They could hold me down. I liked the weight of her. Her wide hips and thick thighs could pin me.

Eventually she started talking about the future. We'd make love and lay tangled in the sheets, sweaty and hot. She'd get that glint in her eye, lean close to my ear, and whisper the things she wanted to do to me until I lifted off the bed and floated above her.

She spent hours talking about our wedding. The purple flowers, our dresses—mine floor length because I was shy, hers short to show off her voluptuous thighs.

She pinned me to the ceiling with descriptions of our children—two carried by me, one by her. "By then they'll have perfected the technique of combining eggs. Genetically they'll be just yours and mine. Three little girls. What will we name them?"

The first I saw as a baby, wrapped in a blanket, snuggled in Susan's arms. "Rebecca."

My head hit against the ceiling, and I couldn't pull it away.

"Christine." I saw her as a five-year-old, curls as thick and dark as Susan's, but eyes blue like mine. Her image pinned my spine, leaving only my arms and legs free to float.

"And the third?" Susan giggled.

"Stop it," I said. My breath came fast, and I tried to push myself off the ceiling, back to her arms, but the pull was too strong. I was living in that future of hers.

She sat up in bed and pulled her knees to her chest. "What would we call the third?"

"Avery." Avery was a teen with red hair and freckles. Where did the freckles come from? I wasn't sure. But in my mind she was floating up and away. Like me.

The force from the universe pulled stronger than it ever had, as if I was a coin and it was a vacuum cleaner sucking me up. Would the ceiling hold me? Or would I break through? Tears dripped from my eyes and wet the ceiling around my ears.

"Please," I whispered, shutting my eyes against the sight of Susan's tiny body and the far off bed.

"Hannah. You are in my room. The concrete ceiling is cold against your back. Feel that? It's cold. Rough in some places and smooth in others."

The concrete was cold against my naked back. Little dots dug into my skin in places, but most of it was smooth. The pressure of the vacuum eased enough for me to wiggle against it.

"You're in my room, and I'm staring up at you."

The cool air replaced the cold of the concrete as I sunk to her.

"The bed's a mess. Our dinner is still in the kitchen. Can you smell the maple bacon?"

I inhaled the faintest hint of sweet meat. I smiled, relaxing.

Her fingertips brushed my shoulders, grasped, and pulled me into her arms. Her dark eyes held me as tightly as her body. "Hannah, you're in my room. I'm here, and I love you."

She kissed me soft on the mouth and I whimpered.

I snuggled against her warmth and pulled a sheet over us. "It's frightening when I float off like that. You don't understand how strong the pull can be."

"You're beautiful up there, pinned out like a butterfly. Your hair all around you. I love watching you like that. I just want to capture these moments with you forever."



For the first time in my life, I was living in the possibilities of futures, and yet I never saw the reality coming. Looking back, I can pinpoint the warning signs. The first hint was when I found her sketchpad open on the bedside table one morning. She had drawn me while I slept, and her paper was filled with images of me.

Flattering? Yes. But if I had seen it for what it was... she was dissecting me. She pulled apart this and that of me to preserve for future use.

Then she started sculpting again. She had stopped when we first started dating. But in those last weeks, she always had a bit of metal in her hand. She twisted and measured them, holding them up to the light as if trying to see how the universe fit around them. She stopped going to work, instead hiding away for hours in the back corner, sparks flying over a small wall.

"Don't come back here," she warned me when I tried to find her one morning. "I want it to be a surprise."

I stayed away, but how I missed her. I longed for her touch and sweet words. I wanted her to fly me to the ceiling and pin me with promises. But that's the thing about artists: they no longer need your body once they've understood your soul.

One day, on my way to work, my mind wandered to the way her fingers had curled around my shoulder and trailed across my stomach. I drifted off the sidewalk and had to grab the collar of a random person, jerking him off his feet to find my place on the ground. The embarrassment was enough to keep me in the moment, for that day. But as each day passed, she spent more time with her construction of me, and I spent more time living in our memories.

I strapped weights to my ankles. Thighs. Belly. I kept a rubber band around my wrist to snap me back to now. This only served to bring back memories of my childhood—the feeling of safety at school or Grandpa's arms grabbing me from the sky. I flitted away so often, I was afraid to leave the containment of Susan's loft.

Pinned against her ceiling, I looked down over her partition and saw her hunched over her sculpture, torch in hand, mask covering her face as she fired pieces into her impression of me. The slope of her back, even beneath her coveralls, made me relive the way we fit together like a puzzle. In bed. Watching movies on her couch. Feet brushing beneath the breakfast table.

I tried calling down to her, but she had shoved earbuds in to drown out the world. To drown out me. It was just as she had promised. She was lost in the moment, and I was lost in memories and hopes.

I wasted away against her ceiling as my anxious mind cranked around the things I had missed. Her warning had been clear, but I hadn't believed her. She'd pushed me into the future, but she'd always stayed in the moment. Staring up at me. Drinking me in. Living in the here and now of my body while she sent my mind to new worlds. Now I couldn't get down to eat, and she lived too deeply in sparks and steel to call me to a plate of eggs or a glass of water. I tried to employ the simple techniques my teachers had taught me. Find a feeling. A scent. A color. Describe the moment. But my brain scattered, remembering all the moments I had soaked up to keep myself tethered in the past.

The thirst was agonizing. Not for water, but for her. Just one touch from her strong hands, and I'd be revived. Forget the days that passed. The nights spent in semi-slumber. I would return with one drink of her lips. But she didn't look up, and my ankles grew so thin that the weights slipped off. My legs strained against the concrete. I tried to look at her as she was in the moment, but all I saw was her smile above me or her closed eyes beneath me during the throws of ecstasy.

"There!" she called. She stood and removed her mask. She ran her fingers over the sculpture. From above, all I saw was a flat plate of metal hooked and bonded together. Her sculpture's ceiling. But her attention was beneath it, on what she thought of me. Her touch was tender but possessive. How I wanted it on me! Sweat and grime smudged her face. She looked around. "Hannah?"

Her gaze flitted to the kitchen and then the loft.

I screamed at her, my parched throat hissing silence.

Finally, she looked up at the ceiling.

"Baby," her voice shook, her brows knitted. "Oh baby! What happened?"

I tried to explain. But my lips cracked and no sound passed them. My brain replayed the way she had cast me off in favor of her idol. Waves of anger and grief pushed me further into the concrete.

Her eyes went wide with panic. "Right. Here and now. You can come down to me baby. Listen to my voice. I'm here and I'm now. Feel my love."

I tried to lose myself in her, but all I could find were kisses she had given me and fear for the future. For the next time she'd abandon me.

You said you'd keep me safe! My heart tattooed my anger against my chest. It swelled until I was back in her bed, in that moment when she made promises she couldn't keep. Behind me, the concrete moaned against the pressure of my body.

"No, no, no!" She paced back and forth below me, glanced around her studio as if looking for something to pull me down with. "Can't you smell the burned metal? It's almost sweet. You smell it, right?"

I inhaled, but only smelled concrete. It reminded me of hot summer days, tethered in the school yard.

"Hannah, you can't leave me. Everyone leaves me. But not you. We're going to have children. Hannah!"

I tried to call out to her — to make her understand I didn't want to leave her — but only a croak escaped my parched lips. She'd think I was like all her other lovers, who hadn't understood her obsession enough to stay. I imagined her pain, extending out for months into the future. Her guilt and grief would be as deep as her passion had been. The past and potential futures ripped me in two directions.

A crack sounded behind me like the chipping of a tooth on a walnut shell — unexpected and sickening.

"Hannah. Concentrate on my face. My arms. I'm waiting right now for you to come down to me.

The crack turned to crumbling, and the ceiling gave out.

Up and up, I flew into azure blue. Susan became a speck beneath me, and as she faded from sight, I let her fade from my mind.

The future invaded me. What would happen as the air got thinner? Would I continue out into space? Would I go on forever?

Would it hurt?

About the Author

Koji A. Dae is a queer American writer living in Bulgaria. She has work published with *Clarkesworld* and *Zooscape* and forthcoming with *Apex Magazine*. When not writing... who are we kidding? She's always writing.



Shelter

Leah Gharbaharan is a graphic designer and illustrator working in Cape Town. Using both traditional and digital media, her illustrative work draws on the natural world and expresses her interest in disruption and patterns of change. Her work can be found on Instagram @schism.art.

Enflamed: Lust in the Los Angeles Riots

Wynward H. Oliver

I only contracted two STDs in my life. The first time, I had crabs. Thanks to the guidance of my fag mother Roman, I was able to handle that social disease without a trip to the free clinic. As instructed, I shaved my bush and balls and then poured an entire bottle of Campho Phenique over my groin to suffocate those pesky crustaceans.

The next time, a beefy eighteen-year-old named Julio, who wore a thick chrome cock ring and no undies under his distressed jeans, gave me gonorrhoea in the spring of 1992. We'd met each other at Circus Disco one Friday night. Soon after I'd entered the club, I spied Julio standing in the shadows next to the thumping speakers. I liked what I could see, and his seductive demeanor made it clear that he'd found what he was looking for in me.

I approached him, introduced myself, and asked if he wanted to dance. He replied that he had to get going, which was odd because it was only twelve past ten.

I instantly became aloof, but Julio insisted we exchange numbers. Then to convince me that he was serious about seeing me again, he worked my hand into the rip on the upper thigh of his dungarees, crouched just enough to loosen the denim's grip on his groin, and enticed me to snake my hand up to reach his girthy, uncut cock.

iAy, Dios mío! I didn't wash that hand for days.

Yet it took twelve days of missed calls and answering machine messages to set up an actual date. So, naturally, I leapt at Julio's invitation to finally visit him in his sparsely furnished studio apartment in Hollywood, even though it also happened to be the second night of the L.A. riots.

I was so turned on by this newcomer to the club scene that not even social unrest was going to deter me from claiming my next sexual conquest. Accordingly, I engaged in my own egotistical act of civil disobedience and blithely broke the citywide nighttime curfew that was being imposed. It pains me to admit it, but at that time, twenty-four-year-old Wynward stood in solidarity with little else than his penis.

It turned out that Julio's caginess about hooking up with me and his early departure from Circus the night we met were because he had a boyfriend. On the night we finally got together, though, his lover was stuck on the other side of town dutifully obeying the dusk-to-dawn lockdown. Of course, that didn't stop the boyfriend from calling in the midst of our tryst. For ninety minutes, I waited quietly while Julio chatted with his man and then proceeded to have phone sex with him! To my eventual relief, Julio performed a false orgasm and slyly saved his nutt for me.

Meanwhile, I was watching the news as the city was burned, trashed, and looted. I wondered how I was ever going to make it home when I had to pass right by the Korean supermarket next to my apartment building with its take-no-prisoners Asian owners protecting their livelihood with automatic weapons poised as they patrolled their grocery store rooftop.

I could empathize with the Korean sharpshooters because, the night before, I'd been on the roof of my own apartment building with Charity and Hunt using the top-floor hallway firehose to wet down the brick edifice. We could see small fires all around, and there was no way the fire department could attend to each one. We were on our own, and the uncertainty was terrifying. Charity had already chained closed the grand Art Deco glass doors of our building.

As I surveyed the distressing view from above the twelfth story, I said a silent prayer that God would at least spare Circus Disco from that night of destruction. It was only Wednesday. I figured Mayor Tom had a full forty-eight hours to get this uprising in line so I could be safely in line at the club by Friday night. I had my priorities, and they weren't straight, in any context, at all.

Six nights later, when the burnings had ceased, I was again on my own when my burning dickhead alerted me that something was wrong. I was too embarrassed to confess another STD to Mama Roman. I certainly couldn't turn to my hypochondriacal best friend Que for advice or comfort. He'd merely self-misdiagnose a case of the clap for his own wiener and wig out for weeks on end.

Besides, Que was already beside himself with anger and anguish over the riots and the injustice that precipitated them, plenty of which he'd personally experienced throughout his life. I understood the situation and the circumstances much better after Quentin explained them to me. I also decided not to tell him about breaking curfew. I felt guilty enough as it was.

After work the next day, I skipped the gym (a gay cardinal sin, if there ever was one) and zoomed to the Gay and Lesbian Center to get tested. The bloodwork

and throat culture were easy, but the swab inserted into my peehole wasn't fun. Sounding is not my style.

Then, when the medical assistant wanted to also swab my buttock, I resisted. "That's not necessary. No one ever goes near my ass."

But apparently, *he* did if I wanted him to submit any of my tests to the lab. So I ceased my proctological protest and bent over to spread my cheeks.

I waited in the hallway as my syphilis test was analyzed. Thankfully, it was negative, but it'd be at least ninety-six hours before I received my other STD results. Then the doctor on duty proactively gave a *puta* like me antibiotics for gonorrhea and chlamydia that would cure me in a few days, just in case. He also assured me that a positive diagnosis wouldn't permanently harm my immune system and that kissing was still okay.

I took that as a free pass. I zoomed home and changed into some overalls with no shirt and with one strap unhooked and dangling by my sizzling crotch. Since I worked Monday through Friday, I rarely attended Circus on Tuesday nights; which, along with Fridays, were Circus's only two gay Latino nights. Nevertheless, I was at the club in no time, celebrating their reopening after the riots and dancing my white-hot woes away.

That was also the night my Plymouth Scamp's trunk was broken into—yet again—but all they got this time was my gym bag with a towel and an unwashed jock inside. I knew they'd be back for more the next time I went to the club, and I fantasied about filling the Scamp's boot to the brim with a bevy of stinky straps to mask a pure white cobra hissing between the pissy cups and ready to strike. That, or

I could simply cease parking on the seedy side street of Malbecco and just pay the two bucks it cost to park in Circus's secured lot.

Adding to the sick serendipity of it all, I'd already been at the Gay and Lesbian Center the morning *before* my STD test to get the results of my sixth HIV test. Miraculously, I'd once again tested negative, but the twelve-day waiting period for my HIV results was always agonizing. Before that test, I'd pre-counted that I'd had at least thirty-six different sexual partners in the previous six months because I knew the Center always asked for a number. (My goal while single was a minimum of one new score per week. Second dates and regular fuck buddies didn't count toward my tomcat tally.)

My biggest concern wasn't my health, however. If I ever tested HIV-positive, I worried more about how the hell I'd tell my litany of previous partners that I might've infected them—or that they might've infected me. Not the campiest of conversations, to be sure—especially when the guy on the other end of the line assumes it's a routine booty call.

Of course, no one ever performed that type of onerous courtesy call for me. I had to find out for myself that I had the flame because Julio told me nothing. Instead, it was smug Sancho who revealed to me after the fact that Julio was a notorious Santa Monica Blvd. rent boy, who had an unwitting boyfriend to boot!

Wha-da-fuh?! Apparently, I wasn't as street smart as I'd presumed myself to be, and for the six-hundredth time I vowed to play with my priorities better.

Then I shit wax again when my STD test came back positive for a gonorrheal infection in my throat *and* my ass. *How could that be?* The only thing Julio and I did

that night was 69. We never even kissed, although I did suck his hairy *sobacos*. I've called the boy ZaSu Pitts ever since. But his hustler's mouth and horse dick never went near my back door, and I simply would not entertain the fact that *I* was the one who'd somehow given the gonorrhoea to that gigolo.

It wasn't until I was swallowing my last antibiotic pill when I remembered that sometimes before inserting a makeshift man-pon up my butt, I slob it up good to add some soothing moisture to my itchy arse. Bloody buggery bollocks! I must've cross-contaminated my own bunghole with my very own STD-laced saliva!

Right after I was diagnosed, I called Julio to inform him I had gonorrhoea in my throat. I wasn't about to complicate the conversation by talking about my infected ass. But this wasn't a courtesy call; it was an accusation. While I was at it, I also mentioned that several friends from the club had remarked that they saw him often walking the streets of WeHo.

When Julio immediately exclaimed, "I'm not a hustler!" I had all the proof I needed.

After our first night together, I never expected to see Julio again and certainly not after my venereal disease and streetwalker insinuations. Yet he did call me several times in the ensuing months looking for another rendezvous. I didn't dare accept his invitations, but I was thoroughly flattered that the prostitute with the dick of death (and drip) was willing to give Wynward another free ride.

About the Author

Wynward H. Oliver is a gay writer of color and retired educator living in Los Angeles with his husband of twenty-seven years and their two adorable doggies. His work has been published internationally in *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Wicked Gay Ways*, *Handwritten and Co.*, *Queerlings*, and *with confetti*. Wyn's memoir, *Homo-Work*, is nearing completion. For more stories, visit Wyn's blog WynwardOliver.wordpress.com and follow him on Twitter @WynwardOliver. You can also contact Wyn via email at hextor@att.net.



Judgement

Rachel Handley

"Everyone has to be judged" I said.

"I don't understand" Sara said. Our mentor walked ahead of us, unaware that we'd stopped.

"You will" I said. Her muddy hand on my dress.

"Sorry" she said.

Silence.

"I just don't get it; why be judged at all?"

Silence.

I already knew that my silence would cause her to frown. Her eyes would widen in disbelief at my refusal to explain the very thing we were both soon to endure. Finally, her lips would pinch when she realised that I was determined not to answer her at all. I lifted my foot up to clean it, mud had clung to my toes and started to travel towards my ankles in the short time we'd stopped to talk. I scraped off the mud with my fingers, flicking it to the ground.

"You won't even explain it a little bit?" she said.

"She doesn't have to explain anything to you," said our mentor. His face was plum red, a result of many days battling the cold wind. He walked towards us with such force that he only made it a few feet before he started to sink into the mud.

Walking lightly was the only way to travel this path safely and in his irritation, he had forgotten this. I always thought he was a fool, and this confirmed it. I smiled. He closed his eyes, sighed, and pulled on his legs with his arms but this only made him sink further still.

"Help me. Jesus. Don't just watch me!"

She moved toward him first, then I followed. We each grabbed an arm. The mud squelched and popped as it released his feet and we all fell back. He wiped his feet then stood up slowly and walked ahead. We'd sunk into the mud by helping him.

"Come on!" he said, not looking back, his pace slowed as the path grew steeper. I wondered what would happen if anyone was late for their Judgement.

I saw the mountain looming in the sky like a child's cry. Its body was thin and uniform. It had once been thicker, steadier, but the mentors had sculpted it for their own purpose. It reminded me of a thumb cut off at the nail. They'd chopped off the peak a millennia ago. A metal sheet had been placed over the wound. The plateau's floor was cold to the touch and dangerous to tread on if you had too much mud on your feet.

I did not relish the Judgement, but I was confident in my ability. I had won the last two rounds, and this one was my third, and final, test. Sometimes, if my rival is new, they don't understand that the Judgement is a series of tests. They just freak out instead and get picked off that way. I have one final competitor. If I win this last round, my mentor said, I could return to earth. It made me nervous. If *she* succeeded

in this test instead of me, despite it being her first time, she would return, and I would die. My soul would be extinguished. The threads of myself would sparkle briefly, then dissipate into the chasm below the plateau. If I won, she would die but I would live once more, finally having succeeded in enough trials to merit rebirth into the world with a new shape; a new body, fresh life.

What my previous competitors didn't understand is that the Judgement's tests do not start once you reach the plateau, they don't even start as you tread the path to it. They start once your mind enters limbo. When I first came here, I woke up in a small room with no furniture, the walls and floor were both blue. The light was artificial, but I couldn't see its source, there were no windows. There was a door painted the same colour as the walls, so it could only be made out by the doorknob. There were people in the room, three scared blank people who looked at me with no recognition. Each of them was sat on the floor and had claimed a corner of the room as their own. They put their hands on their heads in unison and I copied them.

I stared at the people like they were ornaments until the camouflaged door opened and my mentor came in. He stood in the doorway and looked at each of the women. He looked at me last and sat next to me. He told me my name but not his own. He asked me if I accepted my name. The phrase struck me as odd, how can I accept my name, doesn't it already belong to me? But I nodded anyway. He came back a little later with a white dress, my name was stitched horizontally in delicate red letters up the bodice. As I put on my dress, he asked one of the women in the corner about her name.

She jumped up quickly and ran at him, hands outstretched, yelling. I couldn't make out what she said. He struck her hard on the temple and she stumbled back into the corner where she'd been sitting. He crouched toward her, and it looked like he was drawing something on her, I couldn't make it out, his body was blocking hers. I saw the others look away, so I copied them. Her body flopped with a dull weight as he removed her. I looked up long enough to see her limp feet and the door slam shut.

My mentor returned a few minutes later. He sat next to me telling me small things about my life. He told me the first memory I'd be able to recall would be of my death. I don't know if they've designed it this way or not, but remembering your death first, before anything else, detaches you from yourself. My mentor explained that my detachment was meant to ready me for the tests, for the ultimate judgement of life. I asked him how I should prepare, and he told me I couldn't.

"You still haven't explained" she said, nudging me in the ribs with her elbow.

She looked at me, blinking rapidly. I hoped she wasn't going to cry because I had no idea how to respond to it.

"What?" I said.

"The Judgement. How do I pass?"

"You've been told the same information I have" I said.

I looked at the symbols on my wrists. My mentor drew them on my arms before we went on our first walk to the plateau. He told me they were important for

the Judgement. I asked him why, but he turned away quickly and walked out of the blue door.

"I know, but you've succeeded before! It would be nice to get some tips, you know. My mentor told me nothing" she said.

I nodded. I understood this. I had already watched two souls be examined by the Judgement. I had watched them jump from the plateau and fall. As their souls fractured, they produced a flurry of lights, a flickering rainbow in the deep dark of the chasm at the edge of the mountain. She saw me looking at the symbols and held out her wrist to me.

"And what even are these? What the hell do they mean?" she said.

"They are neces-"

"Necessary for the ritual, yes. I know. You've said. He's said. You've been here too long; you're starting to sound like one of them."

I didn't respond and focused on the motion of my feet. She didn't understand. She couldn't, she was a first timer.

"You've done this twice already. You must know something about doing well. We are the same person for god's sake, you need to help me!" she said.

"We are not the same" I watched her familiar frown.

"We are!"

"We're not. We shared the same life on earth, but once our soul split after death, we became four different people" I said.

"I just don't get it" she said.

"It's simple. Everyone's soul is made up of parts; sometimes they work well together during their life on earth, sometimes they don't. When we die those parts are split up and tested. Some people have a few soul-parts, others have many. We have four" I said.

"You said we!"

I waved my hand in dismissal, "you and me are the last two parts of our soul, of Sara's soul, I should say. After the Judgement only one of us, the best part, will ascend to earth. The other will fall and burn."

'It frightens me" she said.

'It should' I said.

We walked along the rest of the path in silence, both watching our feet as we walked. Once we reached the plateau our mentor checked the symbols on our wrists. The symbols, he said, were used to make the end as painless as possible, but I knew this was false. I have no nerves anymore, no flesh, no bones to crack. The body I can see, my feet, the mud around my toenails, it is just a projection. There is no flesh left to hurt. Anything designed to mask pain would have to mask fear, and I had that already, it wasn't going anywhere. The symbols were useless to me.

My feet slapped the metal floor of the plateau, the shine from the sun was dim now, sunset was approaching and the glare from the metal wasn't too sharp. We stood a few feet apart. My toes wrapped around the edge as I looked at the chasm below. Vertical white rocks polished smooth surrounded the chasm like old teeth. I wondered how much more I'd see if I jumped. During the previous tests I couldn't see much. I've never jumped into the chasm, so I've only seen the rocks lit by the flickering of a soul as they've fallen.

I waited. My mentor's footsteps measured the seconds. Sometimes new souls think they have to jump. I thought so once, on my first test, but I hesitated. Every time I've passed a test it's because my counterpart jumped first. I waited for her to do the same. She looked at me for a while. I wondered if I should say a few comforting words to her, but I stopped myself. It wouldn't do any good. I watched her mouth curl as she looked forward. Small chunks of dried mud fell silently onto the metal floor as she jumped into the chasm. I heard the footsteps behind me stop and I turned to look at my mentor.

He was smiling, a wide bright smile which caught me by surprise. I'd never seen him smile before. He walked towards the edge of the plateau and stood next to me. I looked into the chasm to watch for the light of her soul. She had sacrificed herself for me and I was grateful. I wanted to witness the beauty of her death.

"I can't see her light" I said "where is it? Did I miss it?"

I felt my mentor's hand on my back and a quick hard push. I was falling. I looked up as blue and red sparks leapt out of my body. I saw her rise up from the

darkness as I fell. She was ascending. She would be given new life as my own was extinguished. My body shed its last scrap of light before I fell further into the chasm and forgot my name.

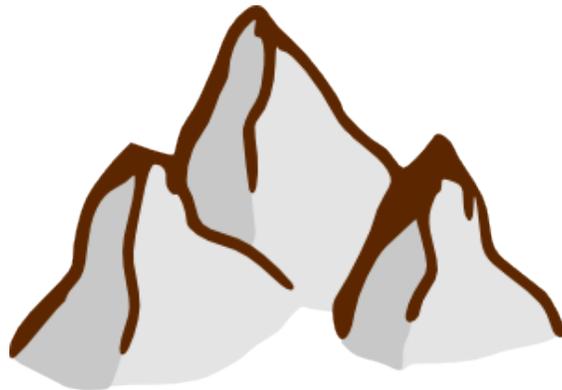
I wake up in a blue room. No furniture, a blue door, no windows, just timid women—hands on their faces, knees pulled up, each sitting in the corners of the room. None of them look at me so I follow suit and I look at myself instead. Symbols, horizontal and in red ink, decorate my wrists. I don't remember anyone writing on me. I try to remember something, anything, but I can't. The blue door opens and light pours in. I see a man sit next to one of the women, talking to her in whispers. She nods, she looks reassured. He turns to me and in that moment, I recognize his face: my mentor. He pushed me, that bastard. My last memories return to me; the plateau, the slick mud of the path, her. I wondered if souls were given new life at all. I knew I had to do something, but my mentor left before I could get his attention. I waited. Sometimes I'd look at the other women and wonder if they remembered too. I pitied them.

My mentor returned with a white dress for one of the women. As she put it on, he asked if I would accept my name. I took my chance, I jumped up and ran at him. My arms outstretched. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, only that I wanted to inflict pain. This man was not my mentor but my jailer. I wanted him punished. He turned swiftly and punched my temple hard. I fell.

I wake up in a blue room.

About the Author

Rachel Handley is a queer disabled fiction writer, fiction poet, and academic based in Dublin, Ireland. Their work has been published by *The Liminal Review*, *Arlen House*, *Dreich*, *365 Tomorrows*, *The Madrigal Press*, *Ellipsis Zine*, and their work is forthcoming in *Bear Creek Gazette*, *Sonder Lit Magazine*, and *Ink Drinkers*. Their debut collection of short stories, *Possible Worlds and Other Stories*, will be published by *Ellipsis Imprints* in September 2022.



Baby, I'm a Fire God

Markus Wessel

It was our third date and we were halfway through our desserts at the Sand Dollar Café when Runn put his fork down, reached across the small bistro table between us, and took my hand. His dark thumb traced a warm half-moon across my knuckles, and he smiled.

"I need to tell you something, Ricky," he said, his voice like a bronze bell. "I am a fire god."

I carefully swallowed my bite of Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte and felt a tickle of adrenaline spread out below my navel. Not another crazy one, please, no. Dating is hard enough when they're sane. "Excuse me?"

He sighed. "Baby, I mean it. I'm a fire god. Just a minor one, though. Listen, I know what that sounds like, but it's true. I'll show you. Please don't freak out. Here, see that candle?" The tables of the Sand Dollar Café were decorated with tealights inside large wine glasses. The waitstaff would light them with long matches for added atmosphere, but ours was out. "Watch this." Runn took the forefinger of his free hand, reached inside the glass, and touched the wick. It lit up with a flash.

I ripped my hand out of his so hard that I swiped my water off the table by accident. I hardly noticed it; I think I was on my feet before the glass exploded on the the floor. I don't remember what I said and little of what happened afterwards.

When I finally calmed down, I found myself in a cab heading to my place with a very concerned driver eying me in the mirror.



I didn't hear from Runn the next day or the day after and I liked it that way. I spent the weekend holed up alone, keeping myself from thinking about what had happened by binge-watching *Friends*. It didn't work. And what *had* happened anyway? He couldn't have lit a candle with his finger; that was impossible. He probably just palmed a matchstick and I freaked out over a magic trick. My mind stuck to that thought and Sunday night I caved.

Runn picked up after two rings. "Ricky, hey." He sounded surprised. "I didn't expect you to call. I'm—"

"It was a magic trick, right? You did a trick and I freaked." I waited, but he didn't say anything. "Listen, I'm sorry for running out like that. It's just, you know."

He cleared his throat. "Don't worry about it, okay? I should be the one apologizing. Really."

My phone suddenly felt hot against my cheek and I switched it to the other side. "Maybe we should talk about it some."

"I'm free now."

"Well then."

I had just enough time to shower and open the windows to let some air in before Runn rang my doorbell. I buzzed him in and waited at the door, and when I saw him come up the stairs, my heart beat in my throat.

Runn was clean-shaven and wore a white shirt with creases sharp enough to cut diamonds—quite a jump from the grunge-band look I had come to expect. He carried a bottle of wine which he almost dropped when I kissed him, hard. He smelled of wood and steel and sun.

"Hello," I said and kissed him again.

"Wanna talk now?" He slung his arm around my waist and pulled me tight enough to feel his erection.

"Let's not."

He lifted me up and carried me inside like I was weightless. He let me slide down on my sofa, kneeled in front of me, and leaned in. "You sure about this?" He held my gaze.

"Yes," I said, and pulled him to me.

A rush of heat embraced me like an open furnace and time seemed to stop. It was my first time with Runn and it was everything I wanted it to be, more even, much more. It was low and slow and close, and after I finished, and after he did, I rested my head on his sweaty chest. The crisp air coming in through the window gave me goosebumps.

"Show me your trick again," I said, as I traced my finger through his curly chest hair.

"I thought I just did." He smiled.

"No, the other one. *You know.*"

He tensed. "That was no trick."

"There's matches below the TV and I can turn around if you don't want to disclose your secrets." I giggled.

He carefully moved me off of him and sat up. He sighed and shook his head. "This was a mistake." He stood.

"What's wrong? Runn, what did I say?"

"What I did, that was no trick. Everything I told you is true." His eyes suddenly seemed much darker.

"Come on, don't be silly." I picked up my T-shirt. "You said you were a—"

"A fire god, yes, and I wish I hadn't." He turned and stepped over to my kitchenette. He leaned his hand on the table and tapped a hard patter on the cheap wood. "Listen, all of this, *this*," he waved his other hand across the room, "it's all normal, terribly normal, but I'm *not*. That is what I tried to tell you. I thought showing you was a good idea, but I was wrong."

I pulled my T-shirt over my head and angled for my shorts. I didn't feel at all like cuddling any more. "That's bat-shit and you know it." I stood and followed him. "What is this, you're playing some kind of game?"

"There is no game! Here!" Runn grabbed a glass of water from the sink. As soon as he held it tight, the water shot up in a roaring boil. "Is this a trick?" He slammed his hand on my table and left a burnt handprint. "Or this?" There was a hardcover of Brewer's Fables on the kitchen counter and he took it and held it out towards me with both hands. "Look at it."

The book started to smolder. Flames licked out from under his fingers, and seconds later it had turned into a fireball. Runn held it without any sign of pain, his forearms ablaze up to his elbows. He had lost any of the relaxed composure I had taken for granted with him; his whole body was tense and his eyes behind the flames looked like pools of greasy smoke. "Do you believe me now?"

My fire alarm went off.

Runn looked up in surprise, and as soon as he did I pulled the fire extinguisher out from between the fridge and the wall. I yanked the safety pin and blasted him with carbon-dioxide.

The white jet of gas hit him in the face with a loud hiss and threw him off balance. He stumbled and fell on his ass, dropping the burning book in his lap. I aimed the jet at the flames and made sure to keep it on until every last bit of ember was dead. Finally, the extinguisher fizzled out. I put it on the table next to Runn's burnt-in handprint.

Runn didn't move. He sat on the floor, looking cold and frightened, and stared at me as if he had never seen me before.

"Well? Are you going to say something?" I said. The air smelled of chemicals and smoke and I wrinkled my nose.

He pushed himself up into a more comfortable position and carefully took a breath. "I'm sorry." Then he saw my face. "*And* I'm an idiot for losing it. It's, I don't know. It's hard, right? To control this. You want to show what you can do, to *really* show it, but then it's hard to stop." He rubbed his eyes and wiped them with the back of his hand. "So what now? I'd better just leave."

"Maybe put some clothes on first," I said. "And then we'll drive to Home Depot and get another two or three of those." I gestured towards the empty extinguisher. "And some fire blankets. If we see more of each other, we better take precautions, right?"

About the Author

Markus Wessel is a genre writer from Germany. He loves cake, coffee, and that special tingle in the belly. You know which one.



Solar Flowers

Devon McConnell Bacon enjoys writing, photography, and creating unusual art. They have had photography published in *Reservoir Road Literary Review* and *Acropolis Journal*. They currently live in the mountains with their partner, kids, dogs and birds. They can be found @Ravenlore23 on Twitter.

651-999-7191

Jo Galvez

06/15/18

8:14

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

I finally arrived! The flight was hell. But it's worth it, I guess. I made it to Melbourne! I told you I would! I'm getting my MA! But I flew over a bit early, to get a bit of vacation time before hell starts. I'm living with Auntie Liza! Remember her?

I wish you could—uh, anyway. I'm rambling. Would sleep off this jetlag now. Bye!



06/16/18

2:30

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

Jules. My lovely Jules. Do you think we could've been happy here?



07/24/18

00:00

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

Happy birthday! You're 25 now, wow! I hope you're having a great time there. I hope you think about me sometimes, because I do, every day.

I wish I could be there with you. I love you.



08/12/18

10:27

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

I'm also 25 now!!! I remember you always joking about us not working out because we're both Leos. *[laughs]* But who's wrong now, huh? I mean, aside from—

[a faraway voice] Ellie, who are you talking to? The food's here! Hurry up or we'll eat without you!

My Australian friends are assholes. Talk to you soon, my lovely Jules.



09/28/18

19:10

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

Did I tell you that I got a job at a coffee shop? Anyway, not the important thing. The important thing is that I saw the cutest cat ever. He always drops by the back of the coffee shop. I don't know if he has a human, because there's no collars or anything.

But aaaaahhh Jules!! I want to adopt him so bad!! He's black as night, has the biggest green eyes, very very fluffy! Remember you want to adopt that black cat back home, but she already has a human?

Ah, Jules. It makes me sad that he might not have a home and a human that loves him, but I kinda wish he doesn't, so I could take him home. Does that make me awful?

I wish you're here to tell me what to do.



10/01/18

3:27

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

Why did I think that going back to school was a good idea? Ugh. This is your fault. You told me we'd go here together and now you're—

3:29

Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the—

Fuck. No. No. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean—hic—to say that... Jules, I'm so sorry...



12/16/18

8:41

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

I already told mom I won't be home for the holidays. Any of it. I want to spend Christmas here. I could go to the beach for Christmas! No cold, no snow, no ice.

You'd love that, wouldn't you? No cold, no snow, no ice on the road?



12/31/18

23:58

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

la party in full swing can be heard in the background!

There's so many people here, why did I go to this party? I couldn't even hear myself think right now.

Ah, I miss the days where we'd just listen to music, smoke weed, and make out while waiting for the ball drop. Then we'd notice it's waaaay past midnight and we're horny but we're having the munchies.

I always told you I'd gladly spend the rest of the new year—my whole life—like that. You and me, horny and having the munchies. You always laugh and kiss my brains out.

[people screaming the countdown in the background]

It's too loud in here, Christ. Anyway, happy new year. Even if I'm hours ahead. Hope you're having the best blunt there and so much food. I love you so much, my lovely Jules.



05/19/19

6:30

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

Good morning, my lovely Jules! It's been... a hectic few months, if you know what I mean.

I can't believe it's been more than a year.

I miss you. I love you. So, so much.



05/28/19

20:36

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

So, remember the cat I saw at the coffee shop I work in? I took him to the vet, and he doesn't have a human! So I took him home.

Storm! Say hi to Jules, here.

[a cat meows in the background]

Aaand he falls asleep again. This cat, seriously.

He's really not that active, because he's a bit on the older side. Very cuddly, though. It's really tough to wear white clothes because of his fur. But eh, worth it.

You would really love him, babe. Ah. I wish you could see him now. Purring away and showing his little belly to me.

I love you so much.



08/02/19

21:17

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

My lovely Jules! I finished my MA! Fucking finally. I'm staying in Melbourne for the foreseeable future. How cool is that, huh?

I'm sorry I couldn't call you on your birthday, babe. I was drowning in my dissertation and work. But I know you get it.

I wish you could celebrate with me. How's the weather there? It's too fucking cold here—a year here and I'm still not used to the topsy-turvy weather! I hope it's not too cloudy up there. I love you!



09/15/19

07:13

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

I still can't ride a car without having panic attacks. All I could see was you. You in that... haaaah. You don't deserve that. You're suppose to be smiling, singing, dancing, not...

8:05

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

It should've been me.



09/17/19

22:27

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

I don't know why I'm still calling you, to be honest. I'm wasting money on international calls for someone that won't answer. Why can't I just forget you? It'd be so much easier.

I miss you so much. Why the fuck did you have to leave?



10/07/19

10:32

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

...

10:34

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

...

10:36

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

Hey, Jules. Sorry if I keep bothering you, I just missed your voice. I miss you.



11/13/19

19:35

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

We always laughed whenever old geezers in the street would tell us we'd go to hell because we're together. Like, how the fuck would we go there? Heaven and hell don't exist!

But now... now I hope heaven is real. I don't fucking believe those geezers—you're in heaven, because you're one of the kindest, most generous people that ever graced this wasteland of a planet.

Maybe that's why you were taken so soon.

I just. I can't stand to think that you're not somewhere beautiful and serene and perfect, because that's what you are.



12/07/19

00:02

*Hey, this is Jules. Sorry I couldn't answer you right now! Please leave a message after the *beep!**

I miss you. So, so much. I have no idea how I can function—live—in this world while knowing that you're not here anymore.

I know you really didn't believe in reincarnation and all that shit, but. In another life, I hope it'd still be you and me. I hope we'll have the chance to be together longer. I know we've had years, but it's not enough. It'll never be enough. I want us to grow old together, have as many cats as we want. Talk about books, get married maybe. I just. I wanted more. I still want more, but I'll never get it now. So I'm hoping the universe won't be so stingy in our next lives.

Maybe this'll be the last time I'll call. Maybe next year I'll crawl back to your number, crying about how I miss you. I don't know what's in store for me anymore. But what I do know is that I'll always love you, my Jules.

I love you so, so much. I think I'll love you until the day I die.

Bye, babe. Until next time.

[sound of an ending call]

About the Author

Jo Galvez has been writing before she even knew what she wanted to write. She has three self-published zines featured in BLTX 2019 and other works being published soon. If she's not working or writing, she's listening to music, playing with her cats, or watching cooking videos on Youtube. See more of what she's up to in her blog: blueescaperooms.wordpress.com.

Stay Away from the Windows

Gwen Whiting

Yesterday, I covered all the classroom windows with black plastic sheeting and because Denisse said it looked scary, we spent art class cutting out shapes and making pictures to decorate it with. Javier wanted to make a spaceship, but I said it wasn't a good idea. I let him draw a dinosaur instead.

Every day we have a routine. First, I write my name on the board (Mx. Petaford) and my pronouns (they/she) and what kind of weather we might have today (clear skies). We read the word of the day (hide) and then we sit down together on the reading rug and sing the alphabet song. I sit down first, then pat the purple square across from me to encourage the children to join me as quickly as they can. I'm not sure if there will be time to sing today.

Denisse sits first – on the pink square, of course, as she always matches where she sits to the color of her clothes that day. Javier flops down on the green square, a book in his hands. After him, Noah, who sits down after waving at me, his right hand and arm covered in temporary tattoos and glitter. Avery bounces down next to me, her knees slapping together. Zoey is always last, lingering at the edge of the rug, her thumb in her mouth. There used to be eighteen children in our class; now there are five.

"Come on, Zoey," I say and smile. She sits as far away from the other children as she can manage. Only one foot is on the rug. I'll talk with her later, during quiet time. "Is everyone ready to sing our ABCs?"

We sing together. Javier's voice drowns out the rest - he's a terrible singer, even for his age, but confident in his alphabet. On another day I might remind him to leave space for the others. Today, all I can think about is the drill. We've been asked not to tell the children exactly when drills will occur; after all, this is practice for something that might happen. But my class is very young, and we've never had any sort of drill before, though we talked about what to do when the principal sounds the alarm.

The rest of the morning goes with minimal upset. Denisse tries to rub the glitter from Noah's tattoos onto her arm and must be separated from him. Avery won't stop kicking her legs under the table. Javier wants to read instead of playing our counting games, and Zoey won't talk at all without being asked. It isn't until I have placed the snack cups on the desks and am filling each one with goldfish crackers that a loud buzz interrupts our morning.

"Students--" They all look up as Principal Tanner's voice crackles through the intercom, except Zoey who is shoveling goldfish into her mouth like a shark. "Our visitors have arrived." I expect him to say more, but the transmission cuts off. The children stare at me, wide-eyed, except for Avery who runs over to the window where a small hole in the black paper beckons.

"Stay away from the windows, Avery. All of you, under your desks." I walk over to the door, turn off the lights, and pull the shade. Locking it is next. The children are whispering even though they've been told they need to be quiet when the drills come. Zoey is the only child who has managed it, hugging her knees against her

chest with her head down, just as the special instructor did in the video the class watched last week.

The phone in my pocket is still. I check it to be sure that I haven't missed the vibration of a text, but nothing. My role is simple - I keep the class quiet for about five minutes until the principal gives the signal. It will be a series of knocks on the window. Three means drill's over. Two means shelter in place. We practiced this all summer long in staff workshops. No one knows when or if the visitors will arrive, but every month, they come closer. What are the families who kept their children home doing to prepare?

With a sigh, I crawl under the art table, banging my head underneath it. A shower of paper bits and macaroni follows.

"Mx. Petaford, you spilled," Denisse points out.

"It's okay. I'll clean it up during lunch time."

"When do we get to eat?" Avery asks, drumming her fingers against the underside of her desk.

"Avery, please stop doing that," I remind her. "Remember, we're to be quiet." She stops beating the desk and starts humming. Well. It's better than for her to be kicking one of the others.

Quiet of any sort doesn't last long in my classroom but to my surprise, it's Zoey who breaks the silence.

"Mx. Petaford, I have a question." Her voice is high, even for her age, and it shakes like a flower caught in a rainstorm.

"Yes, Zoey?" Avery scowls at me as I just demanded silence, but Zoey so rarely asks for anything that I can't shush her.

"Why do we call them visitors?" she asks, then plops her thumb in her mouth. Every child stops, their attention focused on me. Even Avery stops rocking for a moment, leaning forward and staring at me. I would give anything to hear three knocks on our window right now.

"Well, because," I fumble in my head for an explanation. Most of the training that we were given as teachers this summer focused on the children's physical safety. How to barricade a classroom door. Where all of the exits in the school are located. How to bandage a wound. There was even talk of allowing staff to carry guns, though it went nowhere. We did not talk much about how to answer their questions - perhaps because we have no answers. The best I can do now is to make something up and hope that it doesn't result in a hundred angry calls from their parents. "They're coming from very far away to visit us. And we've never seen them before and we don't speak their language yet, so we don't know what they would like us to call them."

"I like visitors," Noah pipes up. "Sometimes they bring me presents."

"Will these visitors bring us presents?" Avery instantly wants to know.

I can see the coiled-up energy in her ready to strike. "No, Avery, probably not. We're not sure if these visitors want to be friends." I catch Zoey out of the corner of my eye, hugging her knees again and rocking. Why hasn't this drill ended? I need to check my phone and see if there's something that I've missed.

"Tell you what - why don't we make a welcome sign for the visitors? We can hang up some beautiful pictures in our classroom for when they come in." It churns my stomach, thinking about that possibility, but I need to keep the children quiet so I can find out what's going on. These drills are supposed to be quick. "Stay under your desks and I'll bring you each a piece of paper and some crayons. Isn't this fun, getting to color our pictures on the floor?"

I crawl on my knees to gather and pass out the supplies, navigating around the maze of fallen paper and macaroni, staying low as we were instructed to do. There are no sounds in the hallway. No shutting doors. No footsteps. Not even the chattering of a distant child, though when I strain my ears, I swear I hear a distant sob. That's when I decide to stop listening.

After my class has begun drawing, I curl back up under the art table and take out my phone. No messages. I send a short text to Mr. Nguyen. His classroom is by the main office. I wait. Nothing. No response. No signal. No internet. The battery is getting low, but the charger is across the room. By the door.

I slip the phone back in my pocket and watch the children draw while I try to figure out what to do next. Why hasn't anyone come by to tell us what's happening?

"Teacher, I drew a unicorn," Noah says, interrupting my thoughts.

"You always draw unicorns," Avery sticks out her tongue at him and continues scribbling on her page. I have no idea what she's drawn and I hope that she doesn't ask me to guess.

"That's because unicorns are pretty," he says and Denisse nods. I notice that she's crawled over next to him, but I don't say anything. What good will sitting under a desk do if the visitors are here?

"I drew a visitor," Javier says, a smug grin on his face. His parents watch the news every night so quickly I reach out my hand for it before he can show the others.

"Oh? Can I see?" The picture I am given is of a dark shape, slender and much taller than the six stick figures standing next to it. A round hole in its face is red and I'm afraid to ask if it's meant to be blood or a mouth. He's started labeling the figures: Noa, Av, Deenees.

"I'm not done yet," he tells me.

"That's okay." I don't want the children to see this picture and put a shape to their imaginings. "Why don't we put this away for now and have story time?" Is there somewhere safer than under our desks to hide? The cubbies are too small - the supply closet might fit two children, but how can I decide which two? My hands are shaking as I fold Javier's picture and put it in my pocket.

"Mx. Petaford, I said I wasn't done."

"I know. I'm just keeping it safe." He looks as if he's about to argue, so I say, "Why don't you pick the book, Javier? You can be reader today." Javier starts to stand, but I grab his sleeve and pull him down hard. His lip trembles. "I'm sorry - I didn't mean to be so rough." It isn't in my nature to be harsh with the children. I take

a deep breath. "Remember, we need to stay very quiet and down low. Like little mice. Okay?"

"Okay," Javier says, but he doesn't look at me.

"We're going to have story time," I tell the others. "So, let's everyone sit in a circle--" We need to stay away from the windows. And the door. They can't make a circle under their desks without moving them. There isn't much classroom left after that. "Sit next to the whiteboard." It's close to the supply cabinet.

How long has it been since the drill started? Rain is pattering against our windows. The black paper on them lets through enough light through to faintly illuminate the classroom, but doesn't reveal what might be outside. I plug in my phone, knowing that I may need the light from it if the room grows much darker.

Javier is reading, his voice stumbling over the long words. I can't see the book but because he's chosen it, I know it's about dinosaurs. At least that's something they all generally agree on - that and the book about the caterpillar who eats everything in sight. What am I going to feed them if this goes on for much longer? Should I ask the children to share their lunches? Only Noah's mother consistently packs a full meal - Javier, Avery, and Denisse all eat school lunch, and Zoey's lunches tend to be a bit erratic. Once her mother only packed a couple of pieces of stale bread with a swipe of oily peanut butter inside.

Should Zoey be one of the children I put inside the cabinet? If the visitors have come, school's the safest place for her. That's not true for the others, however much our principal wants to think it is.

I watch the children as Javier continues to read. He's one of the smartest kids I've ever known - should he be hidden first? Or because he's smart, would that give him a better chance to escape on his own if something happened to me? Avery with her foot tapping and her humming - would she reveal their hiding place if she's put in there? If Noah and Denisse are separated, will they cry for each other? They're best friends after all and can't stand to be apart even for music classes and recess. How can I decide?

Then- the shutting of a distant door, sharp like the bang of a gun. Someone is crying now, not in my classroom, but further down. Then it stops.

There is no knocking at the window. Not three knocks, or six, and the sky outside is throwing darker shadows.

The children are quiet. Even Avery.

"Put the book down, Javier," I whisper.

He doesn't put it down. Instead, he hugs it to his chest as if the dinosaurs will protect him.

"We're going to play a game now." I crawl back to the children. Zoey's eyes are wide enough to catch the moon. Noah and Denisse are hugging each other and staring at the door. "It's called Quiet as a Mouse." No one says anything. Avery has locked her fingers together and is squeezing them, but at least she isn't making any noise.

My throat hurts when I swallow and say, "Two of us are going to be the mice in the mousehole. That means they're going to sit inside the cabinet and be very, very quiet, no matter how much noise we make outside, until the teacher mouse opens the door. I will tell the rules to the rest of you once we pick our mice. Okay?"

"I want to be a mouse," Denisse says. "And Noah can be the other one."

"I want to be a unicorn," Noah objects.

"No, we're--" I turn my head and watch the door. I can't look at them. Can't make this decision with any sort of logic - there is no logic to it. "Going to be fair. So we'll do eeny-meenie-miny-mo. Okay?"

They all nod. After all, everyone has an equal chance in eeny-meenie-miny-mo. Right?

"Eeny-meenie-miny-mo-" I start going around the circle, pointing to a child with every word that I whisper, but before I can finish, Javier stops me.

"Teacher, you aren't pointing to yourself."

I know.

"Well, I'm too big to fit into the cabinet and I have to tell everyone else their rules," I say, making my voice as bright as I can and smile at him. Will the visitors smile when they see the children in the classroom? Do the visitors have mouths? I don't know how long I have to make the choice, so I speed through the rhyme.

"Catch a tiger by their--"

“Unicorn.”

“Catch a unicorn...” The first rhyme chooses Denisse.

She crawls in, pouting because Noah isn't allowed to follow. I start again.

Javier is the other child chosen. Avery instantly starts singing under her breath, “Denisse and Javier sitting in a tree--” but a glance from me stops her. I help him in. I wonder if I should give them some crackers in case they are in there for a very long time, but I'm afraid that they will eat them too loudly.

“Remember the rules,” I whisper as I close the door.

Now we are four.

Avery has already made it to the window. The sound of tearing paper rips through the silence. I am not fast enough to keep her from peering out, but she only looks for a moment before stepping away.

“The sky's awful dark, Mx. Petaford.” A sliver of light wobbles from the hole she has made. I want to ask if she has seen ships but would she even know what she was looking at? Noah is holding the edge of my shirt and rubbing his nose into my side and I realize that all four of us are standing now. If a visitor walks to the door, we will easily be seen.

“Come, let's—let's go to my desk,” I say, gesturing to Avery and Zoey. “You're all going to sit under there and we'll make a fort with our coats. Won't that be fun?”

"What does that have to do with mice?" Avery says, but she's never been allowed behind my desk, none of them have, and the temptation is too great. It isn't long before the three of them are nestled under it, buried under every coat and spare bit of clothing I could find, and I can crawl back to my phone.

It hasn't been charging. It's receiving no power, and I realize that part of the quiet I've noticed has been from the lack of overhead light and running current. But what does it mean? Have the visitors cut off the power grid to the city? We've been warned that it's one of the things that would happen, though we have lost power to storms before. There's an emergency radio in one of the classrooms down the hall but to get to it, I'll have to leave the children behind. I look up at our clock, but the power outage stopped its hands.

How long have we been waiting? Three knocks means we're safe. Six means hide. I repeat that to myself as if I could forget it. It's been too long, I *know* that, and yet, what happens if I step outside to see what's happening?

If I leave the room, I can get the radio.

If I leave the room, I might finally know what's happened.

I look at the door, then at the window. There is more than one way out of the room, but to leave by the window would require a two-story drop. If I hear the visitors, should I take the children to the windows? Try to lower them down and hope they fall gently? I can't take that risk.

"Okay." I take a breath. "Mx. Petaford is going to step into the hall for a moment. I want the three of you to stay under the desk until I tell you to come out. You can't leave until a teacher tells you it's okay."

"What about Denisse?" Noah demands. I can hear the children in the closet but only faintly.

"You'll go get them when the teacher comes."

"Why do you have to go?" Avery asks, kicking the floor, then catching herself. "This is a dumb game. I don't want to play no more."

"I want to go home," Noah says, sniffing. "I want Mommy."

Zoey stares at her dirty sneakers. The lace on her left shoe is untied, the other lace is broken.

I don't know who to comfort first. I want to go home too.

There is a noise down the hall. Is it a knock or a footstep?

"Under the desk!" I hiss at the three children. "And quiet - don't you dare make any noise." Noah hiccups as he dives with Avery and Zoey back down underneath their burrow of puffy pink and blue and red coats. I can't hear anything at first - my ears are too full of the sound of my heart pounding, focused on listening to the children and their scared, fast breathing - the whimpers that tell me they finally understand that we are not playing a game. That there never was a game.

Please be quiet.

I hear steps down the hall. The sound of one body moving. What do I have in this room to protect them?

Please.

I don't own a gun. I never learned how to shoot. All I ever wanted to do was grow up and be a teacher. I've never even gotten into a fight or hit anyone.

Be.

The footsteps are so close now. But I don't hear anyone knocking.

Quiet.

I don't hear any voices outside.

The only thing in this room that will shield these children is me.

I stand in front of the door. I hold my arms out as if I'm asking for a hug - making my body as big as possible, hoping that whatever is coming down the hallway only sees me. I think about the picture that Javier drew of all of us together and the visitor. Its red, red mouth.

I want to crumble when I hear the first knock but I can't.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Three knocks means we're safe.

My arms fall and I drop to my knees as the door opens, gasping.

"There's been a power outage and the intercom--" The principal stares at me, then at the classroom. Javier has cracked the closet door open, his nose peering out from inside. Crayons and drawings are scattered under the children's desks, bits of broken macaroni litter the space where I had sheltered beneath the art table. The pile of coats shifts under my desk as Avery wiggles her way free and crawls toward us on her knees. The black paper at the bottom windows is peeling down and the lines around his mouth deepen as he frowns. A waft of urine hits my nose as Zoey runs to me, hugging me tightly.

"It's... okay," I say, patting her tangled hair. She doesn't let me go.

"Mx. Petaford, I need to see you in the hall," the principal says.

"The visitors--"

"It was only a drill." Javier opens the door when he hears that, revealing Denisse next to him. I lean down and pry Zoey's arms from around my waist before the principal can say anything else. She flops down on the floor as I take a deep breath.

"Everyone find your square. Pick the one you were sitting on this morning, okay?" No one moves. "Remember, Denisse, you were on pink?" Slowly, Denisse nods and goes over to sit down. One by one, beginning with Noah, the others follow. "I'm going to go into the hall for just a minute and then we'll read a story and finish our snack from this morning, okay?"

Noah rubs snot all over his sleeve and leans against Denisse. Javier still has his book of dinosaurs wedged against his chest. Zoey has found her place on the edge of the rug, sucking her thumb, but this time, Avery reaches out and hugs her.

I crack the door when we step out into the hall, afraid to leave them.

"It was only a drill, Mx. Petaford," the principal says. "Those children look terrified - what did you tell them?"

"You left us in there for a long time. With no communication. Nothing." The other classrooms are still silent, and I wonder if he opened our door first. "What did you expect us to do? What good would any of this have done if the visitors had been here?" I'm shaking and I know the other rooms can hear me. That the children can hear. That, and the sounds of desks moving and teachers talking, keeps me from shouting.

He smiles, but it is weak.

"There have always been drills. There will always be drills." He turns and walks down the hall, then looks at me before he opens another door. "Next time, prepare your class."

I turn away and walk back into my classroom.

Javier is reading his book out loud to the others. Avery has gotten the box of crackers down and is trying to pour them into cups. Most of them have spilled onto the floor where Noah is lying on his stomach, pretending that they're real fish, and is swimming them into Denisse's mouth. Zoey is sitting on the rug, sucking her thumb.

Maybe this is the best I can offer them, to give them games and snacks and childhood for as long as I can.

I go to the windows and tape the fallen piece of black paper back up. Then I sit down next to Zoey and pull her on my lap. The children look at me.

"Let's sit down, criss-cross applesauce," I say with the biggest smile I have ever managed. "Who wants to read a story about making new friends?"

About the Author

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