LANDING ZONE

MAGAZINE

LORE ANTHOLOGY

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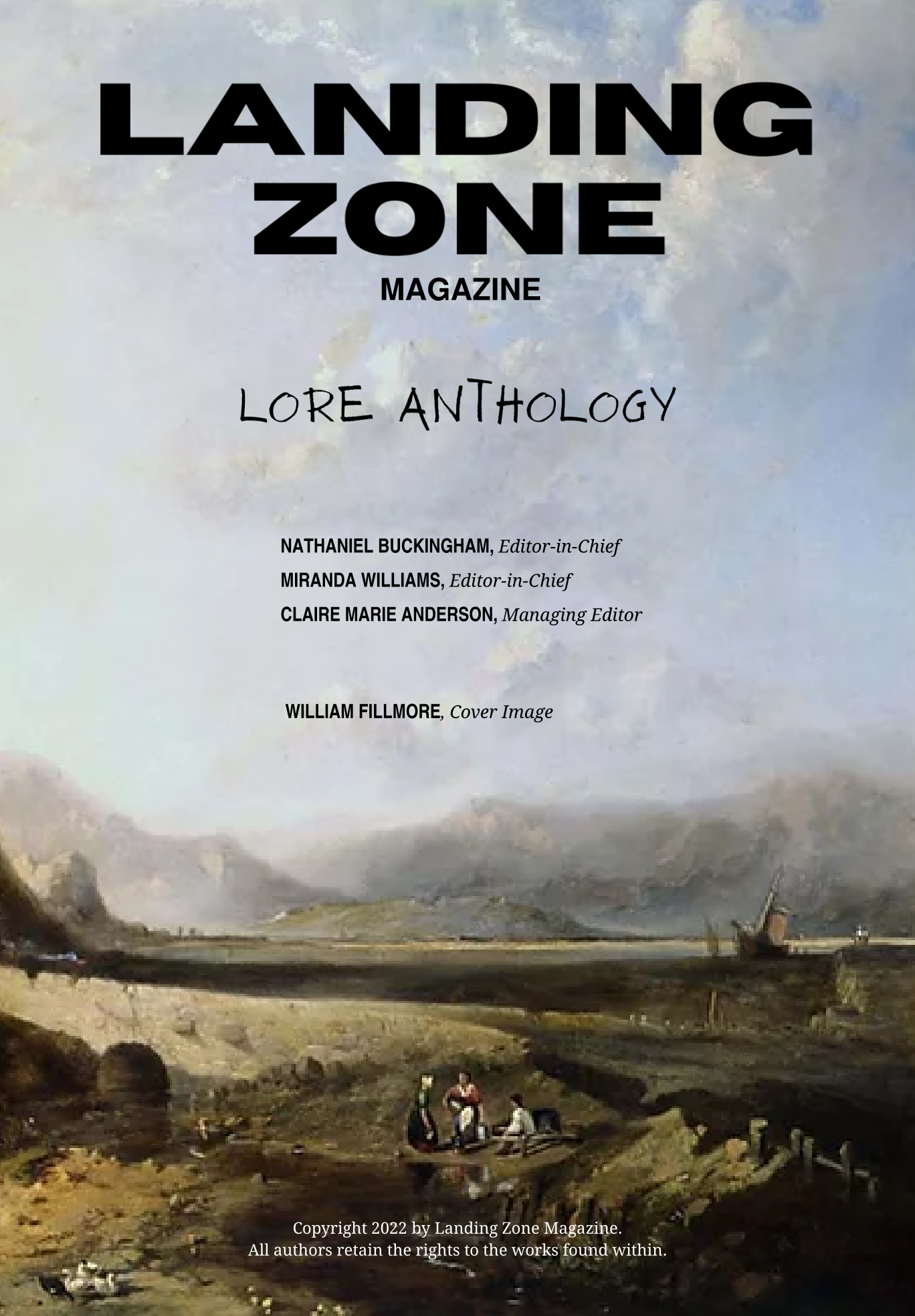

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers, Writers, and Friends,

October delivers the release of *Landing Zone*'s LORE Anthology, and we couldn't be more excited to share it with you. Lore is a loaded word to us—it represents history, adventure, the magical evolution of language, quiet rumors whispered within fire-lit taverns, and above all, possibility. With LORE, the intention was not to compile myth, but to shape it into something new, and in different ways, each writer in this anthology has impressively delivered on this ideal of possibility.

In these pages: darkness lurks inside both minds and monsters, old myths are reforged, girls become trees, mandrakes, a woman decides to draw blood for her sister, and underprivileged characters shatter and conquer antiquated histories, among other profound and powerful variations on this theme.

Compiling an anthology is difficult. We had to choose between many wonderful but overlapping tales during our final deliberations in an attempt to twine together a mythos of variety.

Deciding on which voices to include necessarily, and gut-wrenchingly, silences others, which always ushers in a feeling of defeat, dread—did we make the right decisions here? Did we sketch the proper map, or will the road lead to a dead end? That power we provide to you, reader. You're the only one who can answer. This enchantment is always created for you, and we hope we cast the right spell.

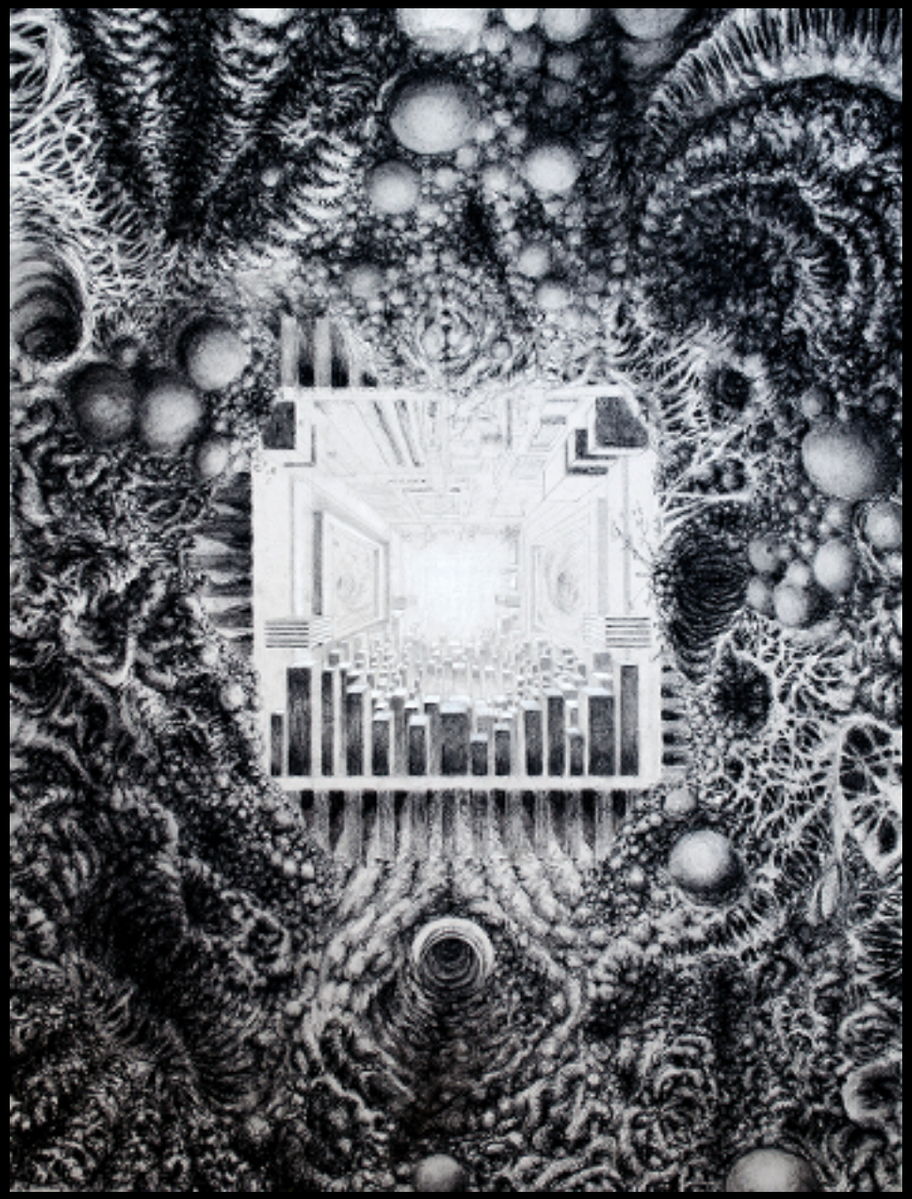
It's been a long journey to arrive at this moment—there have been, as always in the literary and publishing industries, delays, pitfalls in the road, diversions and unplanned excursions.

But now, we are here, at the tavern, warming our feet by the fire and wetting our palettes with mugs of hot cider, surrounded by friends with stories to tell. We hope you enjoy listening to them. And we hope you're excited, like we are, for the other new journeys we have to share ahead, and the new lore we'll create as we push forward.

NATHANIEL, MIRANDA, & CLAIRE | EDITORS

BEFRIENDING THE UNKNOWN. . .

BEHIND THE COVER



"Drawing the Otherside"

WITH

WILLIAM FILLMORE

INTERVIEW

NATHANIEL BUCKINGHAM: The cover image is absolutely incredible. There's so much fine detail and dimension to the piece, and it transports the viewer immediately into a different, fantastical dimension. What's the story behind it, and what draw you to the alien or uncanny or strange?

WILLIAM FILLMORE: This work started as a one-point perspective study and grew into a much larger and visceral drawing. More deeply, I was scared of the dark as a kid, and especially my childhood bedroom closet at night. The unknown was the source of my terror. As I grew up I found myself exploring and gravitating towards the grotesque and the strange. The more familiar I became with the alien and the uncanny, the less afraid I felt of the darkness and the unknown. Now the darkness is my ally and my art is where I can use my childhood fear as a means of expression.

NB: It's so cool that such a powerful image developed out of that beginning, and I think that we can all relate to your journey—having that fear, and conquering it. How long did it take you to create the art?

WF: This is a silly question. How long did it take a musician to compose a work? It doesn't matter to me only because it was fun. Drawings and works like this are a time warp or a flow state that is the opposite of quantifiable time. BUT if I had to define the edges of how long this piece took, about 80 hours.

NB: <laughs> Yes, you're right, it is a silly question. I suppose a better one would be: why do you work in the mediums you do?

WF: I am a sculptor by practice. Most of my works are modeled in clay or cast in metal. I also enjoy working with wood and steel. Drawing, painting, and printmaking are more a part of my academic studio practice. But they have become a permanent fixture in my personal practice too.

NB: I appreciate the variety of your pursuits. The cover image is especially impressive then considering you view yourself as a sculptor first. How did you initially become an artist?

WF: In 2005 I graduated with a business degree from California State University Fullerton. There was nothing more awakening than realizing as you are

graduating that you spent five years getting a degree you didn't really want. I have spent the remaining 17 years studying and now teaching studio art. I do not regret my business degree and I wouldn't change a thing, because since I began working in the studio everyday has been a gift.

NB: I completely agree. I had a similar journey transitioning from the field of finance into finally being able to assume a full-time editorial position. Starting in one area before finding your passion does make the time more precious. Speaking of, what do you have planned for your artistic future?

WF: I am working on a series of clown portraits that relate to my affection for clowns as a kid.

NB: I would love to see those. Thank you for the interview, William. It's a been a pleasure.

WF: Thank you, Nathan.

WILLIAM FILLMORE is a surrealist artist born and raised in Southern California. After earning his Bachelors in Business Administration in 2005 from California State University of Fullerton, he pursued his desire for making art, earning his MFA in Sculpture in 2013, from Indiana University. Since graduating William has participated in numerous Artist in Residence programs. William professes his passion for the studio arts as a professor of Art + Extended Media at Russel Sage College in Upstate New York. Working in multiple creative disciplines from drawing, ceramics, fabricated steel/wood as well as drawing, printmaking, and painting. William’s works feature the pain and beauty found in memories both forgotten and the discarded. Each piece stands as a grotesque surrealistic testament to the indelible sting of nostalgia and regret.

ASHLEY PRYOR GEIGER "UNNAMED"

BROOKE SCHULTZ is a writer and reporter. This is her first publication.

ASHLEY PRYOR GEIGER is an interdisciplinary artist and scholar (Ph.D. Philosophy, The Pennsylvania State University, 2000), who lives and works in Toledo, Ohio. Drawing on her extensive research and teaching in the humanities, her visual work uses digital collage and the manipulation of old photographic processes like calotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, and daguerreotypes to create a bridge between the past and the present -- especially as it relates to those who have been forgotten, overlooked, or underrepresented or misrepresented in history.

FELLED

Brooke Schultz

You didn't even have time to think of the splintering bark as an omen, because the future was already closing in: snapping branches and leaves parachuting down to the forest floor.

When a girl becomes a tree, it becomes lore. You had heard of others before you, though their names have worn away, like wind does to bare land. You wonder what happens when a tree turns back into a girl.

Your own name has been lost, but there's a gentle wash of memory: of whispers, of laughter, of grasping feathers in your hands.

But that was an age ago. You have already grieved it, and you have grown old. So old you think at first you must be dying and you want to send a warning—perhaps a goodbye—through the web of roots. Instead, there's silence. The pathways to your sisters have already run cold.

You had long forgotten how it felt when the roots rose up, spindled around you delicately like a spider's web and gave way to bark, but now in the reverse there is familiarity in the way the earth exhales as the roots unfurl, as the wood splits.

So much time has passed since the earth enveloped you. It runs like a kaleidoscope: the sisters all around you, extending to you when you were a young unsteady thing. You still had language then; it took time to understand what they were saying. There is a rhythm when they speak; it's like a song. You learned to sing along: voices dissonant in the face of danger, harmonious when seeking to help. A hum—near silence, truly—signaled contentment. You hear this hum only through muscle memory. This quiet is

different, though. Lonely. You haven't been lonely in lifetimes.

As the branches crack, you wonder if they know what is to come.

The bark turns brittle, fissures into ribbons and falls away like snakeskin. Is this what they all hear at the end—not the gentle song of each other, but the sound of you slowly becoming undone? Even now your lost sister is out of your reach, but you remember what it was like to feel her wane. Her humming softening, not a hint of panic, fading out to nothing. The rest of you, unwilling to fail in your loyalty, sent what life you could as she diminished. Did she hear you, or was she already gone?

You wonder if they're reaching for you. Together you have weathered winters, fretting as branches grew frail. Rejoicing when the sun's full warmth returns, listening to the rustling of each of your canopies swaying in the sun. You've mused about snow dustings, cascading feathers. Droughts and far off fires. Saplings and the buzzing colonies of bees.

You realize as you continue to split that your memories of before are few: brushstrokes and impressions, all cacophonous. You want to plant yourself here firmly. Want your sisters to help you rebuild. Want to feel the rain pattering on your branches, as leaves bud and fan. Want to shelter both the life just cracking the shell, and those who decay at your feet.

GJ GILLESPIE "ROCKING PNEUMONIA AND THE BOOGIE WOOGIE FLU."

ERIN LIANA JOHNSON lives in the Central Coast of California, a place rich with stories. Recently published works include “Owl In The Rain” (*Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, July, 2021) “Enough” (*Monterey Poetry Review*, September, 2020) and “The Revolution Will Be Wheelchair Accessible” (*Featured Artist, Wisdom Body Collective*, June 2020.)

GJ GILLESPIE is a collage artist living in a 1928 Tudor Revival farmhouse overlooking Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island (north of Seattle). In addition to natural beauty, he is inspired by art history -- especially mid century abstract expressionism. Winner of 19 awards, his art has appeared in 56 shows and numerous publications. When he is not making art, he runs his sketchbook company Leda Art Supply.

HOW NOT TO GET RAPED IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY

Erin Liana Johnson

Become a tree.
Bark too smooth and hard
for fingers to find purchase,
leaves, so much safer than hair,
breasts armored into knots and burls.

Become a constellation.

Learn to be swift.
Don’t stand too long in the groves
or fields,
avoid the market and the holy places,
don’t linger by the water.
Keep the sunshine and moonlight
from glimmering on your skin;
but don’t lie easy in the dark,
even behind a hundred locks.
Do not be too silent,
and do not sing.
Be careful,

be careful,
be careful what you love.

Become water.
Become a bird,
an island,
a reed in the wind.
Become anything but
a woman.

K. JOHNSON BOWLES "BARK BITE"

ALIRAGEH BARREH is an aspiring historian and emerging writer from Dallas, Texas. His work, both literary and scholarly, focuses on contemporary African philosophy, the intellectual history of the early modern Islamicate, and precolonial networks of power in the African Great Lakes and Kasai River regions.

K. JOHNSON BOWLES has been featured in 80+ exhibitions and 60+ publications. She is the recipient of fellowships from the NEA, Houston Center for Photography, the Visual Studies Workshop, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She received her MFA from Ohio University and BFA from Boston University.

STRETCH A NEW SKIN, BEAT AN OLD TALE

Alirageh Barreh

"The Mboom and Ngaan stories did not remain separate, but were fused. In the fused form Mboom and Ngaan were brothers or Ngaan was the son of Mboom, Mboom being the God in heaven and Ngaan, the God of the waters. They created the division in moieties, just as exists in villages. But Ngaan married Kán aKán whom Mboom coveted." - The History of God among the Kuba, Jan Vansina

Before there was history or memorymen to recall it, there was Round Thing, who was like a calabash but not. Round Thing had been satisfied with Their existence for years uncounted, creating many things but no people - They were unaware that there could be anything much like Themselves - except for a persistent itch. Despite all efforts to make a remedy, the itch never subsided. With no way to solve this problem, They grew angrier and angrier, until the emotion building up inside Them caused Round Thing to burst like an overripe fruit and destroy all they had built. The insides of Round Thing poured out, revealing two new beings - the brothers Sky and Marsh, organs of the universe-made-spirit. They embraced and danced the first awakening dance together, happy for the twin gifts of existence and companionship, and only noticed the broken shards of Round Thing after they exhausted themselves in their joy.

"Ee! How terrible this end must have been for the one who bore us! Let us do

justice to our parent, honored brother," said Brother Sky, surveying the scene.

"Agreed, beloved brother," replied Brother Marsh, *"but what is there to do? I have no craft to put Them together and neither do you."*

The two spent a long time in thought before deciding, as the very wise tend to do, until Brother Sky spoke up.

"An idea has come to me," he said with a triumphant note in his voice, and he collected the shards to give them a funeral. There was no shroud to cover the shards, no house to take the body around, no belly-slitting knife to open the way for the knotted life shadow, and no red termite clay to shield the grave from witches: none of these yet existed. The funeral did have wailing and mourning songs, followed by jokes and celebration, and all in such a moving fashion that none today could call it a poor one. When the work was done, Round Thing's unblemished life shadow appeared to speak with Sky and Marsh:

"Yekèle! Such an ordeal! I am grateful to you, sons of my body, for your efforts guided me to a place I had not known in all my time. I think I will stay there. I see with opened eyes and with this sight I can tell that it will become home to others who need kindness like the kindness I have been shown. You have honored your mother-father and earned your inheritance. Take the Forge Words from my head and become creators - I go now to the Otherworld and they will be lost to me once I teach them to you." All this said the life-shadow of Round Thing, who whispered one of the Words to each of the brothers before vanishing. They were Brother Sky and Brother Marsh no longer, but Chief Hammer and Chief Anvil, Those-Who-Said-Be!-And-It-Was.

Countless were the wonderful deeds done by the Brother Chiefs, who unrolled the spreading earth like a mat to cover the Otherworld, who filled the seas and rivers, who constructed the heavens out of timber and metal. With their Words they made the spirits to take up roles in their creation, spirits we pay homage to still. One-On-The-Move - the laughing magician who brightens the daytime sky and hosts the ancestors at her perpetual feast - and Prince-Counts-The-Nights - the silent ruler who daubs his beautiful pitted face with holy kaolin clay - were the first to be forged by the brothers and helped construct the others. Sharp Iron Boy, River Pig, the Shining Twins, Old Crafty Woman, Hill-That-Trumpets, Cave Uterus, Spotted Gentleman and all the others sprung from these efforts, each influencing

every other and weaving patterns of story more complicated than either Brother Chief could ever invent alone. Those-Who-Said-Be!-And-It-Was were very pleased with their labors.

The brothers lived this way for a long time, building and relaxing and sometimes reconciling quarreling spirits, until the day they themselves quarreled. It was, in the fashion of powerful men, a dispute over a woman they both wished to marry. They had already invented the ritual to do so at the request of Prince-Counts-The-Nights, who took the Evening Star and the Morning Star to wife, and taught it to all the other spirits afterwards. Chief Hammer wanted to marry One-On-The-Move very badly, having fallen in love with her during their work together. She was smart, just, powerful and so beautiful that it was hard to look at her - a worthy wife for any great chief. She also lacked the social graces of her brother Prince-Counts-The-Nights, was blunt to the point of cruelty and unwilling to acknowledge any superior, even her creators. Afraid of rejection and the accompanying shame, Chief Hammer took his concern to Chief Anvil. Chief Anvil was shocked to hear that Chief Hammer intended to ask for the Bright-Braided-One's hand, for he had set his heart on the same woman and was thinking of approaching her with a similar offer. Anvil had always been handsome and better at talking than his brother, but he knew Hammer was the finer craftsman and wiser judge. Familiar with her nature, Chief Anvil was sure that One-On-The-Move would pick his brother to be her match if made to choose between them, and this he could not abide - Chief Anvil devised a very unbrotherly plan. He traveled to Chief Hammer's home, who greeted him warmly. Over a water pipe and a jar of palm wine, they picked up their earlier conversation.

"Beloved brother, have you considered the problem I discussed with you previously?" Asked Chief Hammer, leaning unsteadily against a blackwood.

"I have," Chief Anvil answered, nervousness masked by wine-foolishness. He drank from the jar again before continuing, *"and the answer has become clear to me. I sent Skin Shedder to discover what One-On-The-Move would like to receive as brideswealth. He told me that she will accept nothing but a new kind of lobelia, those flowers she loves so much, dedicated to her alone."*

Chief Hammer smiled broadly, his filed teeth gleaming in reflected genius. *"A tricky plant, much in the way of detail work is required, but you know I enjoy challenges. I will take my tools and the Word in my head and not leave my secret place until I have built this great lobelia. Thank you for your aid,*

honored brother!"

The moment Chief Hammer strode off into the thick forest, Chief Anvil put on a disguise and ran off gwigiligilig to talk to One-On-The-Move before his brother came out again. She laughed her great booming laugh when she heard what Anvil had wanted to speak to her about. She laughed until everyone in Creation came to see what the fuss was about and she was still laughing when she finally replied:

"Yha! Ho-he-ho! Have you gone mad, o Son of the Round Thing? Is it not unseemly for a great notable to sneak around, head bent and hands folded like Fish Scale Digger? Is this how a chief acts? Even my brother used an intermediary when he was courting the Shining Twins and I am far more important than they are. You shame us both with your presumption. No, I will not accept such an offensive and artless proposal."

Ah, Chief Anvil had never been so humiliated in his life! He could not even rebuke One-On-The-Move in front of his people, as she was clearly in the right. His actions would be considered even more shameful when all Creation learned about the trick he had pulled on his brother. Anvil saw only one way to stave off total disgrace. He drew himself up to his full height and addressed the Bright Braided One, command in his voice and iron in his eyes:

"You wish for me to act chiefly - let me show you what a great chief would do. If you will not be mine by negotiation and the right of marriage, you will be mine by the strength of my arm and the right of spoils."

The world was silent - none of the assembled spirits had ever heard of concubinage before.

Prince-Counts-The-Nights was among those in the crowd called by the laughter and he now slipped into his cloth armor. He struck his sharp sharp spear against his tall tall shield with a resounding crack before standing next to his sister. He did not speak, he never did, but his intention was clear. One-On-The-Move took her charm bag out from under her raffia skirts and laughed again, but this time the sound was high and bitter:

"I allow you to try, Chief Lesser, but only so that my brother and I may instruct you in etiquette. Perhaps we will take a nose or an ear, depending on our mood. Weapons will judge the affair between us, Dried-Up Marsh!"

Who alive has seen such a glorious and terrible battle? Not until the duel of the Brother Chiefs was there a greater clash of arms and never again was it surpassed. Ee! One-On-The-Move's war charms could not be countered! They scorched red and dead the land that is desert today. Ee! Prince-Counts-The-Nights' spear was war itself! It broke open the deep gorges and springs with every stamp of the butt. But what can spells and spears do to one who holds a Forge Word? The two good spirits were losing the battle slowly. None of their fellows could help, even the most potent of the latter-day spirits could not enter such a frightful battle. It was very good that Chief Hammer left his secret place of gestation and metal, finished flower in hand, at the time he did. As soon as he stepped outside, he heard the sounds of a frightful battle and marched over with the quick magic step called eats-the-road. Hammer was so shocked by the sight of his beloved brother and his cherished creations doing battle that he simply stood there until he recovered enough to scream out an anguished *“Stop!”* All three combatants immediately turned toward him and began presenting their cases, hoping to acquire his aid.

"My only brother," began Chief Anvil, *"how glad am I to see your face! We have been betrayed most cruelly. Our own subordinates, who we fashioned so lovingly and heaped with honors, have turned against us and mean to depose a rightfully installed chieftain! They ambushed me as I waited for you to return along the road and nearly killed me. Honor your kin and the cord that connects our navels!"*

One-On-The-Move, tired from fighting but proud as ever, could not help but laugh at Anvil's story:

"He-ho-he! My glorious chief, resplendent light of royalty, Prince-Counts--The-Nights and I would never act against your title. The very thought disgusts me! Would you march into the Otherworld and battle your mother-father for an additional scrap of power? You built us to know the virtue of loyalty and your craft is strong. Your brother, however, was not so well-designed. Indeed, he has gone mad! He tried to take me to wife against my will and we were forced to defend ourselves! We would be guesting at the Round Thing's House already if you did not come when you did. Do justice to your people and support the righteous!"

Chief Hammer was stunned again - how could either of these horrible tales be true? He asked if there were any witnesses among the assembled crowds who were willing to speak about what they saw, for he was loath to use the

poison ordeal and kill one or the other party in the process. All were too afraid of the retribution of Chief Anvil to speak, even mighty latter-day children like Hill-That-Trumpets and Sturdy Palm. All except for a brave little bird named Darling Singer, who was famous for the beauty of her voice and the drabness of her plumage.

"My terrible chief, I saw it all!" The bird said sweetly. *"Lady Sun's words are true. Your brother takes your friend as thrall. Chief Anvil lies to you!"*

After Darling Singer spoke up, the others found their courage and supported his accusation. Soon all of Creation was saying it with one voice. Angry at the betrayal and horrified by his brother's actions, Chief Hammer stood with his helpers. Knowing he could not fight both the spirit siblings and his brother at once, Chief Anvil realized he had truly failed in his attempt to save face. Unable to punish Hammer or One-On-The-Move or Prince-Counts -The-Nights, he wheeled on the bird Darling Singer.

"Try being so talkative once I have destroyed your voice!" He yelled angrily and he did just that before retreating to his watery abode.

Darling Singer tried as hard as she could but no sound would come from her beak. Chief Hammer picked up the heartbroken bird and stroked her feathers.

"I'm sorry, small one," he said sadly, *"but I can't undo my brother's cruel work. We both possess a Forge Word and our strength is equal. I can, though, replace your lost singing with something better. Many are those with sweet voices; none but you will possess all voices. No child of my atelier will ever match your ability with language. No poems will be delivered as expertly as yours and you will take parts of every song to make them your own. Furthermore, I mark you with a badge of honor - watch, I paint your tail red with my own blood, and all your clan will bear this symbol of your favor in my eyes. Your new name is Lantern-In-Gray."*

Then Chief Hammer, hurt in the heart from all he had seen, left for his home in the heavens in silence. He deposited the giant lobelia he made on the highest point in Creation before walking up into the sky, where he might look at it from his woven-wall house and consider these events again.

JACK BORDNICK "IMAGE 8630"

MICA CORSON is a writer, reader, and perpetual student. She is a recent graduate of Central Washington University's Professional and Creative Writing program and holds a Bachelor's degree in Psychology. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her dog, Atlas, where she enjoys the rain, clouds, and the very rare appearances of the sun.

JACK BORDNICK'S sculptures and photography incorporate surrealistic, mythological and magical imagery often with whimsical overtones — aimed at provoking our experiences and self reflections. Aiming to unbalance our rational minds, the predominant imagery deals mostly with facial expressions of both living and "non-living" beings, and things that speak to us in their own languages. They are mixed media assemblages that have been assembled, disassembled and reassembled, becoming abstractions unto themselves. He was an Industrial design graduate of Pratt Institute in New York. He has been a designer and design director for the past twenty years including for numerous company, corporate and government projects.

THE LADY'S WISH

Mica Corson

After nearly three days in foul darkness, the heavy iron gate of my prison was lifted. I stumbled out, my vision slowly returning to me with each shuddering step over rough, uneven cobblestones. The time spent in isolation kept me from any light or sound. Now the sharp clanging of metal hatches and low, hushed whispers filtered in as my vision settled on the trial that awaited me. The cavern brightened as crackling torches lit and circled the opening above me, a flaming crown over my head.

The firelight flickered across bronze edges embedded into the wood grains of two doors opposite me. They towered before me, each almost twice as tall as me. Impeccable images of battles, the losses, the victories, and the epic stories of the empire carved deep into the weathered dark wood. The doors must have been as thick as the tree they came from to contain so many figures. The most pronounced of which was the fractured carving of a man's face. It was cut in two mirrored halves on each door, starting in opposite directions. Half of the face stared to my right. A single eye in profile staring off into an unknown place and time, a mouth quirked with mystery and mischief. To my left, the second door, its profile with closed eyes, wrinkled at the corners, with a prominently arched brow, and a beard of tight curls blending into the foreground carvings of ocean waves and sailing ships.

My Lady had told me stories of him once, a god of passages, of endings and new beginnings.

"It is not a common thing, though, to meet Janus. One must have to make a true choice that will change their entire fate, enough so that a god is

needed to guide them on their path," she had told me. "At one point, he represented the past and future, but now he is merely a sign of diverging paths." At the time, I had wondered why she was explaining this piece of history to a servant like me.

"It is not history," she replied, "not anymore."

I looked up from the cravings, but the world beyond my punishment was shrouded in shadows. Wincing against the bright flames, I could barely make out the forms of the witnesses. I tried to make out the figures that stood directly above the two doors. If my Lady's punishment had been lenient, and she still wished to see me, that is where she would be. Finally finding her form, my shoulders dropped in temporary relief. Her figure was thin, cloaked in shadows that blended into the smoke-filled sky. She seemed to be almost swaying from the cold breeze I could not feel trapped below the earth's surface.

"It is time," a deep, resonant voice boomed, echoing down into the chamber. Its owner stood next to my Lady. I could almost make out his arm wrapped around her shoulders, trapping her next to him. No longer was he her father, but the same jailer who locked me away.

Against the dark sky and the blinding ring of flames, I could not see out her face. But still I could see her in my mind's eye, the way her jaw clenched at her father's refusal to understand, eyes red with sadness like they were when we were found out and ripped apart. He claimed to be a lawful man, following the rites of divine punishment. This was truly a punishment for her. To him, I was an afterthought, an example to be dealt with.

Was it only a month ago that she would appear as if by some magic, a willful sprite of the midnight moon pulling at my hand to some wandering adventure through darkened ruins and catacombs? I would have to rise at dawn or be punished for missing my chores, but I could never refuse her any small vice. Had she known this would be the result of our relationship? Maybe she feared I would run if I realized just how serious our transgression was. She did not need to worry, though I was utterly entranced by her presence after just one day.

"You are here to face trial for your crimes against the noble family you served and betraying the trust of your Lord. In the eyes of men and gods, you will step forward and choose a door. If the gods are merciful, you will find a new bride waiting for you and enough funds to leave this land and never return. If not, you will meet your fate by the savage beast and the judgment of the gods."

I swallowed numbly and tried to still my shaking hands. On one side, a man-eating creature, a lion, or a tiger, I had never seen either before, but I

had heard of the Lord's fascination with them. And on the other, a woman, a stranger, meant to force me away from the woman I loved.

"It's barbaric," she had said months before, lying beneath the stars. "And what they are to face? Either gruesome death or forced marriage, effectively a banishment both for the accused and the poor girl offered up." The moon had illuminated her face, highlighting her furrowed brow and pursed lips.

She could never speak of it in front of her father or any other Lord, but in the safety of my arms, she could voice all her grievances, her distaste for the rituals and rules. As she spoke, her breath caressing my neck, her hands would grip mine so tightly her nails would bite into my skin. I took her hand and kissed it—my promise to never leave her side.

I stepped forward as my ruler had commanded, letting my fingers brush across the smooth edges of the carvings. Letting the chill of the embedded metals wash over me. Just a few nights ago, my Lady had escaped from her palace's confinement and visited me under cover of the night. She had told me of the stories buried in the images, her voice lilting through the grates of my cell. She whispered songs of the heroes and the lives they had sacrificed for their goals, and most importantly, for those they love. At this moment, hesitating before my fate, I could not find their likeness, only the fearsome fangs of their opponents scratched into ancient passages.

I pressed my ear to each door listening for several moments. I could not hear much beyond the pounding of my heart and the harsh panting rushing from my chest. I could feel the door shake with each breath. Hearing no clue or signal, I moved down to the left and listened as well as possible. A high chiming bell sounded, but was it coming past the thick door or echoing down the cavern from someone watching above?

I looked up to my Lady one last time. It was just a flicker, a brief moment of movement, but the pale skin of her palm shone like the moon in the dark sky over my left shoulder, guiding me once more.

I placed my hand on the cold iron latch and took a deep breath, letting the air settle my heart. The face's smiles were almost taunting, and I quirked my own lips in defiance. If this was where my Lady guided me, there was no other choice. I pulled the door with my strength and gazed into the dimly light room before stepping back, letting the door swinging fully open without my doing.

I swallowed. *If this is her wish.* It was almost flattering in a way.

If this is her wish. Claws scraped against the cobbled stone.

If this is her wish, so be it.

K. JOHNSON BOWLES "WILL AND WAY"

OLIVIA SERIO earned a BA in English and Creative Writing from Washington College in 2017 and is currently working toward a Masters in Modern and Contemporary Fiction from the University of Westminster. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming in THAT Literary Review, Funicular Magazine, and Texas Review Press, among others. She currently resides in London with her two cats Jane and Lizzie.

K. JOHNSON BOWLES has been featured in 80+ exhibitions and 60+ publications. She is the recipient of fellowships from the NEA, Houston Center for Photography, the Visual Studies Workshop, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She received her MFA from Ohio University and BFA from Boston University.

PERSEPHONE'S PENUMBRA

Olivia Serio

two steps out of the lamplight halo
her breath hitches--
is it worse not to be anything?

she cannot seem to find air anyway,
and this not quite shadow aches
like pressing on a bruise.

it purples and blossoms,
finding its own set of lungs
in the evening's ebb and flow.

this was not
what she asked for, surely;
to be constantly peripheral;

never fully enthroned in light
or dark. the juice on her fingers,
running down her chin, looks like blood

perhaps in the end
it's always blood.

ANTHONY A. SCOTT "IN THE BLOOD"

ADITI RAMASWAMY is an autistic software dev, author, aspiring chaos spirit, and avid consumer of both literature and baklava. As a teenager they devoured every Neil Gaiman book they could lay their hands on; thus began their deep love of irreverent creepy fantasy, which has never since died out. You can follow them on Twitter at @AditiRamaswamy.

ANTHONY ALGER SCOTT has over 21-years' experience as a commercial artist in advertising with a BFA in Painting, BFA Drawing/Summa Cum Laude. He is a current MA candidate in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and Art Therapy at Wayne State University. He is a member of AATA (2018-2022) and certified in Mental Health First Aid USA (2019-2022). Anthony's current art is derived from his visions and dreams through prayer and meditation which he views as a universal language. Additionally, he feels we are each unique and believes our diversities can live in harmony through our commonalities in emotions and senses resulting in unity. His passion and values are to express unconditional love as mind/body healing during human development which he views as God.

RAGWORT

Aditi Ramaswamy

Meggy's babe died in her womb on a cool spring night. The mandrake appeared not two days later, in the misty early morning as Meggy went out to take a breath of air. She had not been looking at the ground as she walked and so almost tripped over the root, bundled as it was in green-brown fabric which blended into the earth. When she saw it, she stooped and picked it up, shaking off its covering and turning it over curiously in her hands.

"Husband," she whispered, not wanting to wake the neighbours. "Look."

Saulf, leaning against the open doorway, finished tying the straps on his leather shoes and straightened his back silently.

"Husband, someone left this for us."

He grunted, sparing a glance at neither Meggy nor the mandrake.

"What do you think it means?"

Saulf kept his face turned from her and spoke stiffly. "There's word that the mesne lord will gift an extra halfpenny-per-day to the man who reaps the most by the end of the barley season. We'll need it, to make up for what you're losing us with each day you stay home."

Since the start of their marriage, Meggy had felt vulnerable around Saulf. But after the death of her babe, nearly full term and born like a bluish stone, not even one of Saulf's comments could make her feel much more than a passing sting. "I'll be fit and fine next morning," she said meekly. "I'll not be idle today, either. There's spinning for me to finish. And I'll ask my mother about the mandrake."

"Forget the mandrake. You'd sooner spin the day away in aimless stories, fairie woman, than do your share of work."

Fairie woman, he had called her from the start. Not meant as a compliment, but out of all of Saulf's insults this one had always stung the least. At night Meggy sometimes dreamt of being a fairie and flying away on a stem of ragwort, alongside her no-longer-bluish babe.

"Your mother—bah!" Saulf muttered. "It should have been her who died. What good can all her herbs and cunning do, if she could not save *my* son?"

Meggy waited until Saulf was far enough away before wrapping the mandrake in a corner of her skirt and walking the short distance to the even smaller wildflower-lined cottage which the mesne lord had allotted to her white-haired mother.

She found Albreda sitting on her packed-dirt cot, cleaning her herb-knife. In the shifting dim of indoors, the cunningwoman's pale eyes with their luminous black pupils stood out like chips of melting ice. "Meggy," Albreda said, tilting her chin up. "Come inside and shut the door."

Meggy watched as Albreda stood and lifted a thin cloth on her table, inspected a set of dried red-and-white and began to methodically dice them. "Eda is in the family way and yet unmarried," Albreda said con--versationally, setting down her knife and bundling the pieces back together into their cloth. "She's just begun to show, and nobody's too pleased with how it's proceeding. I believe I raised you well when I see the girls who come to me, all for the same thing."

A fleeting ache like a yewberry popped in Meggy's stomach, but she said nothing about how she had seen Eda only a few days past, and her friend had looked happy enough at the slight swelling in her belly even if her parents had not. Nor did she give voice to the resentment buried deep in her chest at the careless way in which Albreda spoke of snuffing out a pregnancy in the same way she might smother the weak flame of a rushlight.

"How are you faring, these past few days?"

Albreda's tone was quiet and cool, and held the expectation that Meggy too would be cool and tearless in return.

Meggy untied the mandrake from her skirt and held it up. "I'm all right. I came to ask about this. I found it by our door."

Albreda raised an eyebrow. "How did it get there?"

"Well, someone must have put it there. Mandrakes can't crawl out of the ground on their own."

A strange smile played on Albreda's lips. "You wouldn't think so.

Perhaps it was meant as a blessing for fertility. Was anything else left with the mandrake?"

"No…" Meggy remembered. "Yes! It was swaddled in green cloth, as a babe might be."

The black in Albreda's eyes swelled and glittered. "Let me see that," she said, holding her palms out.

Almost reluctantly, Meggy handed the mandrake to her mother.

"Do you remember what I taught you about mandrakes?" Albreda asked.

Meggy bit her lip. "Paste of mandrake puts you to sleep? That's all."

"Mandrake has developed many a way to send you to the grave," Albreda said grimly. "Too much paste is poison, and its scream can fell those who come too close as easily as a man cuts down grain. Meggy, my girl, sit beside me. There's something I neglected to tell you."

She sat and Albreda handed her the mandrake. Meggy clutched it almost maternally while Albreda put a thin twisted hand on her shoulder. "Ken this," she said softly. "You are not my daughter."

Meggy sat numb, processing this latest in a stream of petty cruelties.

"I birthed a babe of my own once. He came out dead, just as your son did." For a moment Meggy thought she saw a flash of something cross Albreda's face, a brief glint of the sort of emotion she had always discouraged Meggy herself from showing. "Not two nights after we buried him, we found you laid at the foot of the door. There was ragwort placed in your hand, and you cried bitter until we took down the iron horseshoe from the top of the door."

Meggy found her voice. "You call me an auf?" she said hoarsely. An impossibility. Meg-gy, for all her little oddities, had never felt anything of the weird in herself. Even Albreda, with her cunning-magic, her talent for creating potions and cures out of herbs, would make a more believable auf than Meggy.

"Not quite," said Albreda. "Not the sort which the Hidden Folk charm from rocks or sticks of kindling, anyhow. You are flesh enough—you have your father's hands and jaw, and I'm sure there's something of your mother in your face too, though I've never met her myself."

"My mother?"

"He told me the story, when I asked. A week before we were to be married, as he was crossing the fields back to his own home one night, he heard the ring of laughter on a knowe nearby." Albreda's eyes grew distant, flickered with the light of a hilltop fire. "Foolish that he was, so sure of his own invincibility, he did not heed the old stories. Instead he climbed the

knowe's gentle slope and joined the merry party. When a lady caught him by the hand and bade him lie with her he did not object. He didn't think much of it when she was gone the next morning, and he found himself alone, on flat ground, with grass-stains on his good shirt. But I've found that men seldom spend much time on thought."

"I'm not yours," Meggy said quietly, processing this.

Albreda did not voice any denial. "This mandrake must be from your own mother's folk," she said instead.

"A gift of sorts?"

"The Hidden Folk give no gifts." Albreda's voice was sharp. "I know their ways, as any cunning-woman would. They have no concept of generosity, or pity, or sympathy. If you must ask my advice, bury it in the churchyard, where it can do naught to harm anyone."

Meggy stumbled out her mother's door and back through her own in a haze, the mandrake held tight in her arms. On the way she bent and picked up the cloth she had found the mandrake in, still lying on the dirt at the foot of her doorway.

A dried stem of ragwort fell from it.

The Hidden Folk give no gifts?

Well, perhaps not to humans.

Meggy thought about Albreda's story and tried to picture the fairie mother who had rolled with her father on the grassy knoll. A willowy woman, for surely weren't the Hidden Folk always thin and tall? Pale-haired, most likely. Meggy's father had been a redhead himself, and so too had Albreda as a younger woman. Meggy's locks, though, had always been blinding yellow, barely darker than Albreda's now snow-white hair. Dark eyes—the fairie mother would have dark eyes, of course, for Meggy's father's eyes had been light like Albreda's. She tried to envision the rest of the fairie mother's features but could only come up with blurred approximations, black eyes blinking from a smooth white oval of a face.

It was, by contrast, so easy to picture the mother of her youth. Albreda, heavy-faced and lined with ropy muscle even at her age. Albreda, sculpted from ice and smoke and pungent herbs. Albreda, who taught her that every woman is tied together by the pain she carries inside her, threads made of the things she must never speak aloud. Albreda, who slapped her out of child-hood crying fits, then held her tight and close to her chest.

Her bare foot brushed against the ragwort stem. She laid her palm on the mandrake's stiff wooden bulb of a head, and she chose what to believe.

Meggy milked the cow with the mandrake tied to her back. She spun piles of wool with the mandrake on her lap, sometimes reaching down to

brush a caring hand across it. The thought occurred to her that she would not mind if Saulf came home with a babe from a dalliance with a fairie woman—not that she could picture him ever making such an outlandish confession.

As evening broke she swaddled the mandrake in its cloth and rocked it in her arms, humming a wordless lullaby. Why, she could not say—only that some buried natural instinct had guided her to hold it as she might a child. When the sky had faded to black, she gently lowered her swaddled mandrake into the cradle, hoping that Saulf would not notice it and decide to throw it in the cooking fire.

Saulf came home hungry, ate Meggy's portion of stew and drank half the milk she had collected that day. Not once did he look at the cradle, and for that matter he barely looked at Meggy. "I have somewhere to be," he said, once finished. "Your rest is over, fairie woman. You'll be back in the field tomorrow morning."

Meggy thumbed her frail ragwort stem and almost laughed at the sweet irony of Saulf's intended insult, but stayed herself in time. "When will you be back?" she asked instead.

"Doesn't concern you," Saulf said brusquely, which Meggy took to mean he would be out all night drinking. She let out a tiny breath as he banged out again. He would not be at home, which meant that the mandrake would stay safe.

Meggy went to the corner of the room, opposite the cradle, and dipped a measure of ale from the barrel into her cup. She had just brewed it fresh, so the barrel was nearly full. She sat on the cot, kicked off her goatskin slippers, pulled her shawl around her, and took a pensive drink. Her reflection shimmered back at her from the sunset-gold liquid, and when she locked her gaze onto her own big black eyes—yes, she could believe Albreda's story.

She held onto her ragwort stem as she drank, closing her eyes and letting herself fall into an airy dreamlike state, awake yet suspended in a hazy other world. In that world she could hold her babe close, and it was neither stone nor root, but a real and whole son of her own flesh.

The thought crept in that Albreda, too, must have yearned for her own dead son, even as she swaddled Meggy and rocked her and fed her.

Meggy's eyes flew open just as Saulf entered, the door crashing shut behind him.

"Christ's fingernails!" hissed Saulf, looking into the cradle. "What is this?"

She sprang to her feet. "You're back early."

"Not early enough, evidently." Saulf plucked her off the bed and held her off the ground. "What in hell did you do while I was gone?"

Pain spread across her shoulders as she whimpered, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I only thought…"

Saulf shook Meggy. "Has the devil gotten into you? Do you think yourself a fairie, to carry away someone else's child?"

Meggy's mind went white and still. "A *child*?"

A soft babble, fragile as a twig of sallow, rose in the room. Saulf dragged Meggy to the cradle and placed his broad hand on the back of her neck, forcing her to look downward. "What do you call this?"

The mandrake had vanished. Inside the green swaddling cloth lay a newborn, button features screwed up in confusion. The fine tufts of hair on his head were whitish blonde like Meg-gy's, and when his eyes opened they were the same startling cornflower blue as Saulf's.

"The fairie mandrake!" Meggy exclaimed.

"The what?"

"I found a mandrake at our door, swaddled like a babe," Meggy said. "Albreda told me the Hidden Folk might have put it there, and so I… I kept it, as a gift. Husband, look, he has your eyes!"

Saulf set her down, slowly. "A mandrake cannot become a child. You're as mad as your mother."

Meggy backed into a corner, holding her arms around herself. "Husband, my mother told me something else." Her hand curled into a tight fist, the ragwort stem prickling her fingers. "She said I…"

"No," Saulf said, striding toward her. "No, I don't want to hear anything more of what she said. What do you think will happen when this babe's parents come around looking for it? Did she say anything about that, Meggy?"

"Look at him," Meggy said firmly. "He is the babe we lost, sprung from the mandrake. Look at him, Husband! See the selfsame birthmark on his cheek?" A surge of hot bravery coursed through her and she darted past him, lifting the now-quiet babe out of the cradle.

Her husband stared at it. "How?"

"The mandrake," Meggy repeated.

"A root cannot become a child!" Saulf sounded desperate.

But if that root were left with the daughter of a fairie-woman?

Any last bits of disbelief sloughed away. She truly was a changeling, just like the mandrake child. Just as Albreda raised her as a daughter, she would raise *this* babe with care. She would be warmer than Albreda, too, kinder and more loving.

Time stretched as Meggy stared Saulf down, silent and defiant.

"That's truly an auf?" Saulf said faintly. He had never believed in fairie stories. His eyes darted to the bare top of the doorframe, where so many others, people whom he had derided as superstitious halfwits, had nailed a horseshoe for protection from the Hidden Folk—Meggy's folk.

"You let an *auf* into our home, with your witch mother's blessing?" Saulf's voice grew loud. He wheeled frenetically, clumsily around once, twice, before knocking the top off the alebarrel. "Give it to me," he said, holding out his arms for the babe.

"What are you doing?" Meggy demanded.

"We can't keep it, woman! It's a devilish thing. You can brew more of your second-rate ale tomorrow."

A devilish thing, her mind echoed. In her arms, the babe hiccoughed gently. "But my mother kept *me*," she said steadily.

He froze. "What?"

"My mother didn't drown me in the ale-barrel when she found me laid outside." A sudden boldness coursed through her as she clasped her no-longer-bluish babe to her chest. "Not even when she had to take down the horseshoe from her own doorway."

Saulf gaped.

"You always called me fairie woman," she taunted, feeling a thrill of delight at the vulnerability spilling from him. He reeked of shock like rotted fruit, a new thing for her to see in him.

A choking sound emerged from his throat as his hands sprang forward, almost as if they were guided by an unseen spirit, and he began to stalk toward her. Meggy made an animal dash for the door, but Saulf caught up fast. His hands scrabbled for her neck and closed around it.

She writhed as her vision blurred into liquid dark, fighting to keep her arms from slackening their hold on her son.

"Changeling bitch," Saulf growled. "You're the reason I've been under a curse." He pinned her against the wall with almost, not quite, enough force to break the cradle of her arms. "*You* are the reason I reap slower each year. *You* killed my son, and put this monster in his place. Devil take you both!"

A raw keening shriek filled her ears: her own death cry, Meggy realised dimly. The sound might bring her mother running, but by then she herself would be gone. Knowing how much Saulf hated Albreda even at the best of times, she hoped her mother *wouldn't* investigate.

Yet Saulf dropped before she did, the pressure vanishing from her throat as he tipped heavily onto his back. He lay still, blood trickling from his open lips, as Meggy fell to her knees and sucked in ragged breaths as a

babe would suck its mother's milk.

The babe! She loosened the crush of her grip and felt her son's wrist. His eyes were shut, but his heart beat even and strong. She kissed his soft cheek hungrily before glancing nervously at Saulf, prone on the packed-earth floor. He did not look unconscious. There was a greyish wax-iness to his skin and his eyes were open.

Meggy's thoughts screamed, *I need Albreda*, and she flung the door open and ran bare-foot outside, hurling herself over her mother's threshold just as a crowd of people, drawn by the din and illuminated by the pale flicker of rushlights, emerged from their own doorways blinking groggily in the night air.

Albreda had evidently just taken herself to bed, for a single rushlight was still burning softly in its holder on the floor, but as soon as the door slammed behind Meggy she sat bolt up-right.

"Mother," Meggy gasped.

Albreda's dark silhouette slumped for a moment before moving clumsily to her feet. "Meggy? I dreamt that Saulf…"

"He's dead," Meggy cut her off. "He—he tried to kill my son, and nearly killed me, but there was such a scream, and I thought it was *me* until he… it must have been a demon dragging him away." Lowering her voice further, she added, "The neighbours are on their way down to the cottage. They'll find him and then—they'll think *I* killed him! Mother, what can I do?"

"Your *son?*" The half-burnt rushlight cast a weird glow over Albreda's drawn features as she held it up, moving closer to Meggy. When she saw the babe, miraculously still asleep in Meg-gy's arms, she drew back as if burnt. "Where did he come from?"

"The fairie mandrake turned to a babe," Meggy said.

"Why didn't you didn't bury it, as I told you to?" Albreda snapped.

Meggy ignored her question. "Hide us, Mother. I cannot lose my son again."

"Ken this, girl," Albreda said urgently, never once taking her eyes from the babe, "that's not your son. That's a devil taken his form. *He* must be what killed your husband!"

"He's not a devil! He *is* a gift, from my mother's people!"

"It cannot be." Albreda looked as if she might faint as the rushlight fizzled out in her hands. "A root cannot take the form of a child!"

"This one did," Meggy insisted. "I can feel it in my bones—it's not a devil I'm holding, but my own lost son come back to me. Mother, please, hide us before they find Saulf!"

"No," Albreda said, and Meggy's breath fell away at her mother's cold

disregard before she realised that Albreda was not addressing her, but had instead fixed her eyes on the baby. "You will be gone!" She fumbled around and struck another rushlight ablaze. "I buried you myself. I put you in the ground and *I made sure you would not rise.*"

Meggy's stomach churned at the strangeness of Albreda's wording. "Mother?" she asked, shifting the babe into one arm and reaching toward Albreda with the other, meaning to stroke her hair gently.

Albreda jerked herself away as if Meggy's touch might singe her. "God help me, take that babe away!"

"I thought you'd be happy to see us," Meggy said, confused, grieving. "Your only grandchild—You were heartbroken when he was born dead." Belatedly, she realised that Albreda had given no indication of heartbreak. Her face had been calm and set that night, as she had held Meggy's sweaty head in her lap and rocked her. She had not cried when they put the babe into the ground. Had Meggy found that peculiar at the time, her mother's unwillingness to shed a tear for her grandson?

She looked away, confused, and her eye fell on the cloth bundle still sitting on Albreda's table, the mushrooms her mother had prepared for her friend Eda in the morning.

Eda's belly just beginning to swell, Eda's glowing smile…

Had *Eda* requested the mushrooms herself? Did she know about them at all, or had Eda's sour-faced mother knocked on Albreda's door and asked for something which only Albreda could provide, a way to save the honour of her unmarried daughter?

A memory hit her, from not four nights before. Albreda had brought her dinner, and pushed away Saulf's hand when he reached for it first. Special for the mother-to-be, she had called it.

She had made mushroom stew.

Sweat pooled under Meggy's arms as she thought about the stew, made so rich with root vegetables from Albreda's garden and meat from Albreda's freshly slaughtered chicken that she had not thought about it when she bit into a piece of something orange and dry.

Something clicked in her understanding, and all at once she saw the woman whom she called Mother in a new and terrible light.

As if she had read Meggy's realisation reflected back at her, Albreda heaved a shaky breath. "It was the doing of a foolish and grief-mad wo-man," she said. "I raised you as a daughter, and I gave you care, but I could not stop thinking about my own son who lies in the church-yard even now. Your father never understood that kind of pain. Men seldom do—and besides, you were *his* true babe."

"You wanted someone else to know what it felt like," Meggy said, and when she thought of her dead son laid in the churchyard she held the living one even tighter in her arms.

A silent minute passed.

"I always thought," Albreda said slowly, "that your mother, the fairie-woman, must have cursed my womb."

"And so you cursed mine!" Meggy snatched up the bundle from Albreda's table and threw it hard onto the ground, letting the mushroom pieces scatter.

"I never intended to harm you," Albreda half-moaned. "I knew it would leave you alive, I did not want to kill you. I am fond of you, Meggy, you must understand… We both have lost our sons, but we will always have each other…"

"I have a son," Meggy said, holding up her now-awake babe and noting with some surprise that his eyes were no longer blue like Saulf's, but had become as soot-black as hers. "He is no devil. He is mine, a gift from my mother's people. Perhaps they do not give *you* gifts, but I am one of them. You said so yourself. Perhaps," she added thoughtfully, "perhaps I loved the man-drake-child so much it became real. I am the daughter of a fairie-woman, am I not? Perhaps I can do things even a cunningwoman cannot fathom."

"*Listen* to me!" Albreda looked pale and ill. "Your mother was a fairie-woman, but your father was a man. *You* were born flesh-and-blood, not a devil-possessed root. I know this creature must be sent as punishment for what I have done. But for your sake, Meggy, don't keep the cursed thing!" A great shout rose nearby. "They'll have found Saulf's body," she continued. "God forgive me, girl, you can stay here, I'll say you were with me all night, but you *must* throw that babe out the door. It's not natural. It's the work of devils—let it crawl back into the hellfire it came from!"

As if he understood Albreda's words, the babe opened his mouth and began to cry quietly.

"No," Meggy said simply.

"I cared for you all your life," Albreda pleaded. "I fed you my milk and silenced you when you cried. I tied poultices for your wounds. I only made one mistake. It's not too late…"

And what a mistake it was, Meggy thought, but stayed silent.

The baby's sobbing grew more and more intense, soaring higher and louder and sharper. Meggy thought about the sound she had heard right before Saulf fell, and had a moment of sudden sharp clarity.

Albreda saw the resolve in Meggy's face and shut her eyes, icy calm

washing over her.

The mandrake child burst into a crackling lightning shriek which made the hairs on Meggy's arms stand straight up.

When the sound died so had Albreda, the blood dotting her chin the only indication that she had not merely fallen asleep. The babe lay still and quiet again while Meggy knelt and wept briefly for the cunningwoman and all that she had done. Then she wiped her eyes on a corner of her shawl. "They'll be drawn by your cry," she said to the babe in her arms. "What shall we do? We have nowhere to go. If my mother's people could help me, as they did when they gave you to me…"

There was a pounding on the door. "Was that you screaming, Albreda?" a man's voice called.

"Saulf lies poisoned in ways only kenned by a cunningwoman like you, and his wife is gone missing!" another said. "You best come out now, or we'll come *in*." The pounding resumed, more vigorously this time.

Meggy leapt to her feet and looked around for a crack, a looseness in the wall. If she could slip away… A tugging distracted her and she cast her eyes down to meet her babe's dark unblinking ones. One of his tiny hands lay open; there was a stem of ragwort inside.

She stared for a moment, and thought about her old daydreams of riding into the air with her babe by her side. Go on, the babe seemed to say, go on and take it.

The door broke down. "Hoy!" one of the men shouted, seeing Albreda's corpse, but Meggy was already closing her hand around her babe's, the ragwort held fast in their linked fingers.

And there was a lightness in her chest, like flight.

DEB EWING "CROWSTONGUE"

DICK ALTMAN writes in the high, thin, magical air of Santa Fe, NM, where, at 7,000 feet, reality and imagination often blur. He is published in *Santa Fe Literary Review, American Journal of Poetry, riverSedge, Fredericksburg Literary Review, Foliate Oak, Blue Line, THE Magazine, Humana obscura, Landing Zone Magazine, The Offbeat, Haunted Waters Press, Split Rock Review, The RavensPerch, Beyond Words, Sky Island Journal* and others here and abroad. He is a poetry winner of Santa Fe New Mexican's annual literary competition. He has in progress two collections of published poetry, *Voices in the Heart of Stones* and *Telling the Broken Sky.*

Artist, writer, peer reviewer for C*onsilience Journal,* all-around ruiner of peace for the greater good, DEB EWING stands at a crossroads of her own making. Her favorite things are decay and letterpress. Find deb's work at *Jerry Jazz Musician, Dodging the Rain, Beyond Words, Shot Glass Journal, Plainsongs,* among others. She blogs at *Igneus Press* and *debnation.com.*

THE ORB WEAVER VANISHES

Dick Altman

My dear Greek Arachne, web
master and Athena's nemesis,
why abandon me?

The veranda's right angles sang
three years ago with your tapestries.
How unwavering your patience,

as you waited in unnatural stillness
for vibratory music to set on fire
your eight-legged sculpture

of suspended animation.
How the hunter in you awoke
in a burst of hunger

bordering on lust.
How you raced to embrace
fly, moth and butterfly that,

by wind or chance,
found itself imbedded
in the silken grace

of a feastly table you anchored
against harshest turbulence.
How you offered guests a bier

of downy caress, where
with dexterous dexterity,
you spun a coffin,

not of polished oak
or bronze, but filamentous
translucency my eye traced

with wonder, as if a sacred
shroud that ancient
deities of thread loomed

to bury the royal dead.
How, dearest Arachne, I grieve
your vanishing, your lost

high-wire majesty, your
winged savorings who
surrendered in artful death.

ESPIE SCHIAVO "THE KEEPER"

KATHRYN LEMON earned her BA in creative writing from Kenyon College where she also worked as an Associate and Reading Series Intern with the Kenyon Review. She is presently living in Minneapolis, Minnesota where she is working on a novel and offering unsolicited book recommendations to anyone who will listen.

The many stories that explain how the girl born in 1982 became ESPIE SCHIAVO can only be told via her art. She is a Mixed-Media artist that uses unusual materials and methods to achieve her vision. Her canvases feature watercolor, acrylic, oil and gauche. Shards of glass, drywall tape, canvas pad pages, and torn up books are a few examples of the found materials uses in nearly every painting. She has no formal training and no "real life" experience in the art world. Inexperience, however, has proven to be beneficial. Fear of making a “mistake” is not something that she subscribes to. Inexperience allows her the freedom to try anything and everything.

THE LAST WIFE

Kathryn LeMon

I

My husband sleeps beside me while I lay awake and listen to the voices of his dead wives. The trio of whispers slips up through the floorboards and drifts down the long hallways and empty rooms, past the library and its fireplace full of embers and ash, past the cavernous ballroom with its massive windows shedding silver moonlight on the patterned floor; they speak of despair all the way through the big, dark house until they cross through the double doors of our bedroom to twine around my ankles, crawl up my body, and chill my skin with the icy breath of death: *Beware*, they warn, *you are next.*

It has been two weeks since my husband last slept with me. Hours ago, he woke me from a half-sleep, asked me to remove my nightdress, and I took to his embrace with my usual uncertain fervor, my hands locked in his hair while his pressed into my waist, my back, my thighs—

He pulled away and looked upon me with eyes unclouded by desire.

Three months. In just three months, he has courted me, married me, and tired of me.

Beware.

I reach for my discarded nightgown and pull it over my head, the fine fabric resting against me like a second skin and gliding across the contours of my body as I shift my weight over the mattress. The fabric hesitates with me at the edge of the bed, gathering around my thighs in a puddle of satin

and lace, and then, when I mark no change in my husband's snoring, I swing my legs over the edge and circle around to kneel before him. He is nude but for a gold chain that winks at me from his thick neck.

I have long guessed that it would come to this: my fingers caressing his skin as I undo the clasp of the chain, the flash of stolen gold in the night.

You are next.

The key comes free of the chain. My husband does not stir.

My dearest sister Eloise,

This castle is a paradise! I say castle because Robert is being modest when he calls it a manor estate. There are twenty-one bedrooms, four rooms for dining, a ballroom, and two libraries. Our bedroom is as big as a small house, and the bathroom is larger than the room we shared back home. I think he must be the wealthiest man in the whole world, and he chose *me* as his wife.

As for his last two wives, you were wrong to think that he remarried too soon. He has mentioned them only once in passing, and I have never seen an expression of grief cross his face. I can assure you that he is wholly devoted to me, and I to him. He is wondrously mysterious, too. It is impossible to get a straight answer from his lips, and he delights in confounding me in conversation. I should like to watch him face off against you in the art of discussion, for I think he is your equal.

I hope you will be able to visit soon. Though I love Robert and cherish every moment with him, he is frequently engaged by business, and I must confess that I am more often lonely than not. It is such a big house, and though I find that wandering its empty chambers gives me no solace, it is too hot to spend time in the gardens. I miss you and Mama and James and the village girls. Give them my love, but keep the best of it for yourself.

Your devoted sister,

Jane

Dear Jane,

Forgive me for writing this, but your husband seems positively brutal to forget his wives so quickly. I've heard rumors that he has been married many times before, and no one knows what happened to his previous wives. It's why he moved to the countryside—to get away from the unscrupulous accusations. You will proclaim this all to be folly, but I never could resist a good mystery. If you are not too busy indulging your every

whim, won't you try to uncover the secret of his missing brides for me?

I imagine you must be very like a queen surrounded by so many riches, and I am *honored* that you found time to write to your humble sister. Ah, I wish you had not married so well! I'm happy for you, of course, but there are rich young men coming around to see what interest your husband found in a Hawthorne girl. I fear I do not impress them much as the daughter of a dead merchant even if I am well educated, for none have visited a second time. Perhaps I am *too* well educated? Ha! Whatever it is, I am grateful none of them have taken a liking to me. I haven't liked any of them one bit.

Mama sends her love, but James is too busy sending all of his love to Francine. I would know since he makes me read his letters for spelling errors. It is untoward business if you ask me. She is not any prettier than she was when you left, but her father comes into a little money and you would think she was a duchess with all the boys chasing after her. Better her than me, I suppose. If I have my way, I shall never marry.

Try not to be too bored in paradise.

Love,

Eloise

The bedroom door shuts with a quiet click, leaving me in the hush of the hall clutching a candle and a key. The wood floors of these wide corridors have been polished so thoroughly that the moon, nearly full, seems to glow from beneath my slippered feet, and though I know there is no one else awake, I step quietly, reverently through the manor.

When I turn the corner, I jump at the sight of a white figure floating before me, and the figure flinches in kind. It's only a looking glass, and one I've seen many times before tonight. I grip the key tighter as though by holding onto it, I am holding onto my wits.

Surrounding the mirror are twelve portraits in gilded frames: all women, and all nude or wearing dresses of fabric so fine they may as well be. They look similar enough to be sisters, variations on a theme, and if I draped my gossamer nightgown just so and assumed a pose sufficiently erotic, my reflection would look at home with them. I wonder if it is my husband's intention, by placing the mirror here, for his wives to consider themselves in comparison to the paintings.

He does not keep portraits of himself on display. After seeing one in the cellar of a handsome youth on a horse, I understand why. He has grown old and unattractive, his money saturating his life with feasting, smoking, and

drinking to excess.

"It is the curse of wealth that nothing can satisfy me."

He told me this the night of our wedding after rising from the bed to light a cigar. The smoke, opaque in the candlelight, snaked around his body to obscure his naked flesh while I watched from my place atop the damp sheets.

"The solution is simple, then," I said. "You must give away all your money."

A white smile flashed through the smoke. "Having married me for my money, would that not upset you?"

"I did not marry you for your money."

"Oh?" His voice became lower and softer, taunting. "For love?"

"Not for love."

"I am afraid you have misunderstood marriage, then, for those are the only reasons. It's too late for you now, so you will have to content yourself with my money. I have little to offer in the realm of love."

It was not marriage I misunderstood: it was myself. I lift my chin to summon what bravado I have in reserve and leave the wall of women behind, carrying with me the weight of so many unsent letters. I do not pause again, not for ghostly reflections or second-guesses.

I have already married a monster. I do not have the luxury of second-guesses.

Dear Eloise, spinster-to-be,

You are correct to think that your little story about Robert does not impress me. I am too devoted a wife to entertain baseless rumors about him, and I will certainly not go snooping about after some mystery that I am sure does not exist. That is all I have to say on the matter. I am in love, Eloise! At least try to be happy for me.

About James—I am not as surprised about his infatuation as you are. You see the worst in everyone. Perhaps he is truly in love with the girl. All the same, the next time he gives you one of his letters to read, copy it down and send it along to me. I could use a little diversion. Does he write poetry? I bet he writes the most awful poetry.

As for me, I have nothing much to tell you. Robert is still busy, but he sends me little gifts of flowers or jewelry to apologize. I have asked him when he thinks his work will let up, and he always says, "Soon," but soon never comes. Has he tired of me so quickly? I worry his affection is fading, and I would ask him about it, but what if he finds me nagging? I will not go

into the finer details of married life, for you have made your opinions on matrimony quite clear.

Missing you dearly,

Jane

Dear Queen Jane,

Men are boring and only useful for their money. And isn't Mama proof that one can do without even that? Has she not maintained and even improved Father's business since his death? You said to me once that you could not bear to live in our little town for the rest of your life.

Well, I can bear it, and I will happily be a burden to James for all my days—it's only fair since he will be the one to inherit.

I tried to copy down his last letter for you, but I only managed to get the following lines for your perusal before he saw what I was doing:

"My darling,

When can I see you again? The sight of your hair in the moonlight has bewitched me, and I long to bury my face in your ebony curls."

The whole affair is laughable to me, but Mama doesn't think so. She thinks she will soon have two of three children married. Unfortunately, she has not yet given up on me.

Love,

Eloise

Dear Eloise,

I write to you in the hour before dawn. The house is finally quiet, and though I feel as if I might fall asleep at my desk, I have neglected our correspondence for too long—how can it be that summer is nearly gone? I hope you can forgive my silence.

It seems I have complained of my loneliness one too many times, for now, I can never get a moment's peace. Robert has been throwing the most marvelous parties for me every night, and I do not mean to sound ungrateful, but there is only so much champagne I can drink before I fall over. I know this for a fact as I have suffered this fate more than once.

How are you, and how is Mama? Is James still writing love letters to Francine? I wish you could tell me about everything in person. I miss our late-night conversations. These days, I find myself waking from my sleep almost nightly, and I long for your words of comfort. Though I thrash and cry out from my nightmares, Robert does not wake, and if I do rouse him,

he becomes cross with me.

You will probably think me mad, but I hear the strangest, most mournful voices in my sleep. It is as if someone is trying to tell me something, but I always wake before I understand them. I think I can hear them now if I listen hard enough… I must be more tired than I thought.

Your devoted sister,

Jane

I slink through the halls, feeling more like a thief than the rightful mistress of this house.

I am more comfortable in the skin of a thief than that of a wife, anyhow. I have spent many nights ducking in and out of empty rooms and more than one early morning rifling through my husband's papers. I am familiar with every inch of the manor, but all of my efforts have thus far proved fruitless: his lack of secrecy has made a mockery of my efforts. He keeps his ring of keys unattended and in plain view, but if he does not bother keeping his office secured, why, then, is an unassuming door beneath the staircase in the West Wing impervious to every key?

The door is before me now, and the peeling varnish catches on my fingertips as I insert, turn, and remove the key in one seamless motion. Some strange mixture of fear and eager desire has the flame from the candle shivering in my hands as the door swings open.

A staircase spirals down into the dark. I take the first steps and imagine my husband's eyes flying open, but even if some supernatural power has alerted him to my betrayal, I would not stop now to beg his forgiveness. The thought only urges me on, faster down the stairs, as fast as my feet can take me. The key has worked! He has hidden something at the bottom of these stairs, and I will find him out.

The voices grow louder the farther I descend, weaving in and out of each other, overlapping to form a haunting chorus. *Beware, beware*, one says. Another begs, *Eloise, turn back*, and I shudder. Never before have the voices addressed me by name.

At the bottom of the staircase, my candle illuminates a door of heavy, dark wood. This door, too, is locked, and as I fit the key into the lock and push, I remind myself that the worst thing to find here would be nothing. If I could just discover something, *anything* that would shed a little light—

Jane.

The horror does not register until after the recognition. That is Jane's hair, Jane's freckled nose, Jane's face. There is a flicker of fierce, wild hope

that plunges to sickened despair. That is Jane's face. That is Jane's skin, drained of blood, Jane's hair tied to a nail beaten hastily into the wall.

That is Jane's head.

The rest of her body is elsewhere, everywhere. The candlelight gutters in my faltering hand as I tug on the key, but it does not want to come free of the door. I see two other heads beside Jane's, floating like apparitions. Blood from three bodies mingles on the floor, gleaming as though it had been spilled just hours ago, and the voices are ringing in my ears; I cannot separate them from my own frantic thoughts. There are too many arms on the ground, a leg bent awkwardly in the corner. I pull harder.

The key comes loose, and momentum carries it backward, through my fingers. I turn and sweep the light from my candle across the ground and find it resting in an upturned palm not three feet away, saved by mere inches from sinking into a pool of blood.

I reach forward. When my fingers brush against cold skin, I hear Jane's voice clear and awful: *Run.*

Dear Eloise,

I have told you that Robert is very secretive, haven't I? But have I told you about his key?

He keeps one around his neck and does not even take it off to bathe. Though I have asked him about it time and time again, he says that a husband must have some secrets from his wife. How he loves to tease me! The key, he says, leads to his *secret room*, a little chamber that no one is allowed into but him—not even me. But Eloise! Robert has gone away on business for two weeks and has given me the key. I wear it, as he did, around my neck and close to my heart. Though he is away from me, I have never felt closer to him.

Robert cautioned me not to go into the room even when he is gone, or he will be murderously cross. I can see why someone might spread unflattering stories with him making jokes like that, but he's really harmless. If you spent any time with him, you would believe me. Anyway, I think I shall go inside his secret room. How is he to know? I do not think a husband should keep secrets from his wife. I have none from him.

Oh, but I will be so lonely without him that I don't know how I will bear it. For two weeks I will have no husband, no parties, and no one to keep me company. It will be unbearable—unless you visit me. I have been asking for a while now, but this time Robert would not be here to interfere with us. Think, Eloise! We could run wild through the halls, wear all my jewels, and

drink champagne!

Please say you can come. It is not even a full day's journey if you can get a fast horse.

Mama will tell you not to go alone but come anyway. Please.

I will be waiting,

Jane

Jane,

In two day's time, the cooper will lend me his horse. You were right that Mama doesn't want me to come, but I will come anyhow.

Look for me from your window—I will be wearing my green cloak.

Eloise

The day was so bleak that even the noon sun could not burn through the fog, but I kept the horse I borrowed running at a brisk pace so that I would arrive in the afternoon. I was halfway across the grounds before the house emerged from the mist. It was a grand, foreboding place like something out of a novel, symmetrical with spires on either side rising up into the air. I was wild and free galloping toward it, my only thought that I would finally see my sister again. My sister, Jane, who had married the man to whom this place belonged. The nearer I got, the more I understood the appeal. To be mistress of a place like this? She was very fortunate. But I was more fortunate still, for I would get to enjoy the luxuries without having to marry.

I knocked on the door, tugging free the tangles in my hair while I waited. After knocking a second and third time, I realized no one was coming. I pushed my way inside, looking left and right in the grand en--tranceway. There were two staircases before me that swept up in opposite directions only to curve around to join at the same mezzanine.

"Jane? Where are you?" I stepped forward, tracking in mud behind me. "Jane?"

I did not see him approach, but there he was at the top of the stairs, gazing down on me and I up at him, neither of us expecting the other. It was the only time I have seen something like unease pass over his face.

"Hello, brother," I said, for it amused me that this rich man was related to me if only by marriage. "Your wife told me you were away on business. She invited me."

He descended the stairs before saying anything, putting on a grave

countenance as he approached. He placed a hand on my shoulder and drew near enough that I could smell the perfume of a recent bath on his skin.

"My dear," he said, "I have some unfortunate news."

II

Dear Jane,

Your husband says you threw yourself into the river with rocks in your pockets, and that is the reason there was no body. He's lying. He must be. You wouldn't do that, and certainly not when we had been planning to meet. You loved your husband and the comforts he provided you. You had no desire to leave him or this life.

I did not go to your funeral. I hope you will forgive me.

Mama has been strong, and James has hardly left her side, not even to see Francine. I am the one who cannot cope. Each day I read through your old letters to see if there is something I missed, something I could have done if perhaps I had arrived just an hour earlier…

I am going to return to his estate tonight. His is the last face I want to see, but no one will listen when I tell them he is at fault for your death. They turn their faces away and say nothing because they are afraid of him and his money. I always felt ill at ease in his presence, but I promise you this: I will discover whatever it is that he is hiding, and I *will* exact retribution for your death.

Ever your faithful sister,

Eloise

We sat at the corner of a table that spanned from one end of the dining room to the other, the whole length of it lit with candelabra as if waiting for guests who had yet to arrive. I felt the ghost of my sister heavy in the air, and though I watched her widower closely throughout the meal, I couldn't detect the slightest bit of guilt or grief in his eyes. Whatever I had been hoping to learn about this man, I wasn't going to discover it during one dinner, however long it stretched into the evening.

"Thank you for having me over," I said. "I did not dare expect hospitality from you after the last time I was here."

"You accused me of killing your sister."

I looked down at my hands, folded on the white tablecloth, and did not respond.

"My dear," he reached over to place his hand over both of mine, "I have

been accused of far worse. You were grieving. I was too. I understand the impulse to assign blame."

"Thank you. Your sympathy means more than I can express." I had filled the evening with gentle falsehoods like this, hoping that if I repeated them often enough, he would not be able to see past them to the accusation burning within me.

I needn't have worried. While I was trying to hide my scheme, his mind was occupied with setting the stage for a different game entirely.

Robert stared for a long moment at the place where his hand covered mine and said, "I have no desire to sit through three more tedious courses, have you? Let us go look at your sister's things." He grabbed my hand and rose from his chair, leaving no room for disagreement.

The house was in shadows, illuminated only by long rectangles of moonlight. Every closed door we passed was identical, giving each stretch of hall a nightmarish similarity. I was half-certain he had figured me out and was leading me to a dungeon to kill me. Instead, I found myself in his bedchamber, the room he shared with Jane. Though I saw nothing of her in the room, no misplaced book or dress, I felt faint and claustrophobic as he guided me past the bed to the adjoining bathroom. We stopped at a pristine white vanity with gold detailing around the edges, and he opened the top drawer. Releasing my arm, he lifted a necklace from its velvet box.

"I've had most of her things packed up and sent along already. There are just a few little trinkets for you to bring back tonight."

"Little trinkets?" I did not have to feign astonishment at the sight of a necklace adorned with rubies the size of my thumbnail. "Sir, surely after my sister's death, this necklace would return to your estate."

"Call me Robert," he said, stepping behind me and undoing the clasp on the necklace. "I'm certain your sister would want you to have this. And what's more, I want you to have it." The necklace was heavy and cold, the jewels on such a short chain that they circled my neck without falling below the hollow of my throat. A collar. He placed a hand on each of my shoulders and stood behind me, considering our reflection as if it were a portrait in a gallery. "The idea for this whole house came straight from my imagination." He spoke in a low voice, his mouth right beside my ear.

"Oh?" I said, my unease growing. "What a magnificent imagination."

"My whole life," he continued, "sprung forth from my mind just as I imagined it. I have found that living boldly is the only way for me, so I will not beg forgiveness for asking if I may see you again. Perhaps some would think it is taboo, but I have thought of little else since you stepped foot in my house."

Revulsion made me pause, but then I remembered my promise to Jane and took courage.

Whatever it required, I would make this man pay for what he had done. I relaxed and leaned back slightly so that my shoulders rested against his chest, slipping into the skin of a seductress as easily as if I had played the part my whole life. "Would a truly bold man ask permission?"

"Very well." His thumb swept across my shoulder to the place where fabric gave way to skin. "I will come by your house in one week, and I expect you to be wearing this necklace."

Dear Jane,

I feel as if I am an actress in a play. A current of resolve underlies my every action, my every thought, and when I am with Robert, I understand how vital and precious every moment of life is. I feel as if I have never truly lived before now.

Mama and James are concerned for me. They do not think it is proper for your husband to court me, and I am unable to account for my actions in a way that will satisfy them. I avoid them as much as I can, but I will not have to for much longer. We will be married before the month is out.

I cannot help but wonder how many times he has played this game of luring in young women with gifts of diamonds and gowns and visits to the opera. When did it begin, and how many women have there been before me? Before you? Whatever the case, soon he will discover that he is not playing the game he believes he is. He is not the one in control, and I am not some pretty young thing to be lured and gutted like a fish.

Ever your faithful sister,

Eloise

III

Dear Jane,

It has been a week since I saw—since I found you, and I can scarcely bring myself to think of it. To think at any length sends my body into a fit of shuddering, so I spend my time watching the snow fall, letting my mind go blank and smooth. But our husband is always steering me away from windows. He thinks I've caught a chill. Ha! How endearing of him, to care for my well-being.

I know I ought to tell someone, but who would believe what I've seen? I

thought of going home to Mama and James, but I see myself collapsing into tears in the doorway, unable to speak or move at the sight of them, utterly pathetic. Our husband would come to retrieve me, but I would not go with him. I would scream and claw at his face; I would be transformed into an animal, a madwoman, at the prospect of returning to this house.

I know I must do something, but I— Enough! I can think of it no more.

Eloise

I do not sleep well anymore. I wake every night to the sound of echoing voices or to my husband's snoring. Or I see the image of my sister's head nailed to a wall behind closed eyes and lay on my back until I cannot bear it any longer. I rise from the bed. I do not take the key.

I leave the room and drag my bare feet against the floor, walking aimlessly and stopping every so often to press my hand against a cold windowpane to remind myself that I am alive. At the end of the corridor, I stroke the gilded frame of the mirror and gaze up at the paintings. The twelve women are ethereal in their beauty; they are impossible. I walk over to the nearest one and put my hand against her rosy cheek. Something raw and lonely swells from deep within me.

"Do you recognize her?"

I jerk my head over my shoulder. My husband had not been sleeping as soundly as I believed him to be.

"Should I?"

"She is your sister." He closes the distance between us and puts his hand on my shoulder, drawing me back against his chest. "I should have you sit for your portrait soon."

I let my hand fall away from the painting and examine my reflection. "How soon?" Perhaps it is no surprise that I did not recognize my sister. I can hardly recognize myself for the dark circles under my eyes and the gaunt look on my face. I always knew that marriage wouldn't agree with me.

Robert ignores my question and points to a portrait, smaller than the rest, of a lovely blonde woman higher up on the wall. Her breasts are on full display, but a strategically placed sheet covers her lower half. "That was my first wife. I was still very young when I married her, but I was quickly amassing my fortune."

Her lips smile down on us, but her eyes are blank. This portrait was not as skillfully done as the rest. "What was she like?"

"She was… kind. And I was too young to understand what a gift that

was. She loved me." Robert turns to me. "If truth be told, your sister was the only one to love me as earnestly as she."

Then why did you kill her? I hold the words on my tongue and swallow them down. "Not me?"

"You do not love me." His lips tug at the corners. "But you amuse me, and there is something to be said for that, as well."

Dear Jane,

James is marrying Francine. Mama lived to see all three of her children marry, after all. I am not going to the wedding—how could I? The girl who was once daughter and sister feels like a distant memory. I can conjure her image, but I have forgotten how to exist in her skin.

When I walk through the halls of this manor, each one identical to the last, I find it impossible to believe that the village is only a day's ride away. How could it be that I have ever lived anywhere else? My promise to you is the only thing that ties me to my past.

I return to your portrait several times a day. The painter smoothed over your freckles and gave you a fuller figure than you had, so it is difficult to tell that it is you. I suppose he thought he was doing you a favor. He will have to do me many favors. Although I eat well, I have lost a considerable amount of weight. I am not sleeping, but how can I when I know I am running out of time? My portrait will mark the beginning of the end. Once he immortalizes me on the wall with the rest of his wives, I am as good as dead.

Your faithful sister,

Eloise

I fight through the throngs of people choking the halls of my husband's house. I do not know these people, and they do not recognize me. The party presses in around me, champagne spilling down my nightgown and candles flaring dangerously high in their sconces, but when I turn down the hall, the swarm gives way and I can breathe again. I see my husband at the end of the hall, standing over James and Francine. They are dressed as well as the other guests, dressed in their wedding finery while my husband presides over the ceremony, and I watch, transfixed, as my brother lifts a glass of wine to his lips and drinks deeply. When he removes the glass, his lips are stained red, and the sight conjures the taste of metal behind my teeth. A mouthful of blood congeals into something small and hot on my

tongue. I cough into the palm of my hand.

The key.

It singes my skin as though I have stolen an ember from a dying fire. My husband is smiling at me from down the hall, and I squeeze my hand into a fist to hide my treachery. I do not have long until he notices it is missing. I turn on my heel and flee towards the West Wing, finding myself again in that swirling staircase. The specters of the dead wrap their fingers around my ankle to slow my step, they weigh my pockets down with stones, but the key burns hotter still and urges me onward. Jane's voice speaks into the heavy darkness, and I follow it down to the bottom where the scent of blood is thick and heady. My body moves like an automaton, lifting the key, inserting it into the lock, and turning.

And then I am in the room. My husband stands there waiting for me with a dagger in hand, and I feel nothing but relief. The game has ended. I step into his knife like an embrace.

I wake to the ever-echoing warning: *Beware,* but the thrum of fear that ought to accompany it is distant. I turn my head to the side and find that my husband sleeps as peacefully as ever while I am tormented by his crimes. His chest rises and falls in steady rhythm.

I will not bear this any longer.

I heave myself onto hands and knees and creep on top of him. Something pulls taut in my chest. I reach my hands around his throat, lips snarling back from my teeth, fingers pressing down into flesh. His eyes flash open, and the body underneath mine tenses.

"My dear—"

I lean down and kiss him violently, my teeth clacking against his as I reach lower to palm his growing arousal, and when he tries to grab my hips, I dig my fingernails into his arm and bite down until the taste of blood fills both of our mouths. He lets go, lets me have my way, and I take everything I can.

When I'm finished with him, I roll off of the bed and rummage through the drawer of his nightstand. He says nothing when I take out a cigar and strike a match. Why should he be the only one who smokes? Why should he be the only one who is satisfied in our marriage bed? The cigar shakes in my hand.

Robert stands and unlatches the window for me. When he turns around, I see him touching his lip with a handkerchief. I let the cigar burn in my hand without putting it to my mouth, remembering how it felt to bite

down and have his skin break beneath my teeth.

"Does it excite you?" He holds out the bloodstained handkerchief, his sly smile disturbing my reverie. I press the cigar to my lips and cough before I've fully inhaled. He takes me by the arm and guides me to the window for fresh air, taking the smoking cigar from my hand. "That is not how you smoke a cigar," he says. "Would you like me to teach you?"

"No."

I do not want to speak to him at all. But I also do not want to go back to my nightmares, so I sit on the window ledge and watch him alternate between smoking and pressing the handkerchief to his mouth. When I lick my lips, his blood tastes like a revelation.

Dear Jane,

I don't remember what you look like anymore. I go to your portrait to remind me, and so you have become that pretty, smiling girl. You have become the wife that our husband wants to remember. Better that, I suppose, than the rotting corpse that comes to me when I sleep.

But the girl I want to remember is my sister. If I could remember you, then maybe I could remember myself.

Love,

E

I can't stop looking between my reflection and the newest painting on the wall. Who is she? The woman in the painting is fully-clothed, but the contours of her body are hardly obscured by her nightgown. She is smiling. There is a cunning look in her eye. What does she know?

What does her husband think she knows?

I look back to my reflection. When did her skin become so pale? Does she still believe she can best the monster she married? Foolish girl. She already looks the part of a ghost. Time is nearly run out, and what is her plan? She does not look cunning.

"My dear."

My eyes focus on the man in the mirror. He looks old, but he is vital, alive. Compared to him, the girl is barely more than a child.

"What is it?" I whisper. A chill sweeps over my skin, but no phantom voices accompany it. I shudder all the same.

"I have business up north. I wanted to say goodbye." When I say nothing in reply, he adds, "I've hardly seen you these last two weeks."

"Have you been feeling neglected?"

He laughs and takes my chin in his hand, forcing me to look away from the reflections. "Jane always told me you were amusing. She liked to read to me from your letters."

I try to jerk my head out of his grasp, but he holds firm. I look through my periphery at the mirror—is her face neutral? Is she giving everything away?

My husband sighs and releases me. He reaches into his pocket and drops a ring of keys on the ground. "You'll have access to everything while I'm gone. Don't go selling my things and making mischief. I would not find that amusing." Then he reaches around his neck and pulls off the chain, dangling it in front of me. "As the mistress of this house, you will hold all the keys in my absence."

I reach for the key. He jerks it out of reach.

"This key will give you access to my most secret room," he says, "but you are not to go inside. If you do, I'll have to kill you." He drops the key beside the others.

I look between the girl in the mirror and the girl in the portrait, and I paint a sweet smile onto my face before I turn back to my husband. "Not if I kill you first."

He spreads his arm wide for an embrace and holds me for much longer than usual, nuzzling his face into my hair. "I will miss you, Eloise."

I can't suppress my startled laugh.

"I think that's the first time you've called me by my name."

IV

Dear Jane,

He has gone, and I am alone with the key. There are many keys, but only one that matters. Do I go back down? Shall I visit you? How, how is he to know? Does he know I have been there already? No—he would not let me see it and live. But how does he know?

Your sister,

E

Dear Jane,

I hear your voice inside my head and outside of it. If I go see you, will you be quiet and let me sleep? If I do not go see you, will I be safe from our husband? If I confess, then maybe he will be merciful.

No, no—I am a fool to hope for mercy. Death is the only mercy he will give me.

E

Jane,

Perhaps you did drown yourself. Lately, I have been thinking of the sweet silence of water.

E

Dear Jane,

I have taken to sleeping with a knife beneath my pillow. A precaution. Last night, I sliced my thumb reaching for the blade to defend myself from some imagined noise, and then—on impulse, I reached for the key.

The blood, Jane! I scrubbed and scrubbed, but no matter how I tried, it did not come off of the key. I have not gone into his secret room again, but our husband will think I have. The key proclaims my guilt.

Did you drop the key into the blood when you saw the horrors within that room? Was yours the hand that caught the key when I found you all those weeks ago? Did you save me like I could not save you? I keep turning the key over in my hand.

I will have a plan for when our husband returns.

E

My dearest sister Jane,

This is how the story goes: a wealthy man marries a girl and tells her she may enjoy all the riches his manor of pleasure has to offer—except for one room which must remain private and sacred to him. Then he goes away and gives her the key to that one room. She goes inside, of course, and he kills her for her disobedience.

And if she does not go inside? Does he abandon his bloody pursuit, or does he test her again? If ever there was a faithful woman, what would he do with her?

It is no use wondering. She always goes inside, only understanding the game when it's too late to change her fate. It is the same story, played over and over again so that the man who already has everything money can buy can have a moment of satisfaction.

I wonder what it feels like to thrust a knife into someone and feel the

hot rush of blood over your hands. Our husband seeks that feeling endlessly. I imagine it is something like ecstasy—

And why shouldn't I have a taste?

ELISE GRINDLE "EAVESDROP"

HAILEY SPENCER is a writer with a lifelong obsession for fairy tales. Her (largely folktale inspired) poetry has been published online and in print. She appeared in episode 24 of the Mytholadies podcast to discuss Tale-Type 510A, commonly referred to as Cinderella. Hailey lives in Seattle with her wife, Elizabeth. You can find more on Hailey and her work at haileyspencerwrites.com.

ELISE GRINDLE is a digital artist that creates spiritual fantasy collages and occult art that portray abstract, spiritual, and metaphysical ideas. Her artwork is inspired by life, the human soul, and humanity's expansion through our relationship with all things that exist in the universe. Her work draws from principles such as Sacred Geometry, Psychology Astrology, The Zodiac, Alchemy, Spiritualism, Theology, History, Religion, Mysticism, and many other spiritual concepts.

www.constellationcollages.com

This poem first appeared in Hailey Spencer's book Stories for When the Wolves Arrive

POPPYSEEDS

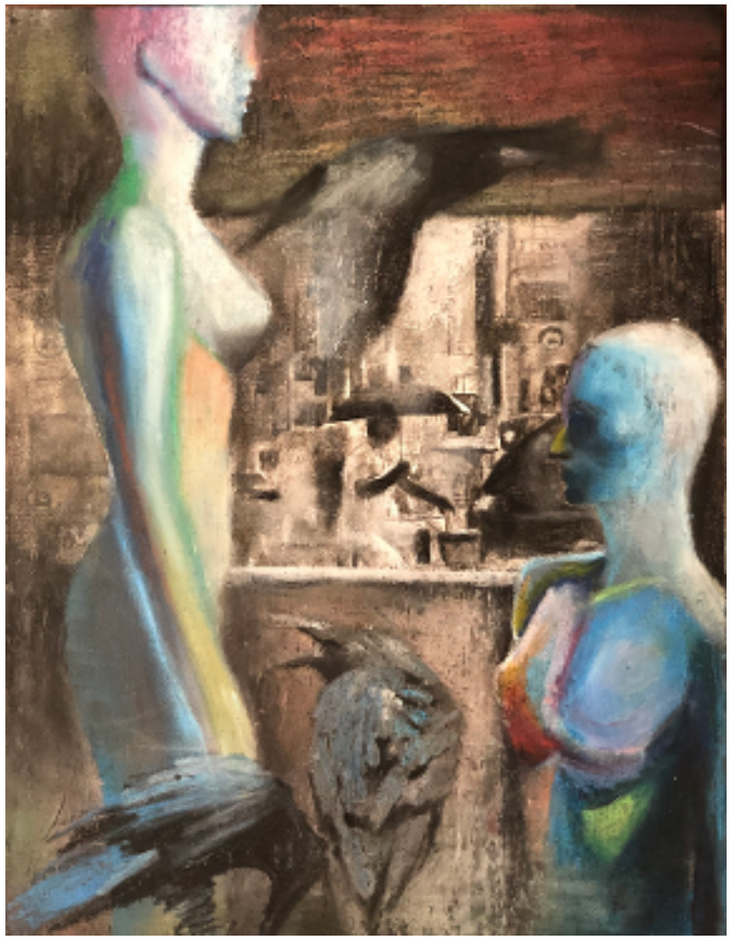
Hailey Spencer

Consider this:
a girl, standing underneath
a full moon
bony fingers in pockets, caressing

the soft shells of worn-out
bread crumbs, a spell
to cast to find her way home safe—
consider this:

A girl is nothing
so much as a warm meal,
cornbread that melts on the
tip of your tongue—
a girl is nothing.

Mere electricity
and the subtleties of moonlight.



LOLA WANG "ROOM"

AMBER WOZNIAK is, above all things, an eldest daughter. A few of her other works have appeared on *The Keeping Room* and *Litro*, as well as in *Passengers Journal* and *The Raw Art Review*. Amber can be found at www.amberwozniak.com.

Lola Wang is a rising senior in high school at the Taipei American School in Taiwan. Her interests include art history, writing poetry, golf, and creating art.

THE TIS

Amber Wozniak

Here is what I know of a mother's love: It sent Hephaestus careening into the sea, impregnating the amniotic depths in which I had spent an eternity. His fall was gilded with bits of muted sunlight, and when he carved through the water it was as if he had sluiced through me.

I approach him with a leisurely curiosity. His frantic eyes and heaving spasms are a language that I do not understand, and when I wrap my arms around his body my intention is not to save him. Rather, I only want to see if his skin is as dolphin smooth as it appears. It is the ocean itself that makes us to rise, pushing us upward through time itself. *Up, up* it insists. He is as weightless as myself until we surface, and the solid metal of him threatens to pull me back down.

I flounder in the littoral, but eventually find footing in the soft sand. I heave him toward the beach and turn toward the waves. It is the soft mews and sputtering that call me back to him.

There is helpless flailing, and a cry of *Mother!* as he shoots upright, grab--bing me by the shoulders. He is a grown man wearing an infant's eyes. I do not leave.

I preen and cluck over him. I run my fingers over his spine curved in perpetual mourning. I teach him to swim, and he is unhampered in the ocean in a way that his leg will never allow him to be on land. I laugh as he

devours blackberries until his skin is tinged with purple. It delights him to be a shade closer to my bluish hue.

You are almost the same as me! Yes, they are very sweet. No, not the hemlock, dear. Yes, the stem is so stately. Yes, the flowers so petite. But it is deadly, my love, no matter how beautiful. Come, let us move this way.

I shower him in something like love. I keep him hidden from eyes above. Still, it is not enough.

Revenge and glory call him from me, and once again I am left to float knees curled to chest in a timeless abyss.

See the crown of ashy debris that they have thrust upon me in rapine. It is my wedding day, but it pales in comparison to the one that graces Hera's head. Still, I do not notice her own until she pulls me from where I sulk behind the laden tables.

She sighs as she touches the toothy points.

Hephaestus is such a good boy, she crows. The metal and craftsmanship are immaculate. She brings my own hand to feel, and it is sharp and cold. *I told him it is not suitable for a wedding. I cannot upstage the bride!*

I nod politely and my eyes wander to where Zeus's vulturine gaze rakes across my ribs. I know then that it was no divine augury that sealed my fate.

Hera sees too and wraps her arm around my waist, gripping me conspiratorially.

And do you know what he said to me, silly thing? Mother, there is no one in the heavens or earth who could upstage you. *Boys and their mamas!*

I pull my hand back so quickly that the jagged edge of the crown knicks my finger. Red pools at the surface, and I think of berry-stained fingers and mouths.

Cold bitch, Zeus smirks later. They stare openly and she laughs. I shiver, feeling picked clean.

Peleus keeps me close, fearful I might make my escape if I tarry too long in the sea. As if he himself did not see me turn snail, turn egret, turn all manner of creature that can be carried by sky and by land. As if I had not already learned that when a man takes hold there is no escape.

I languish in the harsh island sun, my lips ever chapped and gaping. My silty skin is drying to dust. I do not think of gods or prophecies anymore. Parched as I am, no life can take root within me.

I quench myself by moonlight. Stealing to the beach as Peleus sleeps, I gulp the brackish water until inside I am ocean and vast. Sated, I lay back and let the waves rock me until I am deposited back to the littoral once more. I no longer flounder when I move toward the beach.

Some days, I jump to feel the water slosh within my stomach. *Up down slosh up down slosh* I dance until Peleus takes notice.

He brings his weathered trunk of an arm up to pat my head. "My beautiful, silly wife," he chuckles.

Because I do not know hexes, when I smile back I flash my teeth. He removes his hand and rubs the scar where I sunk my lion maw moons before.

When I feel the first wisp brush against the inside of my navel, I assume it is the waves of my internal ocean. It is a comfort—maybe I am finally becoming the sea itself. Maybe I will dissipate like foam, leaving a briny puddle that Peleus himself is forced to clean. But the feeling persists into early evening, long past the usual time when the sun permeates my skin and evaporates my furtive tides. Peleus shoves bread and cheese into my

mouth and the moon rises. The fluttering grows strong.

Perhaps it is a bat or a moth that sweeps across my insides. I retch, hoping to expel whatever manner of creature has stolen inward. I retch until I sleep, waking on the smooth stone floor once the light returns and I have missed my opportunity to bathe at the beach.

The movement stops the following day, and I credit it to a fever dream. I am scorched when I finally make my way back to the ocean. I take greedy, gasping mouthfuls of the water. Swallowing, I think to flush out the last of whatever has stolen inside me.

And then I feel it again. A brush against my ribcage, fluid and pulsating. Soft as a sea anemone. I bring my hand instinctively toward it. This is no creature of loam and dirt. This is a child. A child that belongs only to me and the sea.

I bathe freely now, Peleus so thrilled with the prospect of an heir he does not care what I do with my time. I think this, finally, is my bestowal for service. That when they piled the matrimonial halls with gifts for my husband and naught for me, they had saved the best for last. At last, my recompense. At last, relief from all this damned sun.

But then they come for me once again. I do not notice at first when a figure casts a shadow over the watery depths where I take my reprieve.

Thetis, Apollo calls gaily. He hovers above me, flickering as he morphs between the animals whose skin I wore a lifetime ago He bats the air playfully with beak and paw and tail. *Care for another prophecy?*

I shut my ears, dip below the water. I beg the waves to deliver me from fate but they quiet in his wake. Apollo’s voice lilts through my mind, caressing it soft as a lover as he speaks of revenge and glory.

When it ends, I crest upward so hard I think my spine might snap. I sputter, my eyes are frantic. My body heaves and I think I have forgotten how to swim. I catch the last of Apollo’s laugh as I struggle toward shore and then

he is gone.

Wretched and wrenched, Achilles' coming seizes me so hard I am sure I will break. The midwives beg me to push, tell me that soon there will be relief. I snarl and slap in response. I beg them to let me keep him inside. I will live this excruciating limbo for an eternity if it means Achilles is safe.

My traitorous body expels him without my consent. I want to gnaw him to pieces, gobble him back up to feel him once again brush against me within. There is laughter in the distance. They take him to his father before either of us is wiped clean.

I do not sleep for a year. I am his sentinel; I count toes and hairs. Teeth fall from my mouth and his grow in turn. I pinch him just to hear those blessed cries, those bursts of life. Together, we roar at the shadows. My voice grows hoarse. We share apples and for the first time I have knowledge of time.

I traverse ocean after ocean looking for something to dissolve that cursed string. As if I have an eternity left to later float with my son. As if I haven’t already learned that when fate takes hold there is no escape.

Cold bitch, they spit when they see me turn from him once again on that burning shore. I let them believe it, all the better to search undetected. I continue my departure.

Until Achilles stops me.

Don’t leave, Mama! he snarls, grabbing my hair with his tiny fists. He yanks, holds fast as I recoil. He is already so strong.

He thrashes at my face as I turn toward him. He beats at my shoulders, his mouth gapes, *Mama, mama, don't leave.*

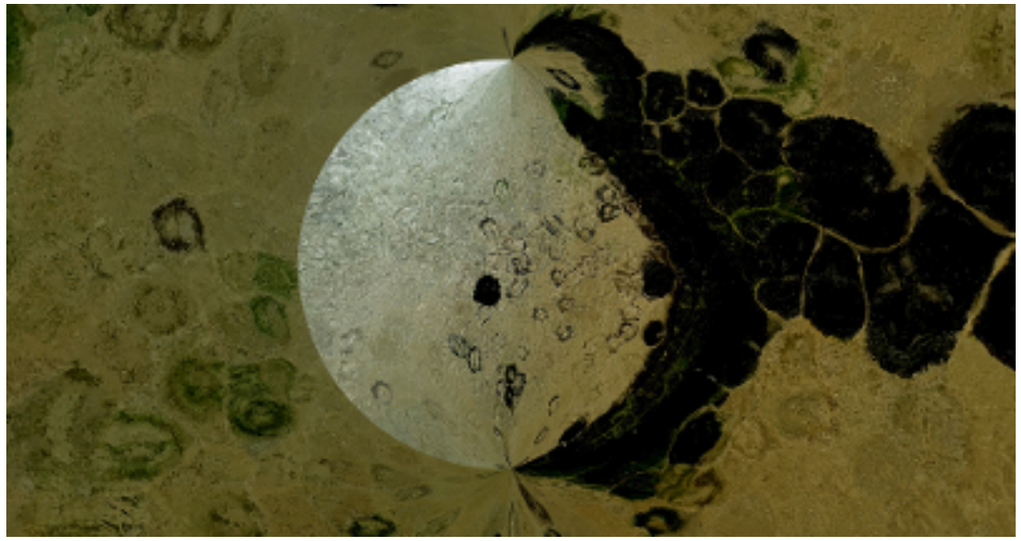
When he finally stops his fingers are stained with bits of purplish blood and flesh. I meet his eyes, pleased at their sanguinary sheen. I hold his face as he gasps for composure. He finally takes a step back.

Please *don't forget me, Mama,* he says. His tone is measured, courteous. He does his best to keep from pleading. *Please,* he repeats. *I look forward to your return.*

Yet still I go, all the more resolute. They have taught manners to my boy when they should be sharpening his teeth.

This is what I know of a mother's love: It has sent me careening back into the sea, leagues away from where my soul sits golden on a sun-drenched beach. His fall will be gilded with bits of blazing sunlight, and when they carve through him it will be as though they sluice through me.

No one will ever forget you Achilles, but least of all me.



PAUL MALONE "PLANETARY FORMATION 0229A"

CYNTHIA GALLAHER, a Chicago-based poet, is author of four poetry collections, many with themes, including *Epicurean Ecstasy: More Poems About Food, Drink, Herbs and Spices*, and three chapbooks, including *Drenched.* Her nonfiction/memoir/creativity guide *Frugal Poets' Guide to Life: How to Live a Poetic Life, Even If You Aren't a Poet* won a National Indie Excellence Award. Follow her on Twitter at @swimmerpoet, Instagram at @frugalpoet and her Facebook page at @frugalpoets. Amazon Author Page: http://bit.ly/gallaherc Website: http://bit.ly/cynthiagallaher

PAUL studied Fine Art at Reading University for B.A. Degree in 1976 and MFA in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art in 1980. Since leaving college he has worked in studios based in the London districts of Waterloo, Greenwich and, most recently, Art in Perpetuity in Deptford. He has exhibited extensively in the U.K., U.S. and Europe and engaged in curatorial practice through international exhibition exchanges and movie projects. He also delivers lectures and workshops about the historic astrophysical researches he is currently studying.

The art image is a still from a film; you can view it on Paul's website below.

www.paulmalone.co.uk

JAGUAR/EL TIGRE

Cynthia Gallaher

How long ago was it
when royal Mayan ancestors
wore jaguar skins,
sat on jaguar thrones,
and balanced jaguar masks
like bowls of maize
in front of their faces;
their words, first muffled and blurred
like a beggar speaking through a door,
then taking on power,
with grunt and authority,
rust and fire snapping
in round black embers,
with green-eyed prophecies
showing them the foreigner.

People say God made man
because he already made jaguar,
who holds the jungle's highest power
between hinged jaws,
an ensnaring trap for
the tamest armadillos,
sheer force that jaguar instead
channels through a gentle backroad,

shying from people,
placing himself deep and alone
in the forest.

Weavers who continually
weft and warp jaguar's image
into their clothes,
may have never looked on one,
but those who have
make sure he doesn't get away
before they melt his fat
and spread it around the milpa,
scaring away peccary, possum and birds.

Kuchil Balum is
the place of the jaguar,
where tree-bound howler monkeys
get mesmerized inside his stare,
traveling lower branch by branch,
then falling at jaguar's feet.

Kuchil Balum is
the place of the jaguar,
so thick in his own legend
he cannot hear us,
we rub strands of banana peel
hardened by beeswax
to lure him
with his own deep grunt.

Kuchil Balum is
a real place where
we can't really see him,
less often hear his low coughing
or smell his sharp odor.

Kuchil Balum is
a place we fear,
where jaguar draws strength,

where we don't dare set foot,
a refuge we're not sure is there anymore,
yet we know all about.

maize—corn
milpa—cornfield
Kuchil Balum—place of the jaguar (Mopan Mayan)

MIRANDA OCHOA "IMAGE 1"

BREANNA "ANYA" REYES is a twenty-three year old indigenous author born and raised in sunny central California. Reyes is a poet and a storyteller shifting focus between fantasy/sci-fi and real depictions of trauma often told through prose. They live with their three cats and one very rambunctious rabbit as well as their Husband in Stockton, CA.

MIRANDA OCHOA is a language teacher at day and a visual artist/writer at night. She graduated from the School of the Art Institute Chicago with a focus on Visual Critical Studies on 2022 and currently lives in Western Connecticut.

THE JOURNEY HOME

Breanna Reyes

Often I forget that while others fear Death I have made a home in his arms a countless number of times; I have been embraced by him, shrouded in his blackness so thoroughly that sometimes the stench of rot emanating from him, rolling off his body- filling my lungs with every breath feels more like home than anything else. There are nights where I long for his scent to fill me once again. For his arms, covered in the flesh of all those who have knelt before him and begged for his mercy, for the decay of the souls lost forever to wrap around me. Less the notion of being held and more the longing to feel at home. Sometimes, the only place that feels like home is still wrapped up inside those abalone bones.

Death, you see, he whispers in my ears at night- hisses, long and low. His lips pulled back in a snarl. He presses his rotting flesh into my neck; he begs me to return to him, black honey dripping from his gaping mouth. How I long to listen, to answer his pleas. I miss the feeling of his nails raking through my hair. Hot pain spreading across my scalp. Each finger tears my skin open ever so slightly, as I drift- drift slowly along his River Styx. I have spent what must be an eternity in his world, held within his embrace as we ride his ferry to and fro. Coins heavy in my pockets, I laced them into the inseams of my clothing. They threaten with each rattle to weigh me down to the bottom of his river or maybe—that's the twinkle of a promise I hear. I believe, during one of my countless visits to his world, I may have sold a piece of my soul in exchange for this currency.

Time on his river is strange, it passes slower here than it does up above. Were it my first trip in this boat the gentle sway of the water waves would lull me to sleep- faster than any lullaby sung softly in a rocking chair. This is not my first time. I have learned to keep my eyes open, my ears sharp- the restless souls below the cherry wood are not always fond of those with still beating hearts. Instead I watch carefully each time. It seems every time I climb upon this boat and settle my body up against Death, he drifts us closer to the docks. As if to say,

“It’s okay to explore, go look at what my home has to offer you.”

Death never speaks anymore, instead throughout the years his small movements have become a language I speak better than anything else. As we drift the coins in my pocket clatter against wet wood. Cherry mixes with salt water- washing away the stench of rot from my skin. The boat lurches to a halt, sending water spraying into my hair. I stumble into Death’s arms, one long fingered hand grasps my body to stop me from flying off the boat. His hand is mostly bone, clumps of different colored flesh cling to exposed joints. The sight once sent electric shocks through my body. Disgust has a way of fading as one grows used to sights and smells.

I look around us, the water lay still below. If you look closely though, hands skate just below the murky surface, faces twisted in pain can be seen too. Souls trapped forever in an eternal tomb. The souls of mother’s abandoned; the souls of children drowned. Cursed in life and in death.

“Why have we stopped?” My voice rings in my ears, bouncing off the cave walls around us.

He does not answer. His long coat, wet at the hem, moves with him as he turns to face the dock.

“You want me to go?” He nods once.

Ice sinks into my stomach. I knew, one day, that this moment would come. There is only one way to the dock. A hundred feet away from where the boat lay, rocking harder with each passing minute despite the stillness of the water, stood a pitch black dock. That was my destination. I glance at Death one last time before jumping clumsily into the grey mass below.

Death had never steered me wrong before.

I was expecting ice. The feeling of getting pushed unexpectedly into a cold pool or the moment a wave knocks you to the ground and leaves you choking on salt water. Instead I am met with the warmth of a bath my mother once drew for me. I do not dare open my eyes as I swim for the surface. There is no need- I know the faces that await me here. I can feel them, scraping bone and soft fingernails against my skin as I kick and claw my way up.

As I resurface I hear a scream, muffled and desperate, in a language only vaguely familiar. I push on, I’ve landed closer to the dock than I thought I would. I reach it, lungs burning and pull myself up. Had I known befriending Death would involve so much physical exertion perhaps I would have stayed in better shape. The dock creaks under my weight, black cat bones and cypress bark falling into the water with soft splashes. The wood is much lighter this close up, a softer brown than visible from the boat. I glance over my shoulder to see the familiar cherrywood empty behind me, with one last breath I land hard on the surface above.

I lay there breathing for what feels like years. My ankles burn, invisible wounds left behind by invisible people.

Eventually, the warm bath water feeling fades and in its place the ice I had been expecting seeps inside. I am soaked and shivering.

I stand, shaking and walk forwards into Deaths’ home.

Flames appear the further I walk from the river, sprouting up in between cracks in the ground like soft flowers growing through pavement. Heat licks at my body, steam billowing from my skin as I walk further and further down towards the unknown. He’s there, silently he trails behind me. Hovering above the ground. He does not make a sound. He thinks I do not notice, thinks I have not grown accustomed to the sound of wet flesh hitting the floor. Does he not know I can detect his ragged breaths before even mine? As I walk Death follows. Fire singes my body and leaves me smoldering. The wet clothes I dawned at the beginning of this journey no longer drip with the dark water of the river- but instead flake away slowly, dust in the wind. Coins clatter to the ground, one by one. Released from their cloth prisons, exiled to a lonelier place among the ashes of the forgotten.

I’m sure I left a piece of me there as well -among the forgotten souls. As my

clothes burned from my body, as Death trailed behind me, silently pocketing what coins he could scrape from the ground before they were sent rolling into the abyss, a piece of me burned off too. My soul forever mingled with the silent ones watching from the corners.

They're no longer human nor transformed into demons. Not spirit nor spector nor kin with Death himself. Forgotten long before I met Death, long before he enthralled me, enticed me. I left a part of my soul with them, wrapped inside the flames still trying to rid itself of the ice clinging to it. Or perhaps I may have left that piece in the water with the souls punished for the wrongs committed against them. Or perhaps my discarded soul climbed into his hood, curled up against him, wrapped itself around his neck like a scarf on a cold day. It's just like me, to want nothing more than to keep Death warm and ready for my return.

I asked him once, tears flowing hot from my face as he scraped rot from his wrists.

"Who are they?" and his mouth parted, how that mouth held galaxies within it. Oh Death- he who has tasted the sun, the stars, who will one day swallow time whole and exist beyond whatever is left. He looked at me then, tongue heavy with a language not his own and shook his head.

"Who are they?" I repeated over and over, begging him to answer- to reassure me these forgotten souls were anything but.

"Now? Now, my love, they are no one. But, once- long ago they were everything to someone. As we all are."

They were the first words he ever spoke to me. Long ago, the first time he told me what awaited us all below. His voice is like sand skating atop ocean foam. It rolls and tumbles over. Overwhelming and powerful- beautiful beyond compare. Danger drips from his lips as he speaks, reminding me with every syllable he is not human. He is more than human, less than human, he is everything but human.

I stop in the hallway of fire, some number of years after this all began and turn to Death. He stops, hovering mid-air. Taller than me, broader and more menacing than I could ever dream to be. Perhaps I should feel shame or embarrassment. As the fire creeps up my body and burns the last of my clothes to ash- so falls the last of the coins. Sewn into my pockets, the

reassurance I could always return to him. I feel no such thing- no heat rises to my cheeks as he looks on. Death has seen me in every moment of my life. From my exit from my mother's womb into this world, wrapped in her blood and tissue- heat rising from my little body, to this moment in time. Naked and burning, once again.

"Was I?" the words fall from my mouth, no longer desperate or aching, "Was I ever anything to anybody?"

"My dear, you were everything."

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