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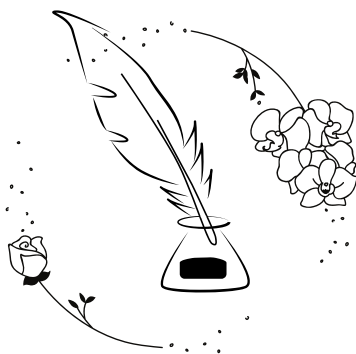
ISSUE NO. 1

TALES

OF REVERIE

FICTION • POETRY • ART

Literary Magazine **2019**



TALES OF REVERIE

Literary Magazine

ISSUE NO. 1

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TALES OF REVERIE

Literary Magazine

MASTHEAD

Esther Hung

EDITOR IN CHIEF

TYPESETTER

HEAD POETRY EDITOR

Shoshana Groom

SUPERVISING EDITOR

HEAD PROSE EDITOR

Kenneth Nolan III

BUSINESS MANAGER

TALES OF REVERIE

Literary Magazine

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

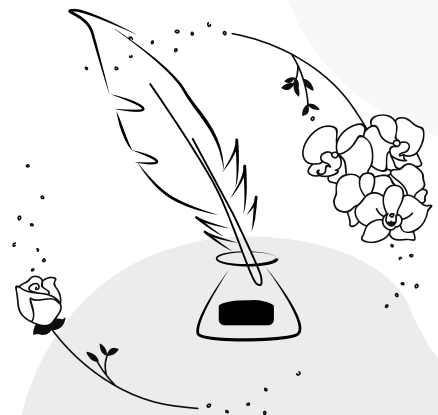
Dear Readers,

Thank you for taking the time to open up *Tales of Reverie's* first issue. We are proud to publish the work of new and experienced artists. Tales of Reverie, so named to stress its fantastical leaning, is the first Paragon Press journal to label itself as commercial fiction. Given the wealth of literary fiction journals to be found, we wanted one to showcase art that first and foremost entertained. We wanted adventure, magic, excitement, and wonder - and our submitters did not disappoint. Whether they sent us horror or romance, poetry or prose, contemporary or historical, our writers delighted us with their creativity and passion. What you're about to read is the best of the best.

We could not have published a single story without the guidance of Austin Shay, Editor-in-Chief of the Paragon Press. For giving us a chance to begin our publication, we offer him our utmost gratitude. We would also like to give special thanks to our team of editors, who spent the last four months working tirelessly to bring *Tales of Reverie* to life. Last but not least, we also offer our sincere thanks to our talented contributors, every artist who took the time to submit to us, and our readers. Without you there would be nothing to publish, nor reason to do so.

Sincerely,

Esther Hung • Editor-In-Chief
Shoshana Groom • Supervising Editor
Kenneth Nolan III • Business Manager



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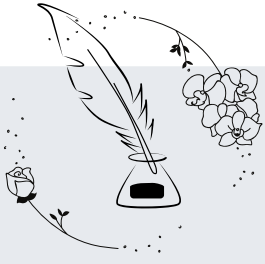
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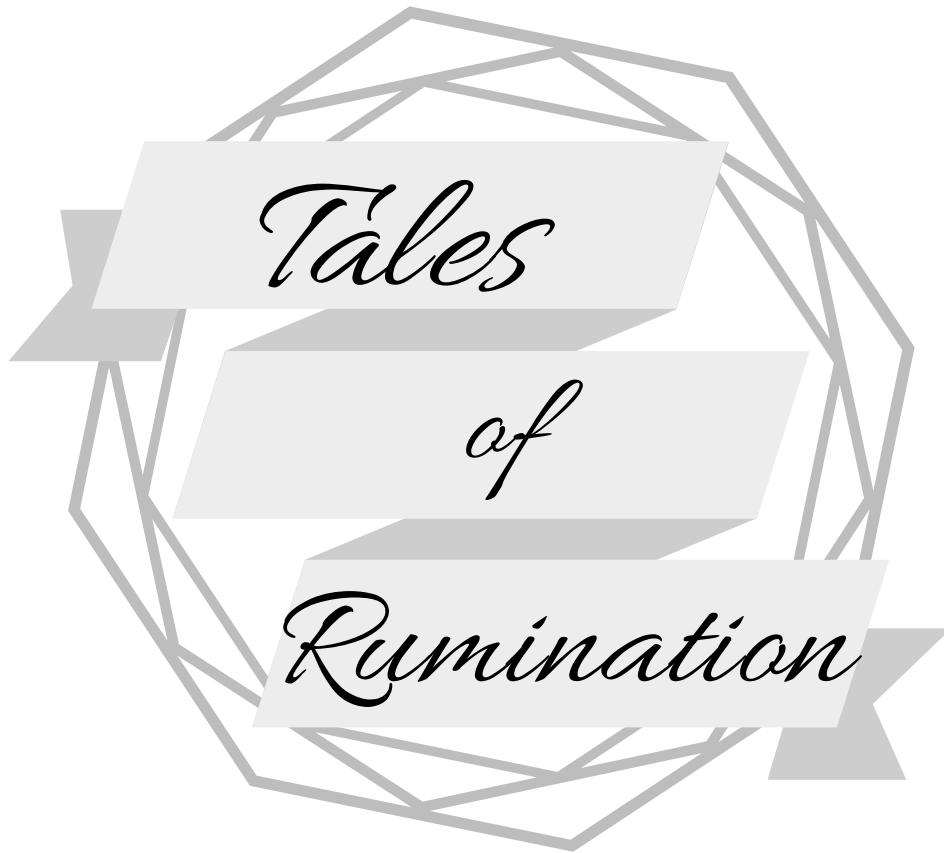
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Section I



*Dare you follow the whispered echoes —
Of starstruck souls and tangled fates?
Fables of loss and longing
That leave the world to ruminate.*

Secrets

By Sophie van Duin

I had always wanted a best friend. And here she was, a girl with dewdrops nestled in her hair. A girl with pearls she had stolen right from the oysters, a girl who knew the ways of wind and sea. She was flattered by my questions and taught me everything I didn't know, until she grew bored, for I had nothing to share with her in return. I had in me nothing she didn't know, and the secrets I had taken could not be given to her.

So she left, one day, when the sky was clear, after she had told me the secret of the clouds and of raindrops, but only the ones that fall. I watched her go and returned to my home, a place I could never show her, for its secrets were not hers.

My home was, and will be, a cavernous place, filled with pages and with words, with a ceiling that reached and surpassed the sky. I cracked open a book, full of stories I could never have told her, knowledge she could never have known.

My secrets have always been stolen.

Soul Clone

By Priya Dolma Tamang

We may not be *favorites*
of wish granting nights
studded with fated stars
that get caught
in cozy constellations of
always together, never apart;
I am that faint voice
you turn your look to,
and find nobody around,
chills running down your skin
when you cannot spot a source.

I am that *shy stalker*
who knows your secrets
better than you, than most,
than the choicest ears
you may have whispered
them into. And by dint
of observation, and ardent

obsession, each cell on your face
seeks permission from my eye
before it dare curve to wrinkle
a day more in sight.

I am that *lover who loves*
formless, nameless, termless,
but not faithless, needless
or truthless: I am that *part of you*
that is neither yours to keep
nor forsake, but is still your part,
a part that is everything you are,
a part that is nothing you are not.

The All Hallows Knight

By Christopher Tuthill

The call came late in the evening, when Jacob was supposed to be sleeping. But he was very much awake, hidden beneath his covers as he read by flashlight the Classics Illustrated version of King Arthur his brother Pete had given him. He heard his mother on the phone in the next room, as he lay there reading of Arthur's fight against Sir Mordred.

Jacob was learning of Arthur's grievous wounds when his bedroom door opened and light flooded the room.

He quickly shut off the flashlight and laid still, hoping his mother hadn't noticed he was up reading.

"Jacob," his mom said. Her voice wasn't angry, but hushed, trembling. "Come on, honey, get your shoes on, we have to go."

Normally, Jacob would have closed his eyes and laid there like a slug, to put on a show of pretending to be asleep. But his mom's voice scared him.

"Where are we going?" he asked, getting up.

"Just get your shoes, honey. We have to go."

Jacob quickly put on his sneakers and took his mother's hand. They were down the stairs, in the Impala station wagon, and on the road in a few moments.

"Where are we going?" Jacob repeated. As cicadas sang in the trees, the car raced down Route 25, toward the center of town.

"It's your brother," his mom said. "It's Pete."

"Where is he? Isn't he working at the park?" Jacob asked.

"He's at the hospital, sweetie. Something happened. Your father said—" and then she was holding back sobs and couldn't say anything. Jacob didn't ask any more questions. He knew it had to be bad. Maybe an accident. Maybe Pete was sick. He knew a boy in his class, Tim Matthews, who broke his arm falling out of a tree and had to get a cast. But this seemed worse,

he thought.

His mom couldn't speak; she just drove. Jacob could see the tears streaming down her cheeks as they passed beneath the streetlights. She pulled into the lot. "Stay here for a minute, baby," she said. "Just stay here and I promise I'll be right back."

Jacob sat and watched his mother walk across the lot and go through the double doors, above which EMERGENCY was written in large red letters.

Jacob was seven, and his brother Pete was seven years older, the impossibly old age of fourteen. Jacob had idolized him his whole life. Pete had taught him how to fish, how to play baseball, which books to read, which movies to watch, how to be cool and how to do it all with a smile. This summer, Pete had taken a part time job as a park attendant at the Riverport baseball fields, where Jacob had all his little league games. It was Jacob's dream to one day be just like Pete in everything. He loved seeing his brother cutting the grass, setting out the bases, laying the chalk foul lines, and doing the other work at the park. It was like it was their own private ball field. Before the games started, Pete and Jacob would play long games of pepper, where you pitched underhand and tried to bunt your way past the pitcher, over and over, til game time.

Now Jacob sat helplessly in the passenger seat of the Impala, wondering what had happened to his big brother. He sat and he waited, and he looked for some sign from the ER that his mom or dad were coming to get him. The minutes went by like hours.

Finally, he opened the door to the car and stepped out into the parking lot. It had been a scorching hot July day and the evening was only a little cooler. He could feel the humidity sticking to his pajamas, clinging to his hair.

He had ventured a few steps toward the ER doors when a young man in a red shirt and white pants came out. He lit a cigarette and stood outside the door, like a lone guardian. Jacob walked toward him.

The man saw him and walked over, meeting him halfway to the door.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Jacob."

"You're Pete's brother, right? I know you from the ball fields."

"Yes," Jacob said.

The man smiled weakly in the gloom, through a face slick with sweat and grime. His chin dripped with perspiration. He dropped his cigarette and stubbed it out.

“I think you should wait back at the car there, Jacob,” the young man said. “Come on.”

“But what about Pete? Where is my mom?”

“Y-your brother—” the man started, then trailed off for a moment. He looked at the ground. “Your brother got hurt. There was an accident. Your parents will be out in a second.”

He took Jacob by the hand and led him back to the Impala, opening the back door. Jacob climbed in.

The man stood above him, casting a shadow over the backseat in the glow of the yellow parking lights, and it seemed in the haze that he was an angel, but whether good or evil Jacob couldn't tell. An angel with a shirt that was slick and red, smeared with paint that Jacob hadn't noticed in the dim light of the parking lot. Jacob stared at the man, looked from his shirt to his face, and back again. Not red paint. Blood. It was on his hands and his face, as well.

“You're a good boy,” the man said. He wiped his eyes. “You're such a good kid. Just stay here, OK? And wait for your mom and dad.”

Jacob didn't want to stay. He wanted to run as far away as he could, but he didn't know what else to do, so he laid down in the backseat and stared up at the ceiling.

Jacob did not recall going home. But the next day he woke up in his bed, feeling like he hadn't slept at all.

He climbed out of bed. His feet felt cold against the floorboards and he shivered against the chill in his room. A cool breeze blew through his open window. A finch was perched on an oak limb outside, and he heard its morning trill.

From downstairs, Jacob could hear voices rising up the staircase: his father's, and someone else's. He went down, hoping that last night had been some bad dream from which he would now awake.

In the dining room, he saw his parents sitting at the table across from Uncle Tom, his dad's brother. His mother's face was red and her eyes swollen. His father, who usually went through life with boundless cheerfulness, now he sat with his head bowed, his face ashen.

“Good morning, son,” his dad said. “Come and sit down.” His voice came out as a rasp.

Jacob obeyed, climbing on his dad’s lap. His dad gripped him in a bear hug, and Jacob felt his father shaking. Jacob’s face was buried against his dad’s shirt, which was damp with tears. He smelled like aftershave. Jacob felt nervous, as if he were shaking himself, at least on the inside. He’d never seen his dad upset before, and it made him scared.

After a few moments, his dad loosened his grip on Jacob, who sat on his lap unsure of what to do. “Where’s Pete?” he finally managed to squeak out.

“Pete was hurt,” his dad said.. “There was an—an accident. And he isn’t going to be here anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Jacob said. He felt numb, as if were outside his body, looking in on someone else. He looked at his father in the eye and saw only grief.

“Honey,” his mom said in a mournful whisper, “Petey’s gone.”

Jacob looked at his mother, whose tears flowed down her cheeks like rain. She said nothing else.

“That can’t be right,” Jacob said. He felt a tightness in his chest, and a knot in his stomach. “It just can’t be. He was at the field yesterday. We are going fishing today. When is he getting out of the hospital?”

Uncle Tom said, “Son, sometimes we cannot understand why things happen. Only the Lord knows. He wanted the most beautiful angel.”

Jacob sat between his parents, trying to puzzle that out. God wanted the most beautiful angel, so he took Pete? “That doesn’t make sense,” he said. “If God wanted an angel, he didn’t have to take a kid. If he wanted a beautiful one, wouldn’t he have taken a girl? And why would he be so mean anyway, to take an angel like that?” His small voice was angry. He felt the injustice of it wash over him, and he wanted to scream.

Jacob’s dad was crying now, too. Uncle Tom took Jacob by the hand and they walked out into the backyard.

“Your parents,” Uncle Tom said, “they just need a break.”

“But why?” Jacob protested. He’d known Uncle Tom his whole life. He trusted him and liked him. His uncle came over to watch football with dad, came to dinner sometimes, and was

there on every holiday. But now Jacob hated him.

“It’s a terrible, terrible thing that happened, son. It’s awful. I won’t pretend to tell you it isn’t. No one deserves this. I am so sorry.”

Uncle Tom pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. They walked across the lawn, past the rose bushes, to the garden. Jacob’s feet were soon wet with dewdrops. The sunflowers were open to the sky, brilliant yellow, their heads stretching for the sun. Beads of water clung to the string beans, the lettuce, the cornstalks. Jacob saw a butterfly dance between the rows of plants. He remembered planting all this with his parents in the spring, pulling weeds with his brother every few days since then. A honey bee flew into a yellow pumpkin flower near his feet, and Jacob remembered planting them with Pete as they talked about the Jack o’ Lanterns they would make, those glowing signals of spirits that had passed over.

He felt his uncle’s hand on his shoulder. “It’s OK to cry,” Uncle Tom said. “It’s OK.”

Jacob stood there and looked at the garden, the labor of love there in his yard, the new buds and green shoots clamoring for sun, their flowers dripping wet, teeming with life that had sprung from this little patch of earth. He felt the tears streaming down his cheeks, rolling down now, dripping on his pajamas, falling, falling and mixing with the dew on the grass.

Pete wouldn’t be there for any more baseball games. No more comics or Star Wars movies or trips to the beach. No more playing catch before little league. No trips to the mall with Pete’s friends. Somehow, Pete was gone. In spite of how much Jacob loved and missed him, Pete was gone forever, and he wasn’t coming back.

The knowledge hung on him like a new, unwelcome, rough skin, and Jacob felt helpless. His vision blurred through his tears, he looked blankly at his feet and watched as the little bee emerged from the flower of the pumpkin.

“I’ll bring Pete back,” Jacob said. “I’ll make him come back for Halloween.”

In October, Jacob’s thoughts turned as they always did to the greatest night of the year: Halloween. Last year, Pete had gone as a vampire, complete with false teeth, white makeup, blood dripping from his mouth, and a big black cape. Jacob had been a spider. Not spider man, but an actual spider. His mom had made the costume for him from fuzzy black material, and

Jacob had been a sight to behold, an eight legged monstrosity with a long silky web stretched between his limbs, dozens of googly eyes glued to his black skull cap, and a bulbous, grotesque body that looked ready to pop.

This was the first Halloween of Jacob's life without Pete. Filled with grief and nostalgia, Jacob had pored over old photos of Halloweens past, all the way back to his first, when he sat in a red radio flyer wagon, a toddler dressed as Superman, with his brother, the ever-smiling Pete, dressed as Spider Man, pulling him along the streets of their neighborhood.

Jacob's mother wasn't very excited about Halloween this year. She wasn't enthusiastic about anything anymore, not since Pete died. But using his imagination, some cardboard, a bedsheet, lots of paint, and some of his comics as a guide, Jacob managed to put together a good costume, one of a knight errant, with a little help from his parents.

Together, they'd read that Classics Illustrated version of the Knights of the Round Table a few times since summer, the same one Jacob had been reading the night Pete died. Jacob had taken inspiration from it to create his armor, cardboard shield, sword, and helmet. His dad had helped, cutting them out with a utility knife that Jacob was still too young to use. Jacob and his mom had painted everything silver, and she drew the dragon design on his shield, which they painted green and red together. Sitting coiled in fury, its green tail wrapped in folds around its long, serpentine body, its mouth open, belching crimson flame, the dragon was the true centerpiece of the costume, a warning to all that Jacob was a knight of serious purpose.

If only Pete were there, Jacob thought, they could have both been Knights of the Round Table. But no matter. Jacob had a plan for that, as well.

The day before Halloween, Jacob rose early, and went to the garden. Most of it was gone now, the cornstalks harvested and tied together for their front door, the beans and cucumbers and lettuce long since consumed. All that was left, lying here and there through the muddy patch, were the pumpkins.

It had been a fine year for pumpkin growing. They were immense, fat and round, lying there in the dirt, waiting to be plucked from the vine. His mother had already picked a few and placed them on the front porch beside the cornstalks, but the largest ones—the gaudy orange prizes—were there for Jacob to carve.

Pete had given Jacob a book on Samhain some months before. From it, Jacob learned that the light of the lantern was a memory of a spirit that had passed over. Jacob felt sure that with the intensity of his sorrow, he would bring Pete back, if only for a night. He wasn't about to tell anyone he believed such a thing—that the dead could come home, if you loved them enough. But Halloween was a day to remember the dead. A day when it seemed anything was possible. Even if it didn't work, it was worth a try.

Jacob took the largest pumpkin to the picnic table in the yard, and armed with kitchen knives and a soup spoon, he cut a hole in the top, removed it, and began scooping the innards out. When he'd completed that, he cut triangle eyes and nose for the face, and a half-moon, grinning mouth with four teeth, two on the top, and two on the bottom.

He wiped the face clean with a rag and admired his handiwork. He took it to the porch and inserted a votive candle that he would light later, when it was dark. He picked three more pumpkins and did the same with them, relishing the time spent creating these sacred symbols, and at the same time missing Pete, who had always helped with the carving.

In the evening, as the long shadows of dusk fell across the lawns, as the wind rustled the dead leaves in the gutters all along the block, as children began their pilgrimage from home to home to collect their sweet loot on the grandest night of the year, Jacob went to the front porch of his house with a box of matches.

“This is for you, Pete,” he said. “I wish you would come back with me tonight, on quests of errantry.”

Jacob struck the match and opened the top of the first, biggest jack o' lantern. He reached inside and fumbled with the candle, lighting it just as the flame started to burn the tips of his fingers a little. Replacing the crown, he went down the steps to see the keeper of Pete's flame.

Two triangular eyes stared out at him, glowing incandescent. The nose shone orange, the mouth grinned at him. If Jacob didn't know better, he might have thought he saw the lantern wink at him. He went and lit the other three. It was a foursome, just like his family used to be.

His dad came out of the house. “What do you say, Sir Jacob? Shall you and I and your queen mom accompany you on your quests this evening?” He set out a large candy bowl beside the lanterns, and placed a sign next to it that said “Please take one”.

The three of them walked down the sidewalk to their neighbor's house. Jacob went up to the first door, that of old man Kelly.

The door opened and the old man appeared, wearing a gorilla mask.

"Trick or treat!" Jacob yelled, laughing.

The old man made some grunting noises that approximated the sound of an ape, or at least tried to, and flailed his arms out. He lifted his mask, grinned, and handed Jacob a Charleston Chew. Jacob thanked him, placed it in his plastic pumpkin, and continued with his parents, imagining all the while that Pete was with him.

Jacob got plenty of candy at his first three houses, and then he saw him: the knight errant.

The boy was twice Jacob's size, and dressed all in plated mail, with a helm and a sword. The craftsmanship on the costume put Jacob's to shame. He wore lobstered gauntlets that shone in the streetlights, a red feathered plume that stuck out from his helmet, which had a working visor. The whole outfit gleamed like diamonds, and it even made a clanking noise as he walked, as if it were made of real metal. The older boy came down the steps of the old Ellwood place, a big farmhouse with a wraparound porch that had been grand in decades past, but now had paint peeling off its shutters, and loose shingles all over its front and sides. The house was enormous, with overgrown hedges all around it, two stories of ramshackle gloom that looked scary even on a bright summer's day. Tonight, it was glorious.

"Hey there, good sir knight!" the boy called. "Prithee tarry just a moment, and I shall be there, presently!"

Jacob's dad chuckled. "Sounds like another Knight of the Round Table, son."

The boy hurried down the walk to the family. He was pale beneath his helmet, with dark hair not unlike Jacob's own. He held up his visor and smiled at them. There was a small scar near his chin, but whether that was makeup for the occasion or the real thing, Jacob couldn't tell. He was tall and thin, probably a young teen of thirteen or fourteen.

"Come, walk with me!" The boy said, and offered Jacob his hand. He winked at Jacob's parents, who smiled at him, grateful that an older boy wanted to play. Jacob took his hand and they walked a little ahead of the adults, down the sidewalk.

"Who are you?" Jacob asked him. "Do I know you from school?"

“Nay, nay sir knight! Though perhaps we have indeed crossed paths before. I am known to some as the Ill-Made Knight. And who, might I ask, are you?”

Jacob found the boy’s act a little corny, but he was happy for the companionship. “I’m Sir Jacob,” he said.

“Ah yes, good sir Jacob, a pleasure to make your acquaintance!”

“That’s a good costume,” Jacob’s dad said. “Did you make it yourself?”

“I purchased much of it from the blacksmith, by my troth, and was gifted the rest by noble King Arthur himself,” the boy declared. Jacob’s parents chuckled. Jacob saw that they were holding hands, and leaning into one another, and it made him feel at ease. There had been too few happy days since Pete died.

They stopped before a house that had a graveyard planted out front, with electric lit, white plastic ghosts stalking through it here and there. As they went up the walk, a group of boys approached Jacob.

“Hey kid,” said the biggest one, the ringleader. He was dressed as a pirate, complete with a black bandana, an eyepatch, a peg leg, and a hook for a hand. “Gimme your candy.” He reached a hook into the plastic pumpkin and brought out a Snickers bar.

Jacob looked to his parents, who were standing back at the street talking to each other. He was about to call out to them when his friend, the Ill-Made Knight, approached the group.

“Unhand my brother knight, sir, or feel my wrath!” the knight shouted. The boy immediately dropped the candy bar back in the bucket and ran away with his friends.

Jacob laughed. “Thanks, buddy,” he said.

“Don’t mention it,” said the other knight. “We Knights of the Round Table must stick together!”

They walked along and received more treats, and between houses they joked with swordplay and tales of Camelot. They made their way up and down the streets of Jacob’s neighborhood, which had transformed into a carnival of orange and purple lights in doorways, green and black cutout monsters and witches, and at one inspired home, a dry ice machine that created a heavy fog, from which vampires and ghouls emerged with handfuls of candy for the neighborhood children.

After some wonderful hours spent this way, the evening grew late, and the children and their parents thinned out. A half-moon illuminated the streets, casting all in an eerie glow of All Hallows' Eve. Jacob's plastic pumpkin was bursting, a cornucopia of treats. It was the best night he'd had since Pete had passed away.

The jack o' lantern hadn't brought Pete back, the way Jacob had hoped it would. He knew things didn't work that way. That wasn't real life, it was just his dream. The kind of dream that Pete would've encouraged, maybe, but still just a dream.

Now they were back in front of Jacob's house. After a long night of adventure and errantry, they were back home. Halloween was almost over.

Jacob's parents went up the front steps. "Looks like we had a lot of trick or treaters!" his dad said, holding up the empty bowl. "And those jack o' lanterns look mighty fine, son! This one is still burning bright!"

Though the candles on three of them had burned low, Jacob looked to the biggest one, Pete's, which was still burning bright, the flame dancing behind its eyes, its mouth seemingly flashing in the shadows as they approached it.

"Time to come in, son," Jacob's mom said.

"Aw, mom, do I hafta?" Jacob protested. He didn't want the evening to end.

"It's getting cold, son," his mom said. "Just five minutes more." She went inside, but kept a lookout from the front window.

The Ill-Made Knight put a hand on Jacob's shoulder and said, "Sir Jacob, now that we are alone, I must tell you something, though it may seem strange. We have had a glorious evening of errantry! Treasure and loot at every home! And I saved you from bandits."

"That you did, kind sir," Jacob said, playing along happily. "Those pirates were not about to let me go without some ransom, but you stopped them, and I am grateful." He knelt down and offered his sword.

The boy took his own sword and tapped each of Jacob's shoulders twice, first the left, then the right. "Rise, Sir Jacob of The Hallows. And know that Sir Pete, your protector, is ever watchful."

Jacob's heart raced. "You—you're Pete? But you don't look—how—?"

“Indeed, I am Sir Pete of the Hallows, come again to you, though I am now transformed. And I will watch you as ever, for you are my brother whom I dearly love.”

“It worked!” Jacob screamed. “The jack o’lantern actually worked!” His heart raced and he threw his arms around Pete.

“Know this: I am from the mists of Avalon, Sir Jacob. I, and the other knights of kindness and of the table shall be there forevermore. I cannot stay with you, though both of us may wish I could. Love can cure many ills of this world, though perhaps not death. Yet if you ever need me again, kindle your lantern, and I shall appear with aid.”

“Wait here a second,” Jacob said. “I’m going to get mom.”

He turned and raced inside. “Mom, dad, come quick,” he yelled.

“What’s the matter?” his mom said. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine—come, come quick!”

They went down the porch, to the sidewalk.

But Sir Pete was gone. All that remained there, in a pile on the walk, was his armor, his sword, and shield.

Jacob’s dad knelt beside it, and picked up the shield. “My god, this thing must weigh thirty pounds,” he said. He struggled with it for a moment, then dropped it back down in the heap. He tried to lift some of the other pieces, but they were equally heavy.

The next morning, All Saints’ Day, the armor still laid there in a pile. It was too heavy to carry, so Jacob helped his dad pile it in the back of the lawn tractor, and they drove it into the garage. It was heavy metal, much heavier than any boy could have worn.

In his workshop, Jacob’s father melded it together in the form of a knight, with wire and bolts hidden artfully so that no visitors could see. After some weeks, when the suit was finished, it was so heavy they could barely budge it.

So his father called Uncle Tom, and some friends from work, to help. Together they placed the suit of armor beside the front door, as a sentry, a protector, a kind and gentle knight in a world of darkness.

Be you

By Priya Dolma Tamang

I am the modest Moon,
who feels like a sultry Sun,
and is baffled if it should
rise at dusk or set at dawn.

For those who wronged me wild,
or aimed to right my wrongs,
blundered to believe
that they and I were
as deviant as decent days
and notorious nights

—— each, its own gift;
each, its own light.

Now, where do I begin to receive myself?

Your Rebellion

By RC deWinter

You said it yourself: you were always a good boy,
doing what you were told, walking the narrow path
outlined for all your growing up –
even when what that involved cut your soul.

You branched out a little as you filled yourself in.
I imagine you sowed a few wild oats,
but even then carefully,
the velvet voice in your head always ready
with a reminder of who you were and had to be.

Creativity called, but the voice of authority was louder,
drowning out that song, and you obeyed,
though where you enrolled falls outside the norm.
But it took you away from that path for awhile,
giving you the opportunity to express
the many selves you carry.

And when it came time to put down roots,
to add the missing piece, you chose well —
someone suitable, more than presentable,
who had walked that same path,
understood all the rules,
well-mannered, well-dressed,
travelling in a pack with the right set.

And there was love – the kind your people have.
I know it well. I've seen it all my life:
decorous with an easy camaraderie, full of friendship,
but conscripted by the boundaries that hem one to the code.
No emotions running wild and out of bounds,
but thoughtful, more polite than passionate.
And you did what you did and she did what she did
and when you were there, there was always comfort;
it was a fine life.

But somewhere inside there was another voice,
a ghost twin, that sometimes, deep in those nights
you couldn't sleep, whispered truth you didn't want to hear.
And one day, after living that fine life,
you woke up and realized there was no one beside you in that bed.

Then followed a long, dreamlike time,
spent wandering between the worlds of the dead and the living,
feeling at home in neither, alone except for that ghost
that wasn't whispering anymore, but shouting,
taking a pickaxe to a place somewhere inside your chest
you hadn't known existed; every time that axehead hit bedrock
words rang in your head.

More! There must be more, there's got to be more.
More... more... *more*...

And, turning your head in search of more, there I was –
a non-native species, not one of you –

standing off in an overgrown field of weeds and wildflowers,
someone who never had and never could
walk that narrow path, but at the same time so familiar,
because when you looked at me there was that word
– MORE –
hanging round my neck like a sign,
the kind people bring to airports when meeting visiting firemen.

And the longer you looked, the more you recognized
something you'd always wanted but could never have –
not as long as you lived the life prescribed.
An echo of the voice that shaped you resurrected;
you shook it off. You were on fire.
And forgetting to be afraid, forgetting to feel guilty,
you stripped down to your skin and for the first time
owned yourself completely.

Then, taking up that pickaxe, swung it
like a man in the grip of madness,
obliterating that narrow path
until before you stretched a wide, smooth road
without an obstacle in sight; and, forgetting how to be the man
you'd been told you were and had to be,
walked right up to me without a thought for anything
but the recognition of more,
and, crushing me to your chest, remade your world.

Astronomy Lesson

By John Wojtowicz

I met a mermaid who drank St. Pauli Girl
and smoked Marlboro Lights
at a floating tiki bar near Treasure Island.

We discussed the benefits of coastal living
and she highlighted with starfish-pink lips
how solid ground weakens storms.

I described the reddish hurricane hues
of a never-ending tempest, trapped in a landless
liquid-hydrogen ocean on Jupiter.

She asked if I was a man of the stars
batting aquamarine eyes
while flicking an emerald-scaled tail enticingly.

I took her back to see my boat's telescope
and poured her a cranberry-vodka
before showing off the swirl
of the largest storm in the solar system.

Into the Mystic drifted across
an old Zenith Trans-Oceanic shortwave
as she removed her scallop shells for a night swim.

We dived into a reflection of stars
colliding against the natural current with a splash
like crosswinds at the Great Red Spot.

She stayed entwined in my arms until sunrise
wetting herself when necessary
through a hinged access hatch.

Between kisses, I whispered a want for her to be mine,
hinted an intent to ask her father for her hand
but she giggled at my early morning masculinity.

She was daughter only to the tide
and advised I be more attuned to the feminine
winds brewing within the cosmos
as she lit a cigarette and cracked my last beer.

A Fairytale in Which I Am Every Character

By Aimee Lowenstern

In my head grew a thicket of thorns, so large and sharp that the slightest of thoughts could not mouse its way through without drawing blood. Many a night I would take the plunge, slashing at brambles until they caught my flesh and pinned me like a red-winged butterfly. I would look toward my castle, a single turret visible above the chaparral, and I would weep.

The sun would rise then, glossy in a tear-laden sky, and the birds and deer would gather to lift my hands from the needles and remove me from the briar. When I looked behind me, I would see the trees I had untangled from the hedges, and all the soft-mouthed animals partaking in their fruits. They would dress my wounds in leaves, and lay me on a bed of dandelion-seeds, and in the air I could smell the chlorophyll of cut branches.

“I will try again tomorrow,” I would say. I would sleep heavy, and the nightmares would make their nests among the thorns.

Tomorrow came, and another and another, and so many tomorrows that I could no longer see the gates where the thicket had started. When my sword fell upon stone and mortar, every creature in the forest grew silent. They trailed behind me like a fur coat the length of the world, and in front of me was my castle.

The dust was thick on the door, but with my thumb I revealed the crest of my name. My name I had only just remembered, and when I spoke it the door unlocked.

The hallway was gruesome, layered in mold and the bodies of flies. I did not mind; it could be cleaned. The walls were still there, and the floor, and the ceiling, and that was all it needed to stand.

I flung open each curtain and window, and a hundred-year breath was exhaled. The views from the castle were so beautiful! Shining manes of grass, liquid silver waters, tapestries stitched of pine.

The turret had the loveliest view of all. I ran up the stairs. Perhaps from the tallest window I could see the whole of my lands— Perhaps even the place where I had first lifted my sword.

At the top of the stairs was the light sound of breathing; over the bed, a cobweb canopy stirred in the air. I pulled it away, and there was myself, sleeping and radiant, eyelashes making long, tear-track shadows across my face.

I kissed myself, light and warm, and I woke up.



Section II

TALES

OF

Trepidation

*Dare you follow the haunting voices —
Of secret shadows from the heart?
Stories that weave terrors in your mind
And leave you trepid in the dark.*

The Houseguest

By Edward Ahern

Between the divorce and his worsening cancer, Roger was operating with half a life — Janice had taken the house, furniture, and half of everything else. Thankfully, there were no children, and Janice made more than he did, so no alimony.

Janice hadn't known how bad the cancer was when she filed for divorce, and he'd never told her. Roger had hoped for her love and not her pity. She might have left anyway, but he missed not having her often bitchy company.

He'd needed a place to live, and hated the cramped quarters of an apartment. The house he'd quickly settled on had as many health issues as he did. Paint blistering inside and out, a leaky roof dribbling water down over the beams, and a furnace spewing soot over everything. Roger bought it. He might not be able to heal, but maybe the house could.

After all, it matches the state of my health, he'd thought.

The asking price had been low — the grime had ensured that. He negotiated further down and closed on the house. The next day, he scheduled in the roofers and furnace replacement crew. Once they were done, he had painters swarming inside and outside the house. Then he moved in the desk and laptop computer he'd been able to salvage from his marriage, along with consignment shop replacements and his one luxury — a large flat screen TV.

For almost a year, Roger got out of bed every morning at six a.m., shaved, dressed, had breakfast and coffee, and walked seventeen steps to his desk and laptop computer. His shirts hung loosely around his torso, and his pants flapped against his thighs. The almost bare rooms echoed as he walked through them. The only thing hung on the walls was a calendar, and the windows were veiled with sheets that had been white a quarter century ago.

It looks like an abandoned insane asylum. Suits my mood and physical condition, I guess.

After he'd settled in, Roger had briefly thought about exploring the online dating services, but Janice's affair and divorce had left him seared, and he doubted his first dates would warm to his coughing into his napkin.

His friends had largely turned out to really be her friends, and those still in contact were busy with their hard-wired marriages and families. His closest friends continued to call him for several months, but felt awkward about asking about his health and guilty about describing their healthy lives. Over the year, their calls tapered down to almost never. Roger rarely drank and didn't do drugs, so his evenings were tedious.

One evening, while suffering through a cable news cud-chew of a trivial political event, Roger had the prickly sensation that someone was watching him. He glanced around the room, then out the windows, but the only movement was televised light patterns shifting on the bare walls.

I need to change the channel, these talking heads just suck balls.

Roger jerked upright. He didn't think like that. Nevertheless, he picked up the remote and switched to a rerun of a crime show.

I should pay the extra and get some R-rated premium channels.

He jerked again and wondered if he'd taken the wrong meds that evening. Much as he'd enjoy the nudity and gratuitous violence, he couldn't afford it.

Got to recharge my superego, recover some internal restraint.

I wouldn't bother.

Roger shut off the police show before the perp was revealed. He felt an alien twinge of annoyance, but moved into the bathroom and made the nightly, exactingly administered, and futile preparations to counter his lung cancer.

The next morning Roger could barely get out of bed, and called in to say he wouldn't be logging in. His company had offered him indefinite paid sick leave, but Roger had told them that if he was going to get paid, he wanted to contribute as much as he could. He vomited, rinsed out, and forced himself to drink foul-tasting prescription liquid.

You'd be better off drinking your own piss.

Goddammit! Is my mind going as well?

Nah. It's your body that needs to be recalled.

Roger took several deep breaths, clenched his fist, and hammered his thigh with it.

You can't hurt me, but you're working on getting some nice bruises. I'll come back this evening, when you're not so hysterical.

Roger heard a faint pop, like pricking a half-inflated balloon, and he was alone again. He breathed in little pants and felt the veins on his forehead pumping up. His fear thinned out a little, even as he wondered what might be cohabitating the house with him. He wanted to not be alone.

After breakfast, he fired up the computer and logged into his corporate account, but couldn't focus. He shut the laptop back down, called his delivery service, and ordered food and medicine. Then he went back to bed. Not to sleep, just to half-consciously replay his occasionally notable life. He knew it was futile, but he was sick and drugged enough that he didn't push the thoughts away.

The delivery service arrived late that afternoon, forcing him to get up, take in the packages, and put them away. He wanted to go back to bed, but made himself go back onto the laptop and cleaned up the least demanding of his professional chores.

Two hours later, he looked up from the screen and saw that the winter night had arrived.

Put a cushion under your ass before you get bed sores.

This is just a hallucination, he thought. Need to change my meds maybe.

If I was your disease talking, you'd hear worse. Look over at the corner of the room. No, your other corner, the one with the coffee stained sofa.

Roger stared at a dim, mist-edged figure of a woman sitting on the sofa, legs crossed left over right. Skirt, blouse, dark hair. Her colors were muted down toward beige, like a really old photograph. His jaw fell open.

Don't worry, I'll get better looking. Now you've got something to focus on while we talk.

It's a delusion, that's all. He forced himself to stand up and walk toward the sofa. As he got closer, the image of the woman dissipated. He sat down where she had been and a burning itch surged through his skin. He jumped up and backwards and the itch vanished.

Don't do that again, Roger, it's inappropriate.

She was seated on the sofa again, legs crossed right over left.

Okay, go ahead and call your doctor's answering service, but we need to talk after that.

Roger pulled his cell phone out of his shirt pocket and speed dialed.

“Hello?... I’m Roger Heinicke, a patient of Doctor Gupta... Yes, I know he’s not there. I think I’m having a psychotic reaction to my medications... No, I don’t need an ambulance, I just need to know which medications I should quit taking. Could you please have someone check my meds and call me back? Thanks.”

She smiled. *While we’re waiting for the call-back, I can amuse you if you like. It’s just a mind screw, but it’ll feel real to you, and I pretty well guarantee you’ll get off.*

What? No!

Okay, Roger. I know you’re feeling like demented shit, but I’d like you to be happy for me. I don’t get to materialize all that often.

Roger needed to sit, and there was only the occupied sofa and his desk chair. He sick-man shuffled over to the chair and dropped down onto it.

While I’m in this drug coma, why don’t you tell me what you are?

Not a what, a who, you cranky bastard. Call me- Angela. I’m a disembodied persona.

So you’re a ghost.

Roger could feel his consciousness pucker with her exasperation.

No, you lump of protein, we don’t scare people. When the conditions are right, we can make ourselves manifest to some humans. Not many, but some.

Okay, Angela, I’ll play. How many of you are there?

Roger settled into the chair — arguing with a delusion was still better than Fox News.

One version is “we are legion” but there are only about three hundred thousand of us, about one for every twenty-six thousand of you, so see, you’re special.

The woman on the sofa had begun to sharpen in color, and Roger noticed a full mouth and nice legs.

Thank you. Okay Roger, here’s the deal. You’re dying. No, don’t interrupt me, you’re already halfway down the chute. It’s mostly dying people who can see us. So, listen. We need to add to staff, and I’m here to offer you a position before you flop over.

We can’t propagate, but we do increase with the world’s population. We’re looking for thirty or forty thousand recruits to fill the shortfall. No pay, but great benefits and chances for advancement.

You're... I'm... Are you guardian angels?

Angela's laugh was full-throated.

We get that a lot from religious folk. We're — call us facilitators — we were you once, now we're like life coaches, making suggestions.

So you ARE guardian angels, encouraging people to take the right path.

Angela snorted. *No, dummy, you've got free will, you do what you want. Like now. You can turn down our offer and go back to heaven or hell roulette.*

Wait a minute. What happens if there's a global disaster and our population shrinks?

No worries. We never let go of the people we take in. Angela paused. I'm required to advise you that you've already atoned for a lot of the crap you pulled over your lifetime, so your odds of getting into heaven are about even. Not great, but fair.

Angela's image had sharpened. She had dark, bright eyes and equally dark hair. Her expression was-not caring-more like kindly indifference.

You've got a day to make up your mind, Roger, after that the offer goes away.

Why only a day?

You'll be dead, dummy. Congestive heart failure. Call for some some booze and a hooker if you like, it won't matter much on your overall tally.

Roger felt so weak he doubted he could stand up.

What would I be doing?

Your first hundred years or so you'll be jiggering suggestions into people's awareness. It's really gratifying to have a suggestion accepted, but the success rate is even less than a telemarketer, maybe one in a couple hundred. Eventually you'll get more interesting assignments, doing what I do, plus some other stuff I'm not authorized to tell you right now.

What if I say yes and later on change my mind about it. Can I get out? Just be dead and move on to judgement day?

Angela grinned. It wasn't an entirely attractive look. *Afraid not. Eternal is eternal. It's fiendishly enjoyable work, but impossible to get out of. Take your time to decide, you've got all day.*

Roger looked around his almost unfurnished rooms and considered his badly furnished life. *How close will I be with the other facilitators?*

Like imps in a jar.

He coughed into his hands and looked at the blood splattered on them. He made up his mind.

Is there a signing bonus?

Dragons of Our Modern Age

By William T Blackburn

In old times, bedtimes, stories told to entertain
Parables to instruct and explain
That which was unknown
Unobserved by science
Awakened, quickened in the subconscious mind

Great serpentine, winged beasts of legend and lore
Lovers of virgins at stakes galore
Mysteries in caves
Gold and gems in hillocks
Sleeping, waiting for greedy humankind

All these mythical, magical creatures gone from discourse
They never really existed, of course
But if they did
Metamorphosed
Gnawing, scenting our fear with tongues tined

I

Around our hearts, cooing and coiled
Guiding action and deeds well oiled
Breeds the dragon called Greed
Taking more every season
Hoarding beyond all reason

II

Ancient in ancient times and sleeping
Cause for heaving, itching, and weeping
That sharable reptile dubbed Virus Incurable
Super-villain most comic
Folks conjecture it's cosmic

III

Inventive, inquisitive, tinged dark
New-fangled weapons for war, on a lark
This beast named Nuclear "Deterrence"
Around about whom we amble
With mutually assured ends we gamble

IV

Festering, pestering, "Am I bugging you?"
Invading our wounds, pus-filled stew
The lizard: Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria
This calculating beast screamed hoarse
Removal of limbs the only recourse

V

Race, Gender, Religion, this creature never cared
Chewing at our thoughts, as resources are shared
A draconic profile in Hatred
Long talons grasping every day
Tearing up lifetimes in every way

VI

Rely on this beast too long we have done
Digging up, burning up the gifts of the sun
Branded Pollution, offering woe
Changing weather, a slow boil of the sea
Watching coastlines flood, setting polar caps free

All of these creatures, all sons of Fear
Born of "creature comforts" we hold so dear

Marian the Ventriloquist

By Brontë Pearson

Momma killed herself three years ago today. Sometimes when I close my eyes, I can still see the way she clamped hers shut as she pressed hard on the gas pedal and slammed the car into the side of our house. I'd been watching from the yard. Momma didn't like living too much.

I *knew* that, but it didn't mean dealing with her death wasn't tough. I loved Momma. She made chicken spaghetti on Tuesdays and read *Junie B. Jones* books to me at bedtime before she'd go shut herself up in her room and listen to *Nirvana* real loud.

The blood made everything worse. Glass flew everywhere like confetti, as if the impact was celebrating Momma's death for her. Maybe I wouldn't have screamed if Momma had told me she was going to do it first, but she didn't. She kept it a big fat secret. She hurt my heart that day.

Today, I sat and stared at the other kids on the playground as I relived whatever memories I could dig out of the first eight years of my life. Now that we were all herds of eleven and twelve-year-olds, no one played much. Some girls sat a little too close to the boys on the benches. Other girls stood in cliques near the creek, telling each other stories about the dead baby who snatches people up out of there at night. Many of the boys sat atop the monkey bars, competing over who was best at the latest active shooter video game.

I preferred to spend my time slumped against the building, watching. My only friend was Grady. He was at home, waiting for me to get away from this place so we could play and talk about Momma. We talked about her a lot. He knew her when she was younger. He liked her a whole lot and told me stories of how she was kind of scared of him, but eventually started playing games where she would peek around the corner and then run up to him really fast and give him a gentle poke before running back into the other room. She did it over and over until she knew he wasn't going to grab her finger and bite it off.

Finally, the bell rang to go back to the classroom. I didn't really understand why they didn't just let us go after recess; we only had twenty minutes before the school day was over, but they kept us anyway. It was torture.

I didn't get close to anyone as we got into our line to go back into the building, as usual. No one glanced at me, not even with one of those discrete side glances. I didn't exist.

When the final bell sounded, I trudged to the front of the school building where everyone's parents eagerly awaited their child's arrival. I knew, however, that Father would take at least ten minutes to get here, so I sat on a bench by the flagpole and watched as everyone else fled like a swarm of bees. I was glad the weather was turning. The sun was warm but breathed a slight breeze that caressed your cheeks just right, and the smell of Tex-Mex spun its way to me from the restaurant down the street. I enjoyed being outside.

Then Father pulled up in our old Buick, which always sounded like it was gasping for air. I tried to shove my backpack in the space between the seat and the dash, but ended up balancing it between my legs, given the collage of old papers and fast-food bags that cluttered the floorboard. I held my knees level to my ribs, swallowing the discomfort. Father didn't say a word the whole way home and neither did I. We only ever spoke when it was necessary. Instead, I traced the letters on the smooshed McDonald's sack on the floor with my eyes.

When we made it home, I slung my backpack over my shoulder and darted for the door. I couldn't wait to see Grady. Father didn't ask why I was so eager to get inside when he came to unlock the door. I supposed he didn't care.

"Grady!" I called as I leapt into my bedroom. He wasn't on the bed like I had thought he would be. "Grady?" I called again, confused. I opened my closet door and pushed through the pile of dirty clothes on the floor. He wasn't hiding there. I then checked my dresser drawers, behind the curtains, and under the bed, but I couldn't find him anywhere.

I began to cry. I had anticipated playing with Grady all day. I wondered if he didn't want to be my friend anymore. I cried harder.

Finally, I noticed a flash of red peeking from behind the throw pillows that piled against the wall on the floor. Grady's painted mouth was turned up in a smile, a striking focal point against the ivory of his face. His eyes gleamed. He looked happy to see me.

"Oh, Grady! How did you get behind there? Did Father put you there? I don't remember putting you there," I said. I lifted him from the carpet, slid my hand under his waistcoat, and fingered the metal lever in his back that controlled his mouth.

“It doesn’t matter how I got there,” Grady said. “It only matters that we are together now.”

“I guess you’re right, Grady. I missed you so much today.”

“I missed you also.” As Grady spoke, I noticed a good-sized chip in the vertical lines that ran down the sides of his mouth.

“Did someone hurt you, Grady? I didn’t do this, did I?”

“Of course not,” he replied, his voice smooth and reassuring.

“If you say so,” I said, tracing my fingers along the swirls of his hair. The black paint was glossy under the light that shone through the window. “Do you remember what today is?”

“Yes, of course,” he said. “The day your mother ceased to exist.”

“Yes, that’s a nicer way of putting it, I guess. I’ve thought a lot about her today. Would you mind telling me a new story about her? You have told me so many, but I’m sure there must be one I haven’t heard.”

“Let me think,” he said, making popping sounds with his tongue as he reflected. “Yes, okay. One day, when your mother was about your age, she was left alone in the house. Your grandparents had gone to visit a friend in the hospital. Your mother sat on a chair in the living room and stared at me while I sat in my usual spot on the shelf behind the couch. She just stared. She didn’t say anything. Then finally, she got up and got real, real close to my face. She looked me in the eyes and said, ‘Grady, would you like a sandwich?’ I didn’t say anything back, of course, but I think she knew I would be happy to have one, even if I couldn’t really eat it, so she went into the kitchen and made us pimento cheese sandwiches. She pretended to feed me, and it was lovely, even though she didn’t say much of anything. Your mother was a lovely person.”

“Thank you for telling me about that, Grady,” I said. “I’ll be right back, okay?” I laid Grady on the bed, propping him up on my pillows. It was hard on my throat for Grady to tell really long stories, so I was desperate for a glass of water.

I walked down the hallway to the kitchen. I noticed Father stretched out on the couch, staring at the ceiling. It wasn’t unusual for him to do that. I didn’t think he liked living much either.

Once I filled my glass, I started back towards my bedroom. Then I turned to look at Father, and I was suddenly full of rage.

“Father, did you try to hide Grady from me today?”

“What?” he mumbled.

“Grady was hiding behind my pillows. I would never put Grady behind my pillows. And he has a chip near his mouth. Never, ever, ever touch Grady without my permission.”

“Why would I want to touch that goddamn thing?”

“Because you hate me.”

“What? No, I don’t.” His face softened.

“You hate me,” I whispered, staring at the stained carpet. I wanted to shout, my voice piercing through the walls and traveling across the world, but it wasn’t worth it.

Father sat up and looked at me, his dark eyebrows scrunched up like a caterpillar. I turned on my heels and stomped back to my bedroom.

“Grady!” I called. “Tell me everything!” I picked him up and felt for the rod in his back that turned his head. He looked at me.

“Everything about what?” he asked.

“Did Father move you this morning? Did he chip your mouth?” My breathing was harsh in the silence before he spoke.

“Yes, he moved me,” Grady huffed. “He came into the room and picked me up off your bed. He looked at me and said, ‘Creepy fucking doll,’ and then started mumbling about how it was unhealthy for you to sit in your room playing with me all day and how he was going to throw me out! He said it was making you crazy. Then, you’ll never guess what he did, Marian! He started trying to play with me, Marian! He stuck his hand in my back and tried to work my controls, but he was having a hard time and became very frustrated, so he pulled his hand out and stared at me, and then grabbed my mouth and tried to move it himself. He pulled a little too hard and a loose piece of my wood flaked off. He panicked a bit, I suppose, and shoved me behind your pillows. He knew you’d be mad.”

I sucked in a sharp breath and growled, increasing the pitch until it evolved into a piercing scream. I screamed and screamed until Father opened the door and asked what the hell was wrong with me.

“You lied to me! You’re a liar!” I cried, my eyes pooling with warm tears.

“What are you talking about?” Father yelled back.

Grady turned his head to Father. “I told her about what you did this morning. I felt she needed to know.”

Father’s eyes grew wide in response to the curl in Grady’s voice. He’d never heard him speak before. “What did I do this morning? And how are you doing that, Marian?”

“Grady said you were rough with him and wanted to get rid of him because you don’t like us playing together. You broke a piece of his mouth. You wanted to hurt him!” I sobbed and tried to ram myself into Father to push him out of my room.

“Marian, what the hell are you doing?”

“Get out! I don’t want to see you ever again!” My cheeks blazed until they felt raw.

“I didn’t touch your damn dummy!”

I pushed harder until he accepted that I wasn’t giving up. He let what seemed to be every breath of air in his lungs escape, shook his head, and left.

“I am so, so sorry, Grady. Father is a bad man to ever lay a finger on you. He doesn’t appreciate you or your history in our family. He didn’t like Papa much, so I bet he hates you because you were his.” I gave Grady a tight hug. His stiff body hugged me back.

“You are probably right,” he responded. “Shall we seek our revenge?”

“We shall,” I said, defiant.

Grady and I crept out of the bedroom and tip-toed to the kitchen. Father was back on the couch, this time watching *Family Feud*. He didn’t see us come in.

We quietly slid behind the counter to the block that held our knife set. I grabbed the biggest knife from the middle of the block and hid it behind my back. Grady and I crouched on the ground and crawled behind the couch, listening for a moment to be sure that Father had not heard us. When he didn’t move, I propped Grady up over the top of the couch so that his face just slightly dangled in front of Father’s, and he said, “It’s not like you liked living too much,

anyway.” I freed my hand from under Grady’s waistcoat and jumped onto Father’s lap, shoving the blade into his chest over and over and over. Father let out a grunt, and his eyes got real wide. I kept shoving the knife until I knew he was gone.

The blood that erupted from his chest made me think of Momma. Her body had been mangled and crushed from the impact. Blood spilled from every surface of her body, decorating the white exterior of her car.

I climbed off Father and took a deep breath, and then a wide grin spread across my face. I laid the knife on the floor next to Father and retrieved Grady before returning to my room.

“You’re a good friend, Grady,” I said. I patted his smooth head.

“My pleasure,” he replied.

“What would you like to do now? Should we go play in the yard before it gets dark? We can go dig through leaves and look for spiders like we do sometimes. You know a lot about spiders.”

“Sure, we can. We better hurry, though. The sun will be going down before long.”

Grady and I went to the backdoor and welcomed the cool gust of wind that enveloped us as we stepped outside.

“The weather is so nice,” Grady said. “It’s nice to have some fresh air after being smothered behind the pillows all day.”

“I’m happy to help, Grady.” I flashed him my most cheerful smile.

We stomped through the piles of leaves that fell from the giant oaks lining the rim of the yard. We plopped down in the shade and I sifted through a pile until I found an itty-bitty spider perched on a red leaf.

“What kind is this, Grady?”

“It’s the Ant Mimic spider. *Castianeira longipalpa*. They live close to the ground, under rocks and leaf litter. Their movements are ant-like, which is why their name is the Ant Mimic spider.”

“How do you know all of this, Grady?”

“I know everything, Marian. And you learned it at school while you were reading spider books in the library, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right.”

“You can pick him up. I’m sure he will appreciate the company.”

I held my finger gently on the leaf in front of the spider, allowing him to crawl up onto me like a stick. The spider was too tiny to make out much of its features, but I noticed white spots that sprinkled its dark body.

“Hi, sweetie,” I cooed. The spider crept along my finger for a moment, and then it decided to bite me.

“Ouch!” I squealed, flinging the spider away. For such a small spider, it had a strong bite. I turned to Grady, my cheeks filling with heat. “You told me it would be okay to pick him up.”

“He seemed nice enough, Marian. You can’t assume all spiders are evil. They are unpredictable, though. I couldn’t have known,” he said.

“You lied to me,” I fumed.

“I would never lie to you, Marian. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, even better than your Papa or your mother.”

“You lied to me,” I spat. “Did you lie about Father too?”

“No, no, of course not.” Grady was getting nervous.

I stared at his black eyes for a long time, and then I remembered that last night, I had accidentally smacked Grady’s face on the corner of the doorframe when we were coming in from outside. A loose piece of wood around his mouth had broken off. I had felt so guilty for my carelessness that I’d hidden him behind my throw pillows.

“How did I not remember?” I whispered. I started to scream and jump up and down in the leaves, stomping my feet with all the exertion I could muster.

“Remember?” Grady asked, his voice shaky through my buried fury.

“Father didn’t do this to you.” I slid my finger over the place where the chunk of wood was missing. Splinters stabbed into my finger.

I screeched and yanked Grady off my hand as he started to say that Father got what he deserved. I carried him to the side of the house where the dumpster was and chucked him into the hills of trash bags.

“Creepy fucking dummy,” I muttered as I walked back into the house.

I waltzed into the kitchen and popped a bag of popcorn, and then plopped down on the floor next to Father.

“Sorry about all of that. Want a bite?” I asked. I pushed a piece between the slight part of his lips and reclined against the couch.

I spent the rest of the evening watching *Family Feud* with Father.

Reflected Tragedy

By Alexandra Bartholomew

Wandering through the empty halls
I wonder what happened within these walls
The old house sways with *crick* and *creak*
As though tempting me to take a peek
Into a dark and tragic story
Grim, ghastly, and gory.

And though I fear the haunting nights
I find solace with my fair lights
Wispy drapes like dusty gowns
Bewitch the path I'm heading down
To a plain and forgotten door
Which ignites curiosity before...

I peer through the gathering gloom
To see a mirror at the center of the room.
I am drawn by odd connection
To stare at my reflection
But what I see reflected there
Isn't me alone — I swear!

For the ancient looking glass
Is a window to the past —
Where I witness the moments of
A secret and forbidden love

Then like watercolors painted swift
The precious scene does shift.

To my horror and despair
I couldn't warn the loving pair
Of the danger hiding out of sight.
A man holding a dagger tight!
He jumps out with a wicked grin
Channeling the devil within.

Shocked! I fall to the ground.
My desperate sobs the only sound.
Why — by The Fates' wisdom —
Was I shown this grizzly vision?
I can't unsee that horrific scene.
It's a deep scar burned into me.

Thus, I record this awful tale,
Hoping my writing will unveil
Why this ghostly memory
Was left for me to see.

The Woman in the Spring

By Jimmy Pappas

PTSD? Is that what you think? Why? Just cause I was in Vietnam? You people stereotype every one of us, you know that? I knew what to expect in combat, and I knew what was expected of me. I was tough enough to handle it.

Okay. I'll give a little here. Maybe it was PTSD. But not for the reasons you think. There was a woman involved. See? There you go again. Nodding your heads like you expected something like that. Well, let me tell you. Nobody broke up with me. There was no Dear John letter. So put aside all of your preconceived notions and listen to what I have to say.

It all started the summer before my senior year of high school with a baseball game. Yeah, baseball and water. That's right. You heard me. And it was mostly water. Water to drink. Water in her eyes. Water all over her body. It was kind of like that Coleridge poem I studied in English class about the Ancient Mariner. There was water everywhere.

Maybe it started with the filthy jug of water thirteen guys had to drink out of. It would be my turn and there'd be little webs of spittle floating around in it. After playing baseball for a few hours, I told everyone I wasn't thirsty. They saw right through me, laughed, and continued to guzzle down the stuff like it was lemonade.

Maybe it was the fact we couldn't find enough players to have a right fielder. I mean, it really bugged the hell outta me when we had to make anything hit to the right of second base an out. I bragged about how good I was hitting the ball to the opposite field. Then I was called out for doing just that? We usually found some little kid to stick out there. Everyone was happy when that happened. All fields were open and the last kids to get picked got to play.

Or maybe it was just how everything seemed to bug me that morning and the teams were lopsided anyway. Okay, so I struck out a few times. You're obviously too smart for me. You know what a loser you feel like when you strike out on a ball that's just tossed in there? Believe me, you don't wanna ever feel that bad. Pretty much a universal concept, right? I just needed to get away, so I said, *I'm gonna go for a walk in the woods.*

I know what you're thinking. *Oh, great. Now he's going to meet up with some vampires or zombies or the local incestuous cannibal family. Blah, blah, blah. Same ol', same ol'.* But that's not what this is about. For one thing, this is a true story. I'm telling you what really happened to me.

Don't believe me already? Okay, then do me a favor. Get out your Funk 'n Wagnalls or the atlas your Mom always kept on the living room coffee table and check out Webster, Massachusetts. You can find it. It's a real town. It's most famous landmark? Lake Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg. That's Nipmuc Indian for *You fish on your side, I fish on mine, nobody fish in the middle.* At least, that's what the locals have everyone convinced of. But that's just a sideshow to the main event.

Now ask some ol' timer who lived there about Berthold Field. I mean, how could I make up a name like Berthold? I can't because it's a real field. Or at least it was. The ol' timer will know. He can tell you about the sand pits next to it. And if he really knows about that field, he can tell you about the natural spring that used to be out in those nearby woods. Cold water bubbled up right outta the ground. It was drinkable. Best water I ever tasted. Scooped it up with my cupped hands and drank it. Delicious! You could sit on a rock beside the spring just like the fairy on the label of White Rock Ginger Ale. Yeah, you'll need to look that one up too.

I was actually pretty thirsty by then, so I went out to that spring for a cool drink. I walked through the sand pits out into the marshy area that probably kept most adults away. I was just a teenager. I didn't care if my sneakers got muddy. I made it out to the spring, took a long drink, and just sat on that large stone. In no time at all, I felt . . . I don't know . . . I can't think of the word. There has to be a fancy one to describe the calmness that surrounded me. My whole body relaxed. I lost all interest in going back to the game.

I stared at my face in the water for quite a bit longer than necessary when what appeared to be a young woman's hand reached out across the surface to touch my reflected cheek. I spun around, looking for her, but no one was behind me. I looked back down into the wet expanse beneath me, and there she was laughing at me. I spun around again. No one was there. But I could clearly see her on the water's surface. It was a total WTF moment. And if that wasn't scary enough, here's the thing — Oh I swear it! — when her hand on the surface touched my facial

image there on the water, I could feel it on my flesh. I made one of those squeaky sounds — *aaahhh!* — and reached up for my cheek.

Trust me on this. There was no one around me. Absolutely no one. Whatever was going on, it was happening right there in front of me, on top of the water. Then she pointed at me. Straight at my face. There it was. She seemed just as fascinated with me as I was with her.

She wore a greenish robe made of a sheer gauze fabric that flowed like water. What shade was it? Olive? Mint maybe? Definitely had a touch of the ocean in it. It was so suggestive of her body underneath. As the robe moved, I saw glimpses of her bronze skin. Sometimes the material stuck to her skin, sometimes it floated away. My mind went wild with wonder.

I learned quickly what I could and could not do. If I touched the water's surface, it made her uncomfortable. She moved with the ripples to the edge of the pool and shook her finger at me. But if I extended my arm in the air and let the reflection of my hand touch the reflection of her cheek — I say this one more time knowing I will not be believed again — I could feel her skin.

I reached out my hand and touched her face just like she did to mine. Its softness seemed beyond anything I had ever experienced before. There was a moistness to it, like someone had rubbed a beauty cream over it. I felt like I was in the middle of some sort of commercial for how to keep your skin young and smooth.

Her voice was like the murmur of water when a slight breeze flows over it. It had a quiet humming quality to it, a beautiful mixture of rippling water and words. I am not even sure how I understood her. It was unlike any language I knew of, yet I knew what she was saying, both by the sounds and by her movements.

She floated about like a water sprite, the guardian of this sacred spring with its power to heal me. It was like I had just met some sort of ancient Greek nymph out of an Edith Hamilton mythology book. Yeah, I know my mythology. This was her world, and I was now a part of it. I relished every moment there.

I stayed longer than I should have that first day until sunset when the reflections disappeared. It was a total Romeo and Juliet day. Just like those two fictional characters, we were already in love. I was certain of that.

My buddies, figuring I had taken a shortcut home, had all packed up and left. I walked back alone with my hand against my cheek.

I returned to visit her as often as possible that autumn. Baseball was just a distant memory for me. I avoided my friends until they no longer asked me to play any more. My friendships declined, but the first love of my young life only increased.

I read to her from Greek mythology books. It seemed clear to me that she was one of the water nymphs the ancient Greeks wrote about. This was her spring. It was her duty to care for it. I planned to always be there to help out. Listen to me talk. How the heck did I ever get to be the guy to fall in love with a fairy? I mean it's so weird, it's got to be true, right?

When freezing weather was about to arrive, we bid farewell. Even on top of the water, I could see her tears. She would have to go well below the surface of the ice for the winter. We would not be able to see each other again until it melted.

I rushed back with the first sign of melting. I half expected her to not be there. I mean, it had to be a dream, right? But there she was. She told me she felt the same way. She had no idea if I would truly return or not.

After a few moments, I stretched out my arms and held her in an ethereal embrace. I know that doesn't sound physical, but it was as passionate as any other romantic relationship. If someone had a movie camera and filmed me there waving my arms over the spring, I would surely have been placed in an insane asylum. I must have looked like one of those mimes that pretend to be hugging someone and put their hands behind their backs like they're squeezing the daylight out of their lover.

This was my life now throughout the spring season. I was a stranger in my other world. Somehow I managed to avoid too many questions from my guidance counselors. And my parents just assumed I knew what I was doing. In other words, they just didn't care.

One day as my senior year came to an end, my English teacher mentioned the word *gossamer*. Without raising my hand or even my head, I explained what it meant by describing my love's clothing, comparing it to a spider weaving a dress. When I finished, I looked up and saw the teacher and the entire class staring at me. I added, "At least that's what I think," and tilted

my head down again.

I ran home after school and rushed through my lessons. I avoided the other kids and snuck into the woods. The woman in the spring laughed when I told her the story of what happened to me in class. She gave me everything I needed in life.

Sometimes, I even camped out there, falling asleep with my fingers on the water's edge. I wanted to be there when the sun rose and our images flashed on the water. I told her the story of Romeo and Juliet, but she hated the ending. The idea of destruction, especially suicide, made no sense to her.

Her favorite mythology story was that of Pygmalion and Galatea. She wanted to be transformed into human form just like that statue. If she herself was real, why couldn't that story be real? Why couldn't my love become human? Then we could watch over the spring together. Our progeny could follow after us. It was the perfect plan.

There was only one hitch: What do I do about the world around me? The Vietnam War was still raging, but that had to come to an end soon, right? And what about college or work? None of that seemed to matter anymore. I just wanted to be with her, sitting on that rock, out in the woods.

As our second winter approached, the war I had been ignoring never went away. My draft lottery number came up, and I had to enlist in the Army or get drafted. I used my enlistment to delay as long as possible. Winter came, and I was off to basic training. By springtime, I was prepared to go to Vietnam.

On the first warm day, I returned to be with her. I sat on the rock watching the last of the ice melt until her face reappeared. I never doubted her love for me when I looked in her eyes. I explained to her about war and honor. I told her it was something I had to do, even though it would keep us apart for a while.

Before I left for overseas, I went to her to promise I would return. I made it clear there could never be anyone else for me. And then I shipped out in late spring. Within three months, I would be wounded in action. I had to go through reconstructive surgery and physical therapy at a base on Okinawa. I was a model patient. I saw her face in everything I did, in every glass of water I drank.

When I rested, I would look out over the ocean through my hospital window. Water always reminded me of the woman in the spring. I hinted to the doctors what they seemed to guess: that I was dedicated to returning to the woman I loved. But I never gave them any details.

Finally, I shipped back to the States. When I got home, I greeted my family and rushed out to the woods. Along the way, I noticed all the changes that had occurred over the time I had been away. Condos were being built. I figured kids were watching baseball in front of a tv set instead of playing it on a field. Much of the forest had been cut down. Even some glacial boulders had been removed. I walked faster like those Olympic walkers until I just sprinted as fast as I could.

When I reached my destination, I saw a home had been built where the spring should have been. A *For Sale* sign stood in the yard. Balloons advertised an open house. I couldn't believe it was possible that a house could stand on such wet ground.

I entered to be greeted by a real estate agent. I asked him what happened to the spring that used to be here.

He was ecstatic. "Oh, yes! We have natural spring water! Just turn on the faucet and try some. Best water you ever tasted! Guaranteed!"

"Oh, no, man. Why did you do it?" I cried.

He responded, but I ignored him. I pushed by, rushing to the kitchen sink and turning on the water.

A loud, metallic scream echoed throughout the house.



Section III



Tales Of Phantasy

*Dare you follow the siren calling —
Of imagined worlds and galaxies?
Legends of love and of questing
Born from far-off fantasies.*

The Burden of Sigyn's Arms

By Kristina Heflin

Drip, drip, drip

I watch the venom splash
into the dish I cradle
above my husband's head.
It is a part of me
the incessant dripping
like the bowl
the chill of stone
where it grinds into my knees
and the ache in my arms
as I hold them up for eternity.

The dish is heavy
my eyes are heavy.
I am brought food
and water. Never sleep.

I think about my husband
writhing beneath me
chained by his wrists
ankles, chest.
He doesn't belong with gods.
Neither do I.
What place does a woman
of devotion have among those

who feast on blood and lies?

We need each other
we fellow outcasts
and our happiness
incenses baser minds.

I think about our children
and my tears flow down
to mingle with the toxin.
No two were more cherished.
Love's offspring
turned to monsters
to the chains that bind us here.

I think about what I would do
with this sulphuric concoction.
I would collect every drop
that has fallen since
we were thrown into this pit
I would flood the streets
until every man saw his child burned
watched his wife's body
racked with spasms.
Then maybe they would know
a fraction of my pain.

I would straighten my aching knees
walk in the throne room of Valhalla
and pour what remained
into the one good eye of the All-Father.

But the dish is heavy
my eyes are heavy.
I am brought food
and water. Never sleep.

I yawn and blink
and stare as the poison
drops down.

Drip, drip, drip

The Praetor of Cyrhestica

By Muhammad Irfan

Who is this man? Who stands before?
Who presides outside of Rome's own laws,
A sullen beast upon Anthony's floor.
Where stood you in the Social War?
Who shamed our Republic, to enrich his home?
How we common citizens laughed as we saw,
A young Bassus stark nude made to roam down Rome.

Damn Bassus! No finer turncoat!
Deceased Caesar regrets his long dotes,
Your campaigns ungrand and destiny remote.
Why now do you again side against us?
And wage a war against Caesar's Heir -
But who are we to sound so treacherous,
Long Live the Second Triumvirate! A bill of fresh air.

Where march you now? Where do you go?
Not to our borders where now Parthian's plough?
Be sure never to meet the "Banker's" woe.
All Hail Bassus! Who avenges us!
On such an anniversary, to crush
the arrogance and triumph in dust.
Your legions joined by a ghostly seven,
Grant him a Triumph, now and in Heaven.
Bassus! Bassus! Bassus!

APPEARANCES

By Nicolas Sampson

The tiger made her way along the edge of a clearing by the tall grass. Her head hung low and weak, her once spectacular fur was anemic, blotchy, lined with patches of dried blood. She made slow progress, limping on her front paw.

From the branch of an acacia tree in the middle of the wide clearing, stretched lazily in the shade, the leopard watched with interest.

“Darling!” she shouted, “you look terrible.”

The tiger didn’t respond and the leopard sniggered.

“Cat got your tongue, baby?”

“Always with the jokes, this one,” the tiger mumbled in a low roar, her voice carrying across the distance.

The leopard sat up on the branch, scrutinizing her opposition. The haggard figure of the once-formidable tiger – the limping, brittle approach – amused her.

“Us felines,” said the leopard, “have to look out for each other. I hate to see the likes of you suffer.”

“Mind your own business,” growled the tiger. “Tree-hugger.”

“Oh, but I am,” said the leopard. She sat back down on her branch, rubbing her cheek on the fragrant bark. “Minding my own business indeed, thinking about sweet, juicy, sumptuous delicacies and – trust me – I like what I’m seeing.”

“The only thing you’ll be seeing sitting in that tree like a starlet are your front paws. And the foliage you’re hiding under. And the only delicacy you’ll ever catch is the resin of the bark you’re rubbing on, and a stiff neck.”

“Somebody’s sensitive today,” howled the leopard, as if announcing it to the forest. “Does your paw hurt so much you can’t take a joke?”

“Why don’t you come closer, see how well my paw works?”

“Are you playing one of your tricks again? I’m not a kitten, baby!”

“Smells like fear to me.”

The leopard cackled and a flock of mockingbirds flew out of the grass. “My noble darling,” she said, stretching her powerful legs, “I didn’t know you were so desperate. So basic! Sounds like carrion is on the menu for you. I hear it’s especially pungent this time of year.”

The tiger shook her head and limped her way into the tall grass.

Hiding in the thick vegetation, the jackal licked his muzzle with his long tongue.

“Well, isn’t that interesting!”

He gnawed on a furberry below his sternum and disappeared into the grass.

A few days passed. The forest was hot and quiet. Birds nested inside the tree branches and rodents kept to their cool burrows. Larger mammals like the water buffalos and tapirs meandered around the ponds and salt licks, but they, too, disappeared as the temperature rose. Only the crickets kept busy, rubbing their legs together. The sun was high up in the pale-blue sky and at the far end of a wide clearing on a desiccated log sat a committee of chattering vultures. Beyond them stood a tall yellow-green wall of grass, its thin stems transfixed in the midday heat.

The tiger limped into the clearing, making her laborious pass through the forest. She was halfway through when the jackal jumped out from the grass.

“Hey, Stripes!” he barked.

The tiger didn’t turn.

“Stripes!” he repeated, his tail in the wind. “What’s the matter? Why all the groaning? And what’s with those wrinkles?”

The tiger paused and took a long, hard look at the canine. He looked confident, his grey, scabby tufts of fur poking out of his puffed chest, a scrawny creature who deemed himself a predator, a bully who tormented little creatures. Voles, lizards, bird hatchlings, he took pleasure in dominating them. He ate insects, walked around with grasshopper legs sticking out of his mouth and that stupid grin on his face. Always pinched and full of himself, he vanished at the sight of someone his own size, swearing vengeance next time round.

Worst of all, he killed and ate newborn calves.

His pack had exiled him years ago, putting out word that he interfered with the sustainability of the herds.

And here he was, sniffing around her business.

“What a sorry sight you are, purr-face,” said the jackal, his tongue hanging from the side of his mouth. He strutted round in wide loops. The grass hissed in the passing breeze. Two vultures landed on the crowded log, flapping their wings as they joined their committee. The jackal trailed the tiger down the clearing, keeping his distance. There was no reason for unnecessary risk. In a world of brawn it paid to be smart – play to your strengths and to everyone else’s weaknesses.

“I’ve been watching you drag your sorry carcass around for days,” he said with a grin, zigzagging behind the tiger. “Didn’t they teach you at apex-predator school never to catch an injury? Or is it old age you’re suffering from?” He paused to let the words sink in. “I guess the new boss around here is the leopard,” he added, “although, if you ask around, everyone knows that the leopard was always the boss. The *real* boss.”

The tiger kept walking.

“Sure, she’s arrogant and vain,” continued the jackal. “Showing off her spots and her sensual figure, stretching her limbs on those branches like a slut. And yet she owns the forest now, including you, Stripes!” The jackal glanced around, then ran ahead of the tiger. “It was a matter of time,” he said with a grin. “The weak make way for the strong. The old make way for the young. And the decrepit, like you, are dying out because that’s sickness: rain that washes away the dirt.”

The tiger came to a halt, ears flickering, driving away the flies around her head. She glanced left, right, somewhere in the distance.

“What’s the matter, darling? Forgotten where you’re going?”

“I should have killed you back in the day when I had the chance,” she growled.

“What was that, darling?”

“I said idiots like you are the forest’s bane.”

“Dear me, haven’t we turned philosophical and prickly in our difficult days!” The jackal moved round in a wide loop. “You know, pussycat, I always thought you were overrated, but no one believed me. They insisted you were the queen of the world, ‘majestic in your shiny royal

fur, your sleek posture,' but the truth is you're a bully. And you're going to get what you deserve. Your time's up."

The tiger resumed her walk, her front paw crooked, barely touching the ground, her heavy tail waving around.

"The problem," the jackal persisted, "is that I'm a canine, and the stink of pride and vanity coming from you hurts my nose."

"It's easy to be brave from a distance."

"So you can hear me after all. At least the ears are functioning. I have so much to tell you."

And so it went. The jackal followed the tiger around, taunting her as the day grew hot and the shadows receded. The sun was high in the sky and the air sticky and uncomfortable. The unlikely pair made their way through areas of yellow grass and low bush and brambly tree thickets, into another clearing, at the end of which stood an acacia tree. The leopard lay on one of the low branches, dozing off in the midday heat. Not far off, surrounded by vultures, were the remains of two buffalo carcasses.

The tiger observed the unruly scavengers. Their beaks were bloody with guts and sinew, their dust-dry feathers scraping against each other as they fought over scraps. Thugs, but also survivors, lowlives with an uncanny ability to sense an opportunity to feed, always in the right place at the right time, stepping in to exploit someone else's work. A filthy and lazy approach, but it worked.

Was the jackal much different? He, too, played into his strengths, found the edge that kept him alive. So far.

The tiger turned toward the canine. He was standing to her right, watching her through his tiny, fiery brown eyes with a grin on his face.

Further down, in the acacia tree where the leopard was resting, hung a freshly killed antelope.

The jackal turned and yowled with glee.

"Hey, Ms. Spotty!" His long tongue dangled from his mouth. "Great catch! Did it climb up the tree and land in your lap?"

The leopard raised her head and her tail shot up. She stood on her legs and stared back for a long time, whipped her tail a few times, then sat back down and rested her head on the burl.

“Such is life, Stripes,” said the jackal. “The queen feasts on her succulent kill while the scavengers fight over scraps. Don’t worry, it should be easy pickings for you. All you have to do is shoo away the feathery pests and the carrion is yours.”

To drive the point home, he charged at the vultures, barking and snapping. The birds flapped their wings, screeching and raising a cloud of dust that spread across the clearing. The tiger narrowed her eyes. She sat down to rest, licking her paw.

The jackal circled round with a satisfied grin.

“How does it feel to scrape the bottom of the barrel, your Royal Highness?”

“I’d keep my distance if I were you, mutt!” The tiger’s green eyes glinted. “One slip and I’ll grab you by the scruff of the neck and rip you from throat to groin and toss your carcass to the birds.”

“You speak like a cripple at the end of her wits.”

“Why don’t you come closer, see how well my wits work?”

“Oo, scary! Tell me, your Thunderous Highness, do you think the humans will make a bag, pants, or rug out of your hide? Something to rub their boots on, maybe?”

The tiger got up and glanced at the leopard, then made her way to a stretch of tall grass, tracing its boundary, the beat of her tail adding to the cloud of dust. The sun was at its strongest and the forest was calm.

The jackal trailed her closely.

“I’m going to make you pay, pussycat. Your time’s up. I’ll make you chew on all those years you strutted around like you owned the place, making me feel like garbage. You’ll discover what it means to be on the wrong end of the hierarchy. This is my time. You’ll suffer my shadow the same way I suffered yours.”

“I hope you’ve had your fun,” the tiger purred.

“What was that, Your Highness?”

The tiger grinned, and narrowed her eyes. “The leopard in the thicket behind you – ‘Ms. Spotty’ to you – I just signaled her to cut you off.”

The jackal laughed.

“Hilarious! You think I’m a pup, pussycat? Get over yourself!”

“Go on! Turn your head. Take a peek,” said the tiger, stretching her front legs. A battery of sharp claws slid out of their gloves. “The leopard is still resting, you’re right.”

“You’re playing with me, pussycat!” The jackal gnawed on his sternum. He straightened up, eyes on the tiger’s claws. Each one looked as thick as his leg. “I’m not falling for it.” He wanted to check out the acacia tree behind him, but that would send the wrong signal. “Cheap trick! How desperate can you get?”

“Let me show you. Stay where you are.”

“Ha! You’re pathetic!”

“And you, my dear fellow, are reluctant to ruin the brave face you’ve been putting up. A wise choice, since we now have an audience in the grass. They’ve been watching us all day. You can’t let them down now. If they see you flinch at the crippled tiger, you’ll be the laughingstock of the forest – again!”

The jackal scanned the vegetation with his eyes. He couldn’t make anyone out. A haze of dust hung in the air. The field had somehow shrunk. The screeches of the vultures intensified. A few of them circled above.

“See, my clever little canine friend,” said the tiger, glaring at him with bright murderous eyes. “I would worry less about posture and more about the right field position. That’s where hierarchy comes from. Advantage. Being in the right place at the right time.” She scratched the earth, tearing deep grooves in the earth. A gurgling roar emanated from her throat. The jackal told himself it was a bluff, but his heart beat fast.

He stepped back and the tiger took a step forward. He took another step back and the tiger matched it, head low and firm between her shoulders. The jackal blinked and shimmied on the spot, painfully aware of the tiger’s sudden nimbleness. Had she really tricked him? He screwed his ears to catch anyone creeping up on him but in that split second the tiger gained an extra couple of paces on him, and the jackal turned to run but stumbled, sliding on the dry earth. The tiger pounced and came crashing in, fangs first. The jackal jumped to the side and the tiger’s hip smashed against his haunches, sending him spinning. He somehow recovered and leaped

forward, but as he reached out he felt a blow in the rear and flew across the air, crashing onto the ground.

In the corner of his eye he saw a lean shadow move up and caught the smell of something sweet and acrid. The next thing he saw was an echelon of claws smash into his face and his head exploded. He collapsed, body weightless, and a heavy bulk fell on him and crushed him, a rod of fire shooting down his spine, and he passed out.

When he opened his eyes, the sun was in his face. He was cold, his body twitching. A head leaned in, blotting out the sky, a golden halo around a feline shape, whiskers gleaming in the backlight.

“I warned you,” said the purring voice.

The jackal wanted to snarl but only a groan came out.

The shadow moved closer, its breath saturated with blood.

“Close your eyes, pup. It’s past your bedtime.”

Late afternoon in the forest. The animals came out of their hiding holes to eat and drink and socialize. The songbirds chirped in the trees and the rodents scurried around, dodging the keen-eyed hawks that glided above. The water buffalos ate grass and locked horns by the riverbanks, the crickets ripped through the afternoon in their disjointed chorus, the vultures feasted on the carcass of the jackal in the clearing, soon to be a pile of bones for the worms and ants. The forest shone golden in the rays of the setting sun.

On the low branches of the acacia tree the leopard stretched her legs, grinding away at her catch, while the tiger sat along the edge of the grass, watching the busy forest. It had been a long day on the back of a difficult operation for the striped predator. The jackal had been wreaking havoc among the grazers for weeks, violating the calf quotas, leaving his mark all over the territory.

It had taken a week of hobbling and languishing to draw him out.

Flylylylyly

By RubieKanary



Rubie
Kanary

Not a Love Poem

By Shaira Afrida Oyshee

He often asks me if I had written a love poem about us.

I haven't,

I tell him, I have grown out of ornamented words that mean nothing.

I think those love poems are mostly puffery.

An ingenuine lover can bake a perfect one, given the age-old recipe;

A big verse about how the lover's cheeks are soft peaches,

Or how their wit is sharp as a sword, or their skin is pale and pure as petals of white wild flowers
in spring,

How the moon would be afraid of their beauty,

How they could grab some stars and place it on foreheads like dew drops,

As if the stars that live light years away, larger than earth itself, lay in their backyards.

Why do we write such dishonesty with words that can construct the most beautiful truths? Like
how we are very small, how we don't know what's going on,

but we live for a few years and feel a lot of things, and that's quite fun, that's quite enough.

I tell him, we are here scratching a block of metal,

expecting there is something hidden inside,

there isn't;

And then silence.

I have no poetry to fill this silence,

but he has his wit; sharp as a sword.

“You know for a poet, you're pretty unromantic, it's almost like catfish, but not really”

I agree, I say meow.

I continue with the recipe for the perfect love poem,

Long adjectives (add according to taste),

Promises (to be poured carelessly)

Pinch of clever words

Metaphors of heavens and angels (Much like garlic, the more the better)

Mix well.

Spread it all over a paper of your choice.

Voila! A love poem!

—

But I can offer him an analogy, so I do,

When I think about what we have, I imagine two kids.

They know little of the big cities and buildings that pinch the sky.

The air in their village is infused with shiuli, the earth tapped by rain.

They are bonded by nothing but a promise; meet every morning,

between the two low coconut trees that rest beside the pond.

They marked their place there with two bricks.

The leaves touch their foreheads; they pull some off.

In silence, in the cool rain-washed morning, they decorate each other with
all that they can make.

Tilt their heads slightly after each addition.

By noon they have ten rings on ten fingers, a crown, two watches made of
knots.

They look like they have come from elsewhere, but their madness have found a home.

That Kiss Was Mine

By Philipp Ammon

That kiss was nice
I had a dream
I felt the touch
Whose lips on mine?
Methought, benign
Your lips I felt — on mine
And I was loved by you at last
Beloved, bedeaed by you at least...
And glad I was,
I thought of thee —
How sure I was it real to be!
'Twas not a crime:
That kiss was mine!

the underworld does not discriminate

By Anastasia Jill

I like the sky today
said one Sapphic to the other;
the sky is concrete, a slab of prism.
It won't break your heart.

A man-cloud comes along
breaks the day into a storm.

The Sapphic says,
they will pay for this;
they will pay... for their mistakes

The Call of the Grim

Tami Veldura

Nariah absently rolled a loc of her hair and squinted at her textbook. "‘So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, so long lives this, and this gives life to thee’ ... *what?*" It wasn't even old English, it was like, Greek trying to pass as English. Badly. She propped her head up and blinked at the sonnet again. "Shall I compare thee..."

Nariah muttered the lines to herself as she reviewed them again. The desk in her room bathed in the yellow glow of a single spotlight lamp. Her bunk bed, the flaking white dresser under it, and the rest of the room sprawled with yesterday's clothes. Tomorrow's stunning art projects huddled in the eight pm shadows. She hated working on homework this late, but after school she had choir, and then tennis, and by the time she got home the sun had already set. She never had any time to herself.

So under the yellow lamp, surrounded by the dark, Nariah grumbled at her English textbook. She checked her phone, but Odessa hadn't texted her back yet and Nariah didn't want to get into another fight with Kaiden over something stupid—he'd lost his mind since he started dating that boy, Larence or Lance or whatever.

She sighed heavily, leaned her cheek in her hand, and tapped her pencil on the desk. That left English. And Shakespere, which might as well have been Greek.

Something tugged in Nariah's chest: a sensation like yearning, but with direction and intent. That was far better than analysing Shakespeare. "Mom!" She scraped her chair back on the wood floor and snatched a coat from her bunk bed rail. Nariah bent to grab a pre-packed duffel from beside the dresser and stormed down the stairs. "Mom! A grim just woke."

Nariah's mother stood in the kitchen, tossing a flaming something in a saute pan in one hand while holding a baking dish with an oven mitt in the other. She was short, slim, and softer than the sharp corners at her eyes implied. The kitchen counters were littered with casserole dishes and tupperware full or about to be.

"Mom, Mom!" Nariah slid to a stop on the tiled floor, her bag hanging off one shoulder.

"I heard you. Get your shoes on. I'm not dropping another meal half-cooked."

"But, Mom—"

"Shoes, Nariah," her mother snapped. "Then help me put some of this food in the deep freezer for church this weekend." She set the baking dish down on the island. "What direction is it?"

"Ugh..." Nariah closed her eyes to feel the tug and pointed to the back of the house. "That way." There were grim buried all over the city, in every graveyard, sometimes even on public grounds, but Nariah was one of only a few that could sense them. She'd never met anyone else who could.

"Call Odessa and let her know we're picking her up on the way."

Nariah tapped a button on her phone and yanked the laces up on her shoes. "Call Odessa," she told it. Her friend picked up on the first ring.

"Hey."

"There's a grim in your direction, Mom wants to pick you up. Can you be ready?"

"Yes, that's more like it—" Then from a distance, Odessa's voice called, "Mom! Nariah's picking me up, we gotta go help a grim."

Nariah could sense grims, see them, speak with them, but that was about the extent of her power. Odessa on the other hand, could do much more.

In the distance, Odessa's mother said, "*Not unless you're done with your English homework.*"

Odessa groaned, "Aw, fuck—"

Nariah's mom barked, "Watch your language, missy!"

Nariah winced. "Sorry, you're on speaker. I'm changing."

"Sorry, Mrs. Boyd. Nari, can you help me with English? This stupid sonnet doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, we can study session at your place when we're done. I'll grab my papers."

"K, I'll be outside."

Nariah raced up the stairs to throw her homework together into her backpack. By the time she made it back down her mother had shut down the kitchen and was sliding into her jacket.

Together they piled the tupperware in the deep freezer in the garage.

"Ready?" Mom asked as she closed the lid.

"Yeah." Bookbag over her shoulder and heavy duffel in her hand, Nariah piled into her mother's minivan, squeezing past the workbench on the way. As she shoved her things into the back seat, her mother added her tennis bag to the collection. Nariah looked up, "You think we'll be out that late?"

"I don't know, but if you sleep over at Odessa's you won't have to stop here in the morning for it."

Nariah smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

Her mother smiled back. "Buckle up."

At Odessa's house, her mother stood out on the walk with her arms crossed and the kind of frown that made anyone think twice. Nariah had faced that frown before. She grabbed her book bag and hopped out of the van.

Miss Caldwell was taller than Nariah's mom by a lot, and bigger all around. She was the kind of woman who would play football with all the dads at church and had enough strength to move one of the pews by herself. Nariah offered the woman her bag.

"Miss Caldwell, I know Odessa's not done with her English homework so I wanted to trade her for mine. I'm not done either. We'll do a study session afterward, I promise." She tried not to fidget with the growing pressure under her sternum. The grim needed help.

Miss Caldwell's lips pressed into a line. "Third time this week, Nariah."

"Yes, Ma'am." Nariah didn't have anything to say, it *had* been the third time. And there was nothing she could do about it. She didn't control when the grim woke, she could only help when they called.

Miss Caldwell took her book back and grunted at the weight. "What's in here?"

"Shakespeare."

Miss Caldwell humphed. "Odessa!"

Her daughter sprinted from the doorway, a duffel bag of her own over one shoulder. She was dressed and ready, as anxious as Nariah. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of Miss Caldwell.

"You both have your crosses on you?"

Odessa pulled out her necklace and Nariah held up her wrist where a cross dangled on a bracelet.

"Be safe. No heroes in this family."

"*Yes, Ma'am.*" They said together.

Miss Caldwell's eyes softened a bit. "You get into trouble, you call me. I'll start the round-robin."

Nariah could see the grim and Odessa could fight what woke them, but sometimes it took a group of adults to take care of business.

Nariah nodded. Miss Caldwell kissed her daughter's forehead, then Nariah's. And that was the signal they were looking for. Nariah and Odessa sprinted for the van and clambered in over the duffle bags.

Nariah's mom leaned toward the window. "We should be back in a couple of hours, Edith. I'll have the girls text you."

They all waved goodbye.

Naria hunched over her phone, zooming in on the map. "Drive past Catholic Cemetery, Mom. If it's not there, it'll be at the Magnolia."

They cruised down the freeway and as the little dot marking Catholic drew up beside them, Naria knew. "It's here. Definitely."

Her mother pulled off the freeway and made a sharp right to avoid a line of excavation equipment lined up along the road. They pulled into the cemetery parking lot. Odessa and Nariah slid their doors open and unzipped their duffels from the seat.

Nariah's bag was packed full weapons: maces and claw hammers, mostly. She slid two small hammers into the loops on her pants and another large one into its sling on the left. Her favorite mace, a long handle with a ball of spikes at the end, she hefted with a grin. "This never really gets old."

Odessa waggled her compound bow at Nariah before slinging a quiver of arrows over her shoulder and counting them under her breath. Nariah's mother pulled a long machete out of the trunk. "You dipped your arrows, Odessa?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Good." She pressed a button on her key fob and all the doors eased closed. "Nariah, lead the way."

Nariah took a deep breath of cold air and held it, letting the throb of intent under her breastbone speak louder. It thrummed with energy, with the assurance that only a grim could have. "This way."

She lead them between the twisted remains of a mangled fence and across the graves toward a hill in the yard. An old oak decorated the peak and from there she could see the grim. The huge dog, like a cross between a mastiff and a rottweiler with twice the mass, sank his teeth into the decayed arm of a zombie and tore it apart.

"Yuck," said Odessa. "That's the grim doing that, right?"

"Yeah, he's here," Nariah confirmed. "Alright. I'm seeing one grim, two zombies are up and it looks like three more are on the way." She pointed down the hill where the dirt was rolling. "We also have a crypt back there, so potential vampire."

Odessa's expression soured. "Goodie."

"We should come down the left side and team up with the grim. Push across this way. Pick up the zombies as we go."

Nariah's mom nodded. "I'll stay here and keep an eye on the field. You have another zombie rising." She pointed. "Sweeping across puts your back to the crypt. Be smart. I'll direct you from here, just make sure your phone's on walkie-talkie."

"Right. Love you, Mom."

"Love you, too. And you, Odessa." She bent to kiss their foreheads.

"Love you, Mrs. Boyd."

Nariah hefted her mace and broke into a loping jog. Odessa followed right behind her, the quiet hiss of an arrow sliding out of her quiver.

They paused at a tall headstone and Nariah watched the grim shoulder into a fresh zombie, knocking it down to rend limbs apart more easily. The grim were guardians of the dead and living. Before Nariah started hearing their calls—or feeling them in her chest, more like—they'd taken care of any zombie problems by themselves. That was why they were buried everywhere, the first line of defense.

Odessa notched her arrow, stood straight, and pulled it back. She let it fly. Nariah saw the grim look up at the sound. Odessa's holy water-tipped weapon lodged in the remaining flesh of a zombie. It turned toward the girls. Then it burst into living flame and fell in pieces to the ground.

"Nice shot."

"Thanks."

Every week when they attended church, Odessa dipped her arrows in a bowl of holy water she blessed herself. If Nariah tried to shoot them, well, first she'd miss since she was lousy with a bow, but if she did hit, nothing would happen. There was something about Odessa—the pastor at church said a touch of God lived in her.

"Don't shoot me, please." Nariah hefted her mace again and lunged toward the battlefield. The grim barked, a deep echo of sound, and ripped the femur from a fallen zombie. He rushed toward Nariah with his gift. She tried not to touch it.

"Who's a good boy, Grim? You're a good boy." She gave him a hearty scratch, then turned away with a kissing noise. "Come!"

The grim kept his bone, but bounded ahead of her into the next zombie. He play-bowed over the struggling corpse, his nub of a tail twitching rapidly. Nariah swung her mace from above, crushing the zombie's head and neck. Wet things splattered over her shoes and jeans. She grimaced. "Dangit, I just got the blood out of these."

A zombie burst into flames, throwing shadow and light in odd directions. Odessa downed a second one, lighting up the graveyard and exposing a dozen new rising corpses. The grim growled and crunched the bone in his jaw.

Nariah marched forward. "Come, Grim. Let's bury some bones."

The grim barked. Odessa nodded at Nariah's glance and together the three of them moved forward. With the grim and hours of tennis practice combined, Nariah's mace made short work of the next round.

Through the phone-turned-radio, Nariah's mom said, "One rising behind Odessa."

Nariah let the grim bound ahead of her as she checked on her friend, but Odessa had things under control. She took a breath, aimed, and another zombie burst into flame.

Carefully, Nariah, Odessa, and the grim worked their way from one end of the cemetery to the other. Miss Caldwell's warning stayed in the front of Nariah's mind. There were no heroes in this family. It meant no one was allowed to run off and save the day by themselves. They worked together as a team and if things got tough, they needed to rely on Nariah's mom and, in an emergency, the round-robin team of parents Miss Caldwell could rally at a moment's notice.

There were systems in place to help them if they needed it, but with Odessa at her back, and Mom watching from the top of the hill, they didn't need anyone else.

Nariah smashed her mace through the torso of a zombie, then crashed the iron down on its head. The grim barked and danced around her, just delighted to have friends to play with. As Nariah wiped her mace on the grass, Odessa came up beside her.

"Is that the last of them?"

"I think so," Nariah agreed.

Then the grim crunched his bone and growled. Nariah glanced at him.

Mom's voice chirped from the phone, "Mist is pouring out of the crypt. Odessa, move up the hill behind one of the big headstones for cover. Nariah, stay to the right."

They followed directions immediately, splitting to keep eyes on the crypt and whatever was about to come out of it. From the hillside Odessa had a clear line of sight. Nariah put her mace down in the grass and hefted one of her claw hammers instead. It was heavy on the head, not at all balanced for proper throwing, but Nariah had been practicing with them.

Mist around the crypt thickened and boiled like steam from a pot, then a creature appeared to float out of the white clouds. The crypt door remained sealed somehow, but Nariah hadn't fought a monster that she couldn't hit, so she took aim, stepped forward, and threw her claw hammer with full force.

The creature watched her movements, saw the hammer fly, and... *shimmered* out of place. It seemed to blink forward several steps, right past the hammer, which impacted the crypt with a dull thump.

"Definitely a vampire!" Nariah shouted. She groped at her side for the mace, unwilling to let the vampire out of her sight for a blink. "Grim? Grim, go get him!" They'd never faced a vampire before, only seen photos and videos from others around the world, and Nariah found her earlier flippancy lost in the knot of her stomach. She knew they were fast. She didn't expect it to be *teleport-fast*.

The dog barked and charged forward.

Odessa released an arrow. It hit the distracted vampire square in the chest, sinking in several inches, but it didn't seem to care, and no flames rose up to burn it to ash.

The grim lunged for the vampire, growling and snapping. The vampire shimmered to the side, then again, circling the dog with a curious look. Another arrow sank into its back, but still no flames.

Nariah hefted her mace and bounced on her feet, eager to get into the fight, but cautious. If vampires could move faster than anything, faster than Nariah could see sometimes, then it was better to let the grim do the heavy work up close while Odessa made it resemble a pin cushion.

But the grim couldn't get a bite on it, and Odessa's arrows didn't seem to matter. "Down to five," Odessa said, concern in her tone.

Nariah jumped into the fight. She followed the vampire's circle around the grim and made an educated guess. When it shimmered away for its next movement, Nariah swung the mace up where its head was going to be.

Her guess was right. The vampire appeared right where she expected it, but the shaft of her mace hit something solid and stuck there before she could hit. The vampire had caught her weapon in its thin, bony hand. It didn't look that strong, but Nariah yanked on her mace and nothing budged, not the weapon, not the vampire.

The grim whirled around and caught the vampire's leg in its jaws. The vampire used Nariah's mace to slug the grim in his side and fling him several feet away. The dog landed

roughly and tumbled. The vampire dropped the mace and turned on Nariah. For the first time, it smiled, and Nariah felt the blood drain out of her face at the sight of dozens of pointed teeth.

She scrambled at her belt for the second claw hammer, when one of Odessa's arrows punched through the vampire's throat and stuck. No blood came with it, but Nariah squeaked in surprise, and staggered backward several steps.

The vampire yanked the arrow out of its throat and tossed it to the side. The hole left behind began to knit closed as Nariah watched, wide-eyed.

"Not good," she said. "Help!"

"Already on my way," Mom said through the phone. "Hang on."

Nariah got a hold of her second claw hammer and held it up, feeling suddenly very outmatched. The grim wasn't getting up, the arrows weren't doing any good, and the vampire moved too fast for Nariah to hit.

She pressed her lips into a line like Miss Caldwell, determined to win this. Mom was on the way. Odessa still had some arrows, how could she use them?

"Odessa, can you shoot it's foot?" She shouted.

"I can try!"

The next arrow came whizzing into the grass. A miss.

But the vampire looked down, then across the cemetery where Odessa was perched out of range. It was going to change targets.

"No!" Nariah shouted. She lunged at the creature with her claw hammer and scored a hit! She struck its collar bone, breaking something inside, but more importantly, she kept its attention off of Odessa.

The creature hissed, darting for Nariah faster than light. It grabbed her around the neck and threw her to the ground. Nariah screamed and tried to scramble back.

"Nariah!" Odessa shouted. Her arrow glanced off the vampire's thigh, but it was well and truly focused, now.

Its gleaming teeth dominated its pale, gaunt face, as if the rest of the skull had shrunk in order to give them more room. They were all Nariah could see. She gasped for air, pinned by her neck and unable to move. There was something in her left hand.

The claw hammer! She swung it at the vampire's face, digging the claws into its cheek. It shook her off and snarled. Terrified, Nariah struck again, and this time the vampire's entire head went flying off to the right.

Mom stood over her, grimacing, both hands tight on the handle of her machete. She kicked the monster over and only then did it finally burst into flames. Note for the future, remove the head.

Nariah scrambled to her feet with a gasp and rushed to her mother, who hugged her tight. A second later, Odessa came running down the hill and joined them. Mom released one hand to hold her close too, and Nariah wrapped an arm around her friend.

"Oh my God, that was terrifying. I thought it was going to eat you."

"Language, Odessa," Mom sighed.

"Sorry, Mrs. Boyd."

"Thanks, Mom."

Odessa gasped, "Wait, what happened to the grim?"

"Oh no, Grim!" Nariah pulled out of the group and ran to the prone figure in the grass. The dog wiggled his nub of a tail to see her, his tongue lolling out to one side, but it was clear why he hadn't rejoined the fight. Nariah's mace had done serious damage to his ribs and shoulder. A lot of things were broken and torn. He didn't look good.

Nariah shoved her arms under him and, staggering under the weight, picked him up in her arms. He tried to lick at her face but she dodged.

"Eew, zombie breath."

"That can't be good news," Mom said as she and Odessa joined Nariah. She nodded at Nariah's bent arms.

They couldn't see the grim or feel him like Nariah could, but that didn't make him any less real than the zombies or vampires he helped them kill.

"He's in bad shape. We need to get him back to his grave so he can heal." Nariah said. She jerked her head away from another lick at her jaw.

"Where's his grave?" Odessa asked, shouldering her bow.

"Southwest corner," Nariah said.

"That's the parking lot," Mom added.

They headed back up the hill with the oak and across the cemetery. Nariah carried the grim the entire way, doing her best not to get licked.

They had to pass the line of construction equipment in order to reach the southwest corner and Nariah pointed out a section of the cemetery that had been recently dug up nearby. "I bet this is why the zombies rose, they're disturbing hallowed ground."

Odessa peered into a taped off section of the dig. "Does this mean zombies will keep rising until they're done?"

"I don't know," Nariah said.

In the furthest corner of the cemetery they found a disturbed square of ground without a headstone. Nariah set the grim down on top of the loose dirt.

Immediately, the dog began to wiggle into the dirt, a delightful grin on his face. He dug in with his nose, shrugged under a patch of sod, and quickly buried himself. Nariah helped top him off and patted the resulting mound fondly.

"Sleep well, Grim."

"That's all he needs?" Odessa asked. "No, like... grim veterinarian?"

"Nope, he should be ok by tomorrow."

"The easiest part of the night," Mom said. "Ok, pack it up. Let's get you home, Odessa."

Nariah grunted. "What time is it?"

"Nearly ten," Odessa said, already typing a message to her mother on her phone. "Mom's not gonna be happy."

Nariah needed a shower. And they still had English homework to finish up. If they got to bed by midnight, they'd be doing pretty well. Nariah groaned as she climbed into the van and Odessa echoed her. They smiled at each other over the tennis bag in the middle of the bench.

It was hard finding time and energy to answer the call of the grim, but Nariah knew it was important. She'd catch up on sleep this weekend.

"Kaiden just invited me to a party at Luke's place on Saturday, apparently he has a pool. Did you get invited?"

Nariah checked her phone, but no messages were waiting. "No, but we had a fight a few days ago."

Odessa clicked her tongue. "Jerk." She hit a few buttons. "I deleted it."

Nariah reached across the bench and gave Odessa a high five. "Thanks."

"Chicks before dicks."

"Language."

"Sorry, Mrs Boyd."

Eden

By Austin Carroll

Lightning tongues strike
across the sky in kisses;
The wet sun gushes at lovers,
painters, and covered eyes.

A million rooms are filled
with mouths of desire;
Surprised eyes gaze on,
wandering the heart's labyrinth.

Under this hidden sky
flowers are as old as stars
and the red dragon's skin
is formed from moss and mud.

"Refuse nothing!" He cries.
In this garden of earthly delights
everything (including all bad)
is good.

Saliva hangs in threads of sin
from fruit that bursts from its branches.
Our hunger drinks from oranges.
A tree's shadow hangs from all of us,
looming.

Ink

By Sophie van Duin

The obsidian sea was deep, as strange things glittered on the surface and the kraken swam far beneath. I had never dived before, but you promised to show me the ropes, and I acquiesced. As we went under, we blew bubbles from our noses.

It was very dark down there.

I couldn't see, and I would have gone insane, but I could feel the gentle pressure of your hand on my wrist. You murmured something I could not hear, but I felt the vibrations as your mouth sent ripples through the sea.

It was like swimming through ink, and when my eyes adjusted I could see the infinite possibilities, the stories this dark firewater could manifest. I saw pirate ships on stormy seas and darkening clouds on starry skies. I saw dragons flying and knights running. I saw kings grinning and trees weeping.

We sunk deeper.

Suddenly, blinding light flashed, and my body was torn; my wrist burned where you had touched it. My toes went numb.

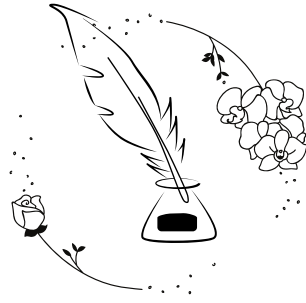
I could see a flock of carrier pigeons. A school of whales. A few narwhals, battling unseen foes. A unicorn, its eyes wild and dangerous. A single bright phoenix.

We coughed up ink as we emerged.

I could not remember making my way back to the surface. I could remember letting go of you, the worry I would never find you again flashing through my brain. But here you were, your stomach empty as you vomited up black bile. I hacked up water and soot.

That day, we promised each other to never go back into that sea. We told ourselves that it was a miracle we had made it out alive. That the stories, the secrets of down below were best left to the kraken.

We broke this promise, of course.



Tales of Reverie

By Esther Hung

Dare you follow the whispered echoes —
Of starstruck souls and tangled fates?
Fables of loss and longing
That leave the world to ruminate.

Dare you follow the haunting voices —
Of secret shadows from the heart?
Stories that weave terrors in your mind
And leave you trepid in the dark.

Dare you follow the siren calling —
Of imagined worlds and galaxies?
Legends of love and of questing
Born from far-off fantasies.

• • • • •

Did you follow those enchanting melodies —
Songs and tales that left you mesmerized?
A truth or wish you never thought you knew
But in these tales of reverie you've realized.



Contributors

Secrets, Ink – Sophie van Duin

Sophie van Duin is a student living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She was previously the editor of her school's literary magazine, Silver-tongued, and when she's not writing she can be found somewhere sunny with a book and sweet tea in hand.

Soul Clone, Be You – Priya Tamang

Dr. Priya Dolma Tamang is a medical graduate from the north-east Indian state of Sikkim. With her tribal Nepali roots and deeply seated Buddhist beliefs, culture and mindfulness have both been active themes in her writing. Her debut book, *Ivory Gleam*, was published by Leadstart Publishers, India, in 2018. She tweets at @kulvadana.

The All Hallows Knight – Christopher Tuthill

Christopher Tuthill's fiction has recently appeared in *The Mythic Circle*, the collection *Dark Tales from Elder Regions*, and the journal *Sleipnir*. He is currently writing a longer piece involving some of the same characters from the story in this issue of *Tales of Reverie*, "The All Hallows Knight." He works as a librarian and lives in the Hudson Valley of New York with his wife and two young children.

Your Rebellion – RC deWinter

RC deWinter's poetry is anthologized in several collections, notably *Uno: A Poetry Anthology* (Verian Thomas, 2002), *New York City Haiku* (NY Times, 2017), *Castabout Literature* (Dantoin/Hilgart, 6/2019), widely in print, notably *2River*, *borrowed solace*, *Genre Urban Arts*, *In Parentheses*, *Night Picnic Journal*, *Reality Break Press*, *Southword*, appears in numerous online literary journals and has been nominated for two 2019 Pushcart Prizes.

Astronomy Lesson – John Wojtowicz

"Catfish" John Wojtowicz grew up working on his family's azalea and rhododendron nursery in the backwoods of what Ginsberg dubbed "nowhere Zen New Jersey." He is currently employed as the mental health coordinator for a community college. He has been featured in the Philadelphia based *Moonstone Poetry Series* and *Rowan University's Writer's Roundtable* on 89.7 WGLS-FM. Recent publications include: *Jelly Bucket*, *Tule Review*, *The Patterson Literary Review*, *Driftwood*, *The Offbeat* and *Glassworks Magazine*.

A Fairytale in Which I am Every Character – Aimee Lowenstern

Aimee Lowenstern is a twenty one year old poet living in Nevada. She has cerebral palsy and is a big fan of glitter.

The Houseguest – Ed Ahern

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over two hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and five books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of six review editors.

Dragons of the Modern Age – William T Blackburn

Currently based in OH (USA), William T Blackburn still struggles to find his car keys. His work appears in SCRAWL, Emerald Press, Route 7 Review, Edify Fiction, Thirty West: Weekly Degree. Newer works will appear in The Blue Mountain Review and Abstract:Contemporary Expressions. He is a contributor to Adirondack Center for Writing's PoemVillage 2019.

Marian the Ventriloquist – Brontë Pearson

Brontë Pearson is a creative and scientific writer from Oklahoma. Her essays, short stories, and poetry seek to expose the art of being human through natural discoveries of the body and mind. She is the winner of the Thelma Hall Prize in Creative Writing and a graduate of Johns Hopkins University's Master of Arts program in Science Writing. In addition to being a writer, Brontë is a mother and an enthusiast of alternative rock music, dark chocolate, and cats.

Reflected Tragedy – AJ Bartholomew

AJ is a writer, poet, and artist currently living in Northern New Jersey. When she is not writing she can be found creating melted crayon art, hiking the nearby mountains, experimenting in the kitchen, and exploring New York City.

The Woman in the Spring – Jimmy Pappas

Jimmy Pappas served during the Vietnam War as an English language instructor training South Vietnamese soldiers. He is a retired teacher whose poems have been published in over 70 journals, including Sheila Na-Gig, Shot Glass Journal, Off the Coast, Boston Literary Magazine, and War, Literature and the Arts. His poem "Bobby's Story" about the life of a Vietnam veteran won the Rattle 2018 Readers Choice Award. It is contained in his full-length book of war-related poems *Scream Wounds* (A15 Press, 2019). His chapbook *Falling off the Empire State Building* was selected as a winner of the Rattle Chapbook Contest and will be published in March 2020.

The Burden of Sigyn's Arms – Kristina Heflin

Kristina Heflin's poetry can be found in journals and websites across the country. A full list can be found on her website <http://www.sagasandmythos.wordpress.com>. When not writing she enjoys spending time with her horse, Lucero, and Carolina Dog, Jessie.

The Praetor of Cyrhastica – Muhammad Irfan

Muhammad Irfan is a Sixth Form student from England, whose favourite poets include: William Blake, Robert Browning and Conrad Aiken. His studies allow him to explore classic poets and poems which heavily inspire his work, alongside the events in his own life. Often writing across genres, from Romantic to Gothic, this is the first of his poems that he has published, and hopes that it will mark the beginning of his poetry voyage.

Appearances – Nicolas D. Sampson

Nicolas D. Sampson is a writer-producer based in Cyprus and the UK. His work has appeared in Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel, The Scofield, and The Writers' Magazine, among others. His short story Flames and Shadows was nominated for a 2018 Pushcart Prize. Film projects include Behind the Mirror (writer/producer – winner of Best Thriller in the Manhattan Film Festival 2015), Vita and Virginia and Show Me The Picture: The Story of Jim Marshall (executive producer). He loves Alfred Hitchcock films. And traveling. And the Cloud. And is currently working on a psychological horror script.

Flylylylyly – RubieKanary

RubieKanary is an education student currently studying at The University of Hong Kong, and has been drawing digitally as a hobby for several years under the same pen name. Her preferred themes in art are often related to fantasy and make-believe.

Not a Love Poem – Shaira Afrida Oyshee

Shaira Afrida Oyshee is a poet from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her works have been published in various newspapers and magazines such as The Daily Star, Dhaka Tribune, Farrago. She is the author of the book, On Days Like This, which won the City Bank Ananda Alo First Book Award 2018.

That Kiss was Mine – Philipp Ammon

Philipp Ammon's poems, stories and essays have appeared in Rhein!, tabula rasa (Germany), აფრია (Georgia) and Neue Zürcher Zeitung (Switzerland). He has lived and studied in Russia, Germany and Georgia. He holds an MA from Humboldt University in Russian Literature and History and resides in Berlin. He has published a book on the history of the Russo-Georgian conflict (Verlag Vittorio Klostermann).

the underworld does not discriminate – Anastasia Jill

Anastasia Jill is a queer writer living in the South. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Small Fiction Anthology and has been featured with Poets.org, Lunch Ticket, FIVE:2:ONE, apt, Anomaly Literary Journal, Gertrude Press, Minola Review, Thirty West Publishing House, THAT Literary Review, and more.



The Call of the Grim – Tami Veldura

Tami Veldura is an enby/aro/ace author of queer fiction. Hir pronouns are sie/hir/Mx. Sie loves romance, fantasy, science fiction, and paranormal stories that push genre limits. Hir work has been nominated for the M/M Goodreads Reader Choice Awards and sie has been nominated and placed in the Rainbow Awards.

Eden – Agustín Carrillo

Agustín Carrillo is an artist, poet, and musician currently living in the woods south of Bend, Oregon.

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Literary Magazine

MEET THE EDITORS

Esther Hung

EDITOR IN CHIEF • POETRY

Esther Hung is a Taiwanese formal poet and fiction writer with a focus in murder, mystery, and fantasy. Most of her published works have been private commissions, and her informal English poems can be found in *Blue Mountain Arts*. She can usually be seen with a supply of tea and buried in her latest work.

Shoshana Groom

SUPERVISING EDITOR • PROSE

Shoshana Groom is a senior at Baker Web College. When she isn't working she enjoys reading, writing, annoying her siblings, and playing with her cats.

Kenneth Nolan III

BUSINESS MANAGER • POETRY

Kenneth Nolan III is a poet whose work revolves around queer identity, body dysmorphia within the gay community, and mental health.



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