

LANDING ZONE | 1

LANDING ZONE

MAGAZINE

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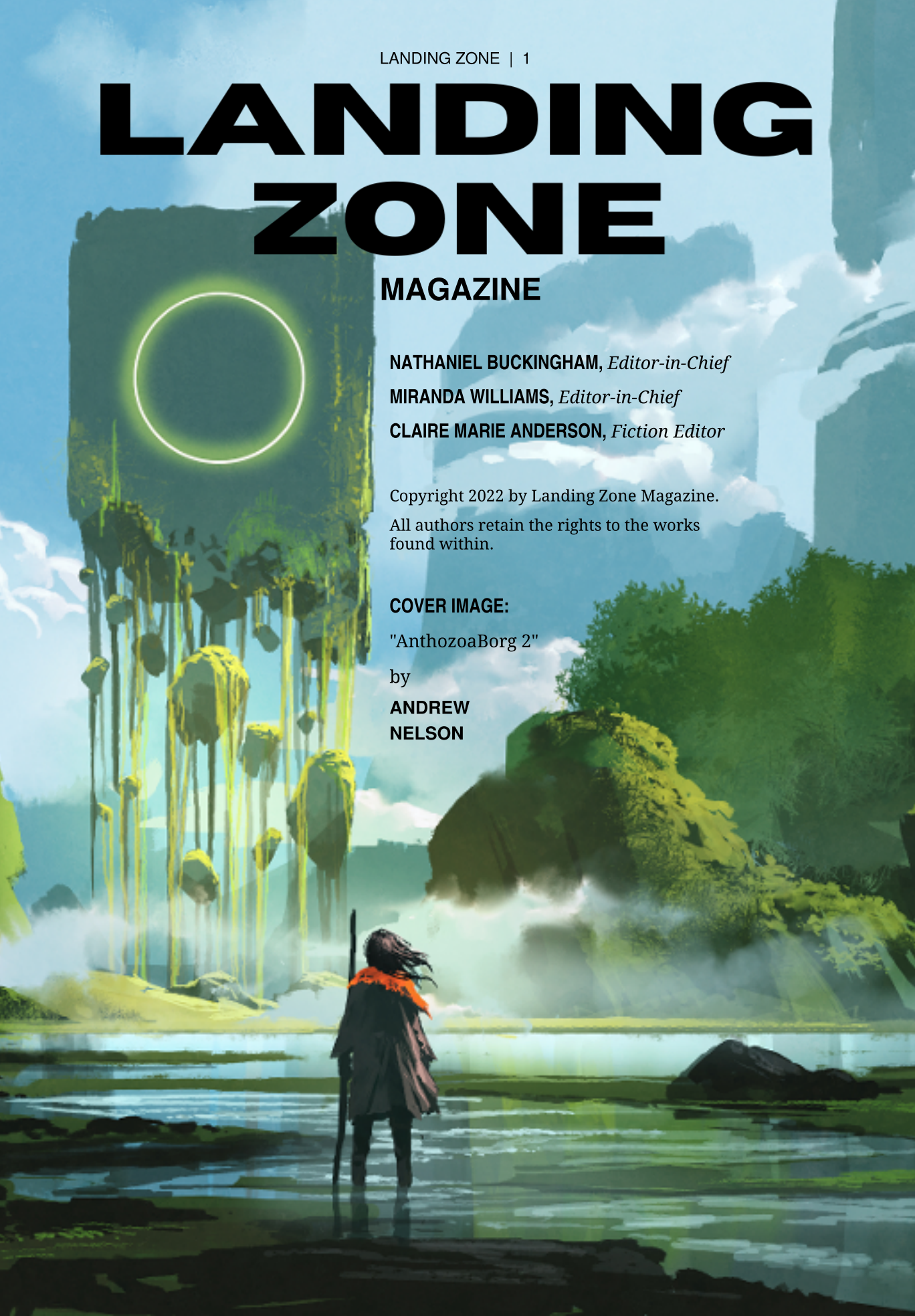
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COVER IMAGE:

"AnthozoaBorg 2"

by

**ANDREW
NELSON**



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LETTERfrom theEDITORS

Dear Readers, Writers, and Friends,

This year has been one of upheaval. Scorch marks adorn our office and the minds of our editors (the office ones are of the coffee stain variety, while for our editors its a searing mental burn-out), and numerous revolutions have exploded, imploded, and been avoided. I (Nathaniel) was on a nine-month hiatus from *Tatterhood* Review, and returning felt like opening the book straight to the final battle without a clue what was happening.

Especially because the first agenda item was overhauling our identity and completely recreating the website—necessary and impassioned goals, but also ones that resulted in many shattered screens, angry words zapping laser-like overhead, and swift, successful-assassination-attempt-esque desk exits. However, despite the trials we faced, we accomplished the mission, and we're proud to now present to you *Landing Zone Magazine*.

I'm honored to return, and to such a talented team of people. It's incredibly tough to run a magazine generally, but in my absence, Miranda and Claire quenched uprisings and fires with an iron fist. I appreciate their hard work over these long months.

And of course, I appreciate, endlessly, the infinite patience of all you writers who waited for a response at a time when sending responses was like knife-throwing a letter through a slit in two closing doors past a slew of guards. And all of it crackling with fire, too. And poison. In the dark. Why not?

With the team back to full potential, and expansion on the horizon, know that our top priority is, as its always been, you and our readers: continued improvements to our processes like one-month response times, fast and accurate publication schedules, increasing payments and rewards, and, of course, intense dedication to cultivating both a diverse world of beautiful, original, and poignant fiction, poetry, and artwork, and cultivating a community of those same wonderful artists and patrons.

Let's have a moment of silence for *Tatterhood*. Although the old identity began our journey, I'm more excited for what *Landing Zone* has to offer our future, and I hope you are, too. So board our ship, and let us forage forward into the next phase of our adventure, into a cool wormhole, or a strange portal in the woods, somewhere new and original and amazing. And thank you, again, for joining us. Your presence is indescribably valued.

NATHANIEL & MIRANDA | *Editors-in-Chief*

ALIEN-MACHINE BIOLOGY. . .

BEHIND THE COVER



with

ANDREW NELSON

AnthozoaBorg 2, 2020, Graphite on cold-press Bristol Board, 18" x 24":

Description:

"AnthozoaBorg" means something like machine-colony-life-form, or machine-coral. The second in a subseries of living machine and exobiological life illustrations, this work fuses plant machine and colony-animal aspects. The work visualizes concepts from evolutionary robotics, feral technologies, bio-machine ecosystems and robot plant forms. Although the creature in the drawing might be physically possible, it approaches surrealism: The rendering draws on academic realism but the subject matter borders on the impossible. This work includes several geometric orb-like constructions with varied geometric surfaces. The purpose of these orbs is left to the viewer's imagination.

INTERVIEW

NATHANIEL BUCKINGHAM: I think most readers must immediately wonder about your process. Each of your art pieces is so vivid and richly detailed. How do you make them, and how long does each one take you to create?

ANDREW NELSON: The drawings are done entirely by hand using traditional drawing techniques. The most detailed of the drawings can take more than 100 hours of drawing time and work might extend over several months. I usually work sequentially, focusing on one or at most two drawings at a time.



Robot 38 - Mid-Process #1

NB: That's astounding, yet it makes sense. The level of detail wouldn't allow any less of a commitment. Considering the difficulty, why did you choose graphite penciling as your medium?

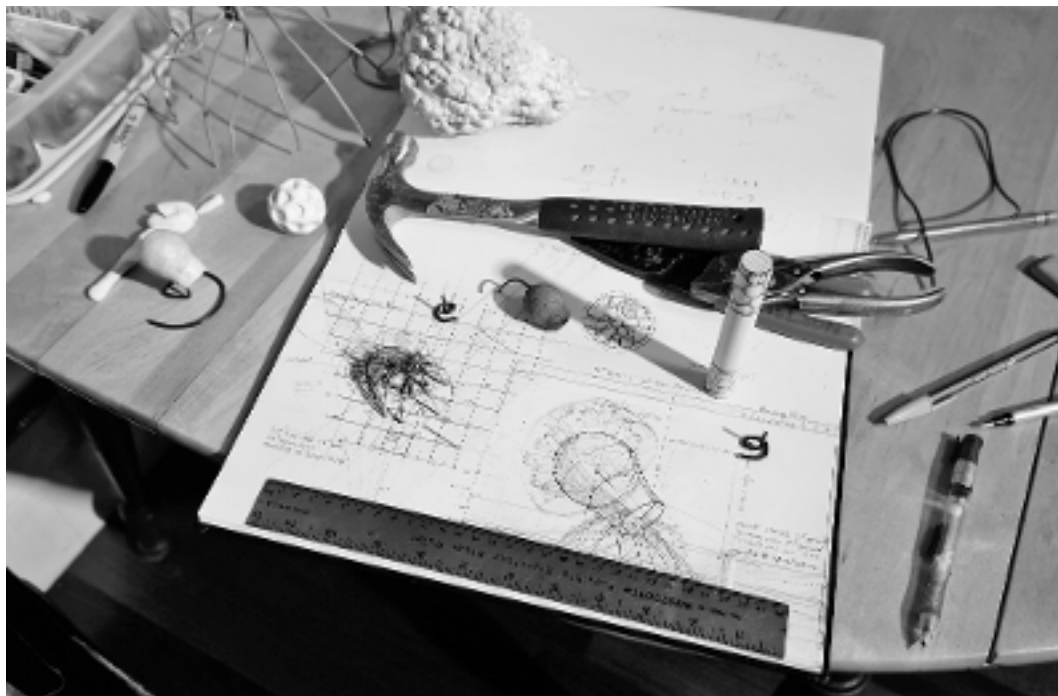
AN: I draw them in black and white (and by hand) partly because it allows for very detailed shading and reshaping. I often add and erase shading and highlights repeatedly to hone in on a particular surface texture. In addition, many of the

drawings require extensive layout and calculation. This layout work is done lightly on the initial drawing board and is progressively erased as the drawing is rendered for depth and then directed lighting. Also, the drawings are intended to elicit a somewhat documentary point of view. The creatures and future/alien landscapes are presented somewhat as though a surveying photographer happened upon the scene and photographed it as a record. This is in part to generate a sense of removal from the unfamiliar creatures in the drawings, as well as to elicit a sense of distance in time between the viewer and the drawing's subject.

NB: That's a fascinating process, and to me, almost seems scientific. I would wager you come from a science background. Is that true?

AN: Yes, I have a background in academic research, initially in cell and molecular biology and then later in biomimetic engineering and autonomous systems. This later research involved using evolutionary computation and neural networks (artificial intelligence techniques) to create control systems for small autonomous robots.

NB: It's interesting that you have a research background because after glimpsing behind the scenes into your methods, it's almost like your creative work is primarily research-based, too. Would you say that your academic background has inspired your art, or your approach to creating art?



Robot 38 - Mid-Process #2

AN: Certainly. This research likely contributed to my desire to explore what autonomous machines would look like if they were to continue to evolve and integrate themselves into natural ecosystems over long periods of time. What would feral technology do if it were left to its own devices to spawn and reproduce long after its biological creators had passed away, maybe millions of years in the future here on Earth or perhaps on some alien world with unclassifiable fusions of biology and machine?

NB: I think that if your artwork was a theory attempting to address those questions, it would pass peer review. They really are incredible. Beyond the academic, do you have additional inspirations that draw you (no pun intended) toward artistic creation, or even toward the alien and uncanny specifically?



AN: Yes, there are several underlying inspirations for these drawings. Another impetus for my artwork is to create images of objects or things that are un-named and unknown to the viewer. There is something visceral or fundamentally felt when one looks at a natural object with a complex structure, whether or not one knows what is being viewed. For instance, a close-up image of a bone fragment or of a complex fungus is fascinating, somehow compelling to the eye, regardless of whether or not one knows what they are looking at.

NB: I found myself fascinated in that way when viewing them—torn between the unfamiliar-familiar, so to speak. Has exploring that notion always been a catalyst?

*Robot 50 - Mid-Process*

AN: The work has developed thematically and technically over time, I'd say. Although I've been drawing and creating artwork since I was a child, these detailed complex machine-plant-creature drawings have mostly been done over the last 15 years. In my earlier drawings I wanted to explore and stimulate the feeling of what it is like to look upon an unknown object, and to combine this with the concept of feral vegetative technology. In addition, I focused more on strange asymmetric conglomerations and fusion creatures, often with a slight whimsical element. The later drawings have tended toward the thematic and a juxtaposition of surrealism and landscape realism.

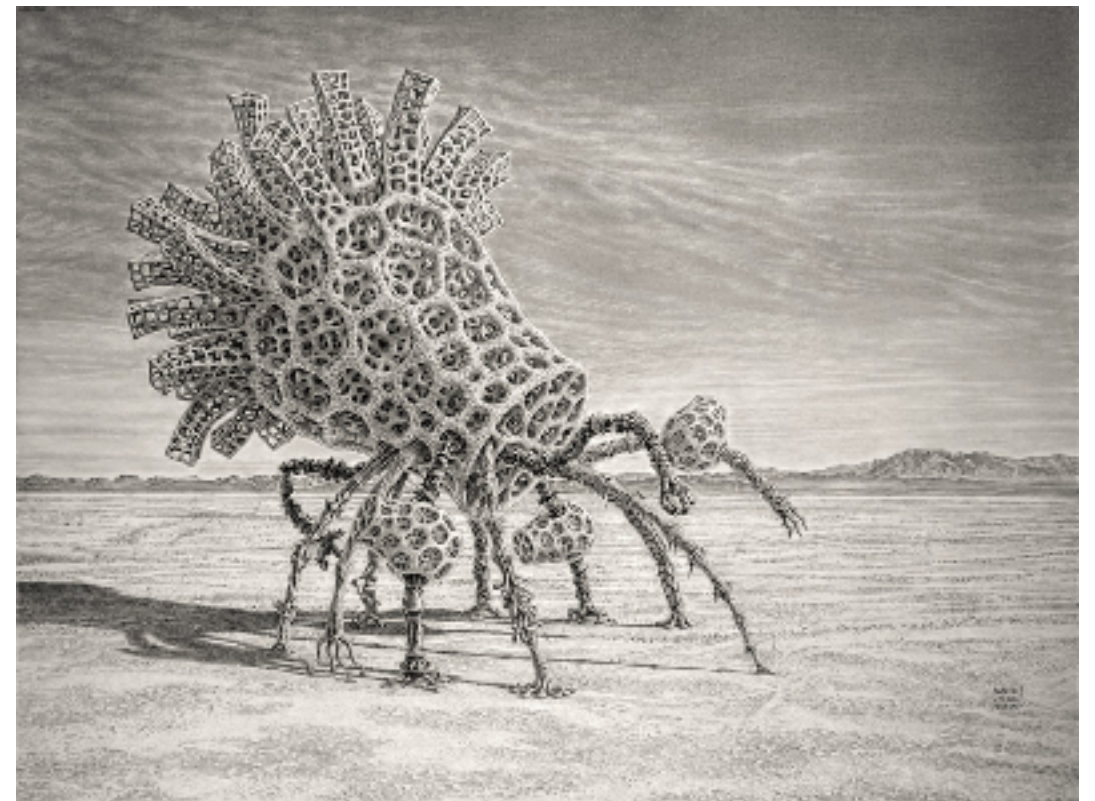
NB: I've noticed that they're also united underneath a common style—they all are undeniably "your" drawings, in addition to containing a certain (if alien) beauty. Is this commonality and aesthetic focus intentional?

AN: All of these drawings focus on non-anthropoid subjects: there are no explicitly recognizable human elements. Of course, the drawings are made for people to view, so in that sense they are intended to be visually accessible to people. It's apt you mention commonality though because one of my goals for current and future work is to explore visually what people, humans, might share with all possible forms of complexity. I'd like to create a window into potential mutual human-alien life possibilities, or life-like complexity. I'm particularly compelled by the sensation

of the inexplicable purpose. Many of the creatures in my drawings are doing something for some reason, but it is perhaps not any reason that a person could comprehend. I'd like the drawings to hint at a sense of an alien purpose: it isn't accessible to us, to our human sensibilities, but there is something there; some strange agent is engaging in a process, there is some kind of sessile vegetable intent.

NB: I think this is a good moment to talk about your future goals. To refer back to what you said a moment ago: what can we plan to see through this human-alien window you intend to create?

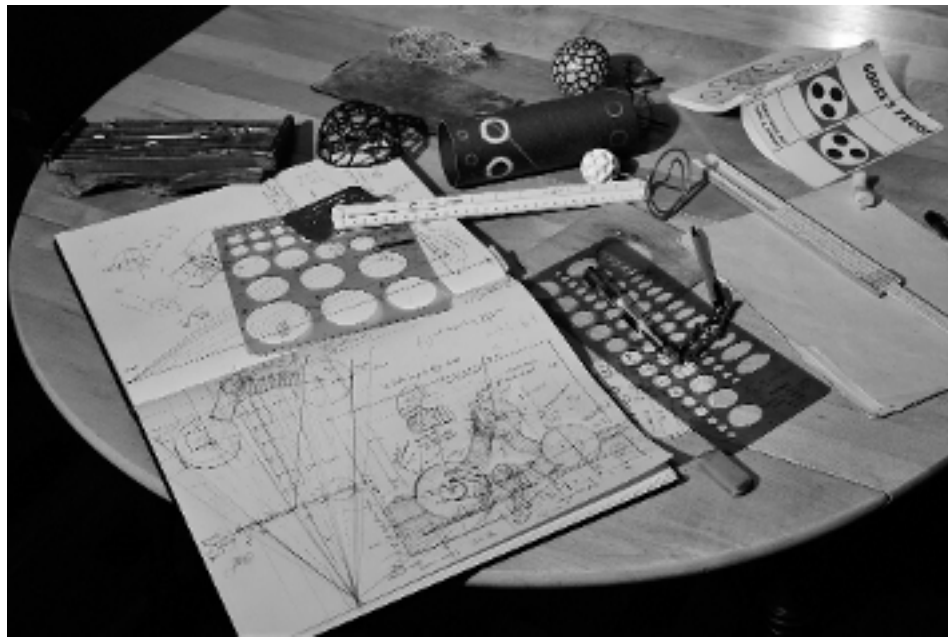
AN: Physically, these drawings to date have used 18 by 24 heavy Bristol drawing board. Future drawings will be larger, possible up to 30 by 40 inches and may make use of ink and *conte* as well as graphite. Thematically, I have been exploring work that includes some layout marks and calculation symbols in the final drawing. I generate study/calculation drawings associated with each of the finished drawings and these have an intrinsic visual interest that I would like to explore. I am also refocusing on work that might be described as neo-surrealism, in which the depiction is realistic, but the subjects of the works are conceptually surrealistic. In a few recent drawings, the backgrounds have been completely unearthly. In future

*Robot 38*

drawings I intend to focus in on full ecosystems of feral technology and non-earthly complexity. Additionally, variations on spheres continue to fascinate me and I may start a series of works depicting various complex organic, machine and geometric spheroids.

NB: I'm eager to see those brought to light—they sound breathtaking. Hopefully, this won't be the last interview we do. Thank you for submitting this series to us, Andrew, and for engaging in this discussion with me, and *Landing Zone*. It's been a true pleasure.

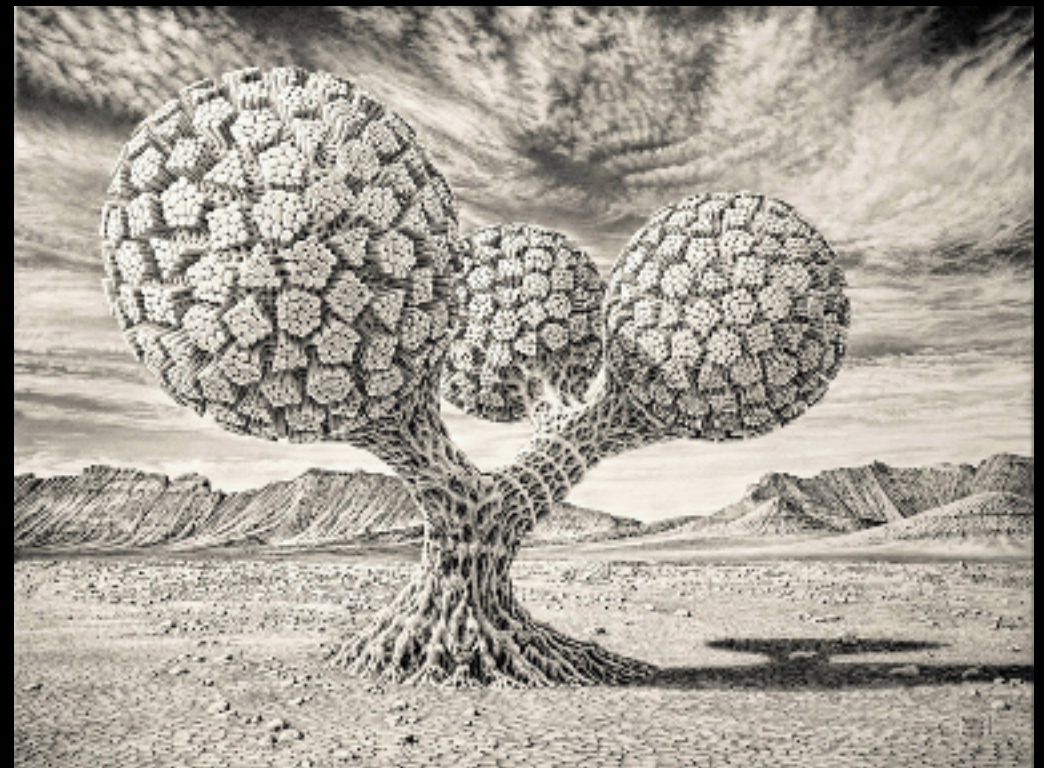
AN: Thank you, Nathaniel. It's been a pleasure for me as well.



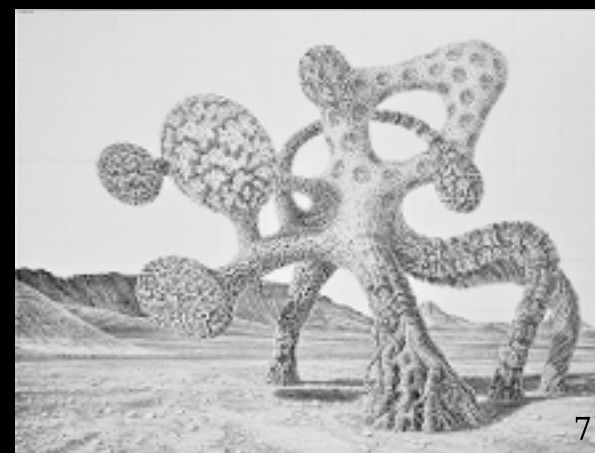
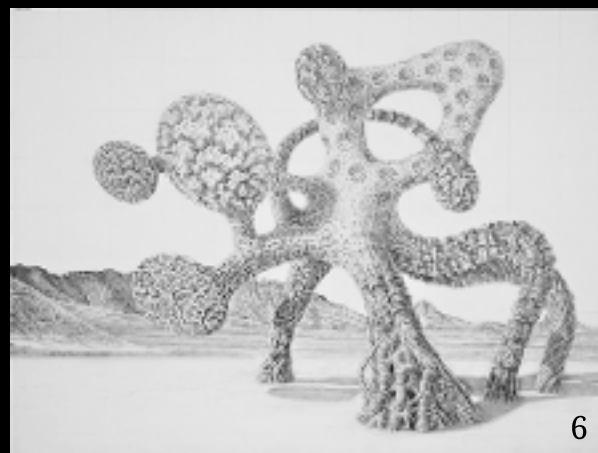
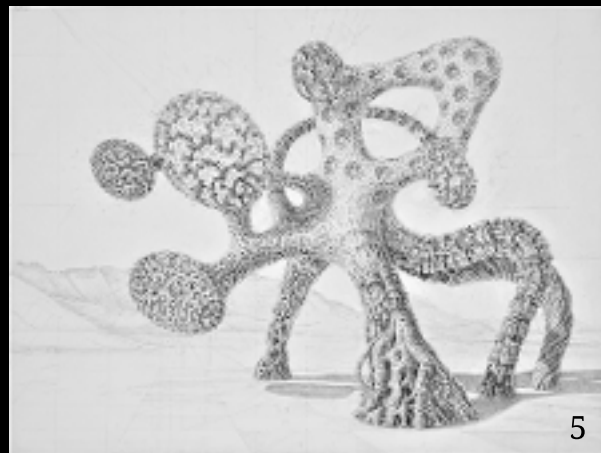
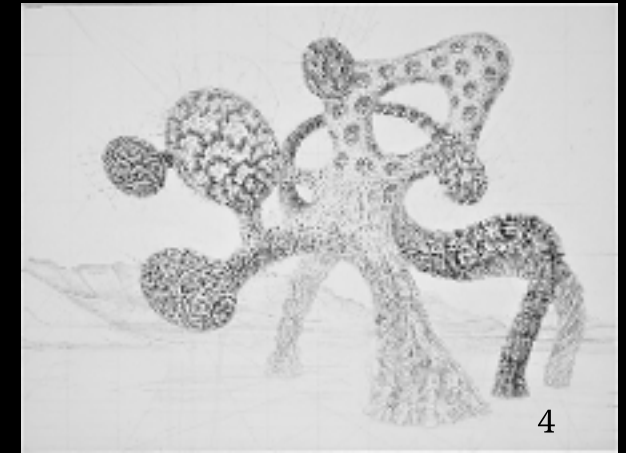
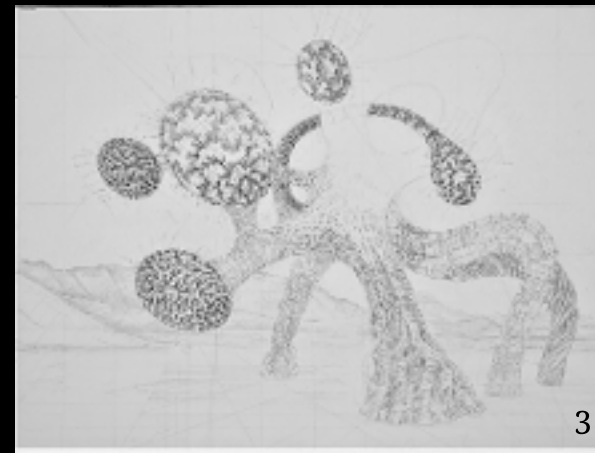
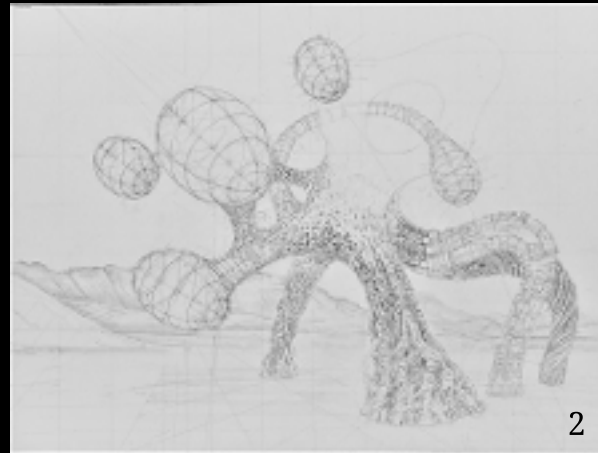
Andrew Lincoln Nelson is an artist working in Tucson Arizona. He produces detailed semi-realistic and surrealistic drawings of futuristic or exobiological landscapes. He has a background in academic research and fine art. His work has been shown at Biosphere 2, Manifest Gallery in Cincinnati, National Arts Program and LPL Annual shows at the University of Arizona, Untitled Gallery in Tucson, and The Center for the Arts in Chandler. His art has also been included in juried publications and on-line venues, receiving best-in-show in several recent shows. He also does occasional commission work, recently including a book cover illustration (*The Book of Stranger Vol. 2*) and several music score cover illustrations (*The Butterfly and the Ocelot* by composer A. M. Guzzo).

Webpage: www.nelsonrobotics.org | **Facebook:** [SurrealMachinesFineArt](#)

OTHER ART



TIME-LAPSE





"Faith" | Diamante Lavendar

AMANDA KRUPMAN is a writer in Cleveland, OH. Her work has appeared in a number of literary journals and magazines, including *The Forge*, *Punk Planet*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Gertrude*, and *The New Engagement*. Amanda received an MFA from The New School's graduate writing program and was a recipient of a 2017 Jerome Foundation Emerging Artist Residency Award. She teaches creative writing at Pace University, North Central College, Cleveland State University, and through Think Olio. Find her on Twitter: [@akrupman](https://twitter.com/akrupman)

DIAMANTE LAVENDAR lives in the Midwest US. She enjoys using art as a medium to explore the issues of life with a strong emphasis on spirituality. Most of her works are abstract in nature with a focus on color, shapes, and lines. The majority of her work is mixed media digital art which includes some or all of the following: photography, fractals, drawing, painting, and digital art. Diamante's work has been shown in numerous online and "brick and mortar" exhibitions and has been awarded in many of those shows. She has also been recognized in the American Art Awards in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. Diamante's work has been published in several magazines including *Edge Of Faith Magazine*, *Eris and Eros*, *The Closed Eye Open* and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*. Her work can be viewed on her website at www.diamante-lavendar.pixels.com.

1ST PLACE

2021 FICTION & POETRY CONTEST

GHOSTING VIOLET

AMANDA KRUPMAN

Violet, on the floor, still at sea in dreamthought. She will throw a party.
Yes. Jemma always loved parties.

Violet pulls herself up and throws open the blackout curtains to face the noonday sun. On the street below: people. Gobs of people. She doesn't like them (people) as a whole, but they fill rooms; rooms full of people fill space; it's space she has now, and it's a liability. Four rooms with twenty-five-foot ceilings, naked walls, and unencumbered floors.

With the curtains pulled back, the light is icy and invasive and fills every pockmark and crack in the place. She feels the sting of it on her skin: it is a bracing, activating kind of pain.

Morning eleven. She's awake.

Bodies

Violet invites all of Jemma's contacts. Thousands of connections, but it takes mere minutes to ping them party details because Jemma left her Earworm plugged into Violet's laptop. Almost immediately, yes-chimes roll in. Some messages too: Girl! It's been too long. So excited to see you! and Hey, Ms. Truly Truly Truly Outrageous! You KNOW I'm there. They keep coming. Violet eventually mutes them.

People, with just their clicks and voices for now, but bodies soon. That's what Jemma had always needed: lots of bodies. Then Violet might get some sleep.

Ghosting

When Jemma didn't come home one, two, three nights, Violet was worried, but not particularly so. She had disappeared before with no warning. And always returned, with words of regret. And Violet, well, Violet had always been struck dumb by her love for Jemma.

White

The vast expanse of whiteness, now absent of any mitigating accents, of context, will probably drive Violet into some sort of madness. But it's also true that she isn't particularly concerned with keeping her mind intact.

The white floors were Jemma's idea. Her idea, but she hadn't painted them: Violet was the worker bee in the relationship. And Jemma: the queen. Though that comparison wasn't quite right, because Violet was the one who stayed inside the apartment, and Jemma was nearly always gone from morning until long after dark. That was true then, true now.

Actually, that last part was just speculation. Violet can't totally be sure what's happening now.

The Bed

The furniture was cleared out on day ten. Violet was left only with the fantastic bed she'd designed and built for them. The movers didn't know what to do with it. Baffled, they'd looked up at it, then back at Violet with deadpan eyes.

She'd made the bed the first year they'd lived there. It rose fifteen feet high. There was a ladder that went straight up past the towering bed into the ceiling, to a hatch that opened up to the roof. Sometimes they would open the hatch at night, for stars, though those were mostly obscured by the city lights.

The bed was surrounded by flowers at its base. It was Jemma who bought them, three times a week, and Violet who arranged them, popping off the firm heads of daisies and carnations, and trimming the stems from the gentle-petaled dahlias and roses.

Grue

There was also the thing they called the cloudforest.

On her last day out in the world, Violet wandered alone into the places she had loved most, which included the museum she had, at one time, helped direct.

She walked through the large, interconnected rooms with hazy vision and a gnawing stomach: she couldn't consume any of it. Then she rounded the corner into the wing that held the rotating exhibitions. There she found a sculptural installation by a Korean artist unknown to her. What it was: domestic objects—chairs, coffee cups, hand mirrors—cradled in stormy swathes of black thread, spun in the shape of twisters and tsunamis. Violet was taken with an inexplicable feeling: it wasn't a momentary sensation like *déjà vu*; it was a piece of some gummy past she couldn't unstick. It snuck in like an insect crawls inside a sleeping person's mouth and it traveled, nesting in her gut. She circled round and round the installation for nearly an hour, trying to make sense of its familiarity. Failing, she left the museum, bought supplies, and went home to the loft, a place that would become both sanctuary and prison.

It was trying to pinpoint the feeling, the memory, that made her weave the thread between the four bedposts, and it was leaving a world of trees and lakes and clouds that had her do it in their colors, to build a floating memorial tumbleweed of greens and blues. Twisted as such, the colors were nearly indistinguishable from one another, or at least pointless to differentiate.

Bodies

Sometimes Jemma would bring sex home with her. These were almost always friends of hers, which Jemma preferred. And they were almost always strangers to Violet, which Violet preferred. In this way they were compatible.

Once, Violet surprised Jemma by ordering in. Violet liked sex with strangers and she liked to pay for it, but she hadn't done so since they'd been together. Violet trembled with excitement when the loft's elevator doors opened as Jemma returned home. She'd staged a kind of tableau: the two of them naked on the wine-stained couch, the long woman she'd hired stretched across the velvet, one leg thrown up over the top; she, compact, head between the woman's legs, eyes on Jemma, drinking in her momentary bewilderment and the grin that followed. Drowning in Jemma's widening smile as she dropped her bag and stood there, not getting any closer to them, just watching with an appraising stature, arms crossed over her chest and legs planted hip-width apart. *Was she doing everything right?* Violet asked with her eyes. Jemma would let her know. But later. Violet would have to wait.

Another time, Jemma brought someone home who wasn't a friend, couldn't be, because it was clear by the band around his neck that he was a Plastic.

For Jemma, it was all an adventure. For Violet, it was all for Jemma. But she drew the line at fucking Plastics.

Get this thing out of our house.
Jesus, Violet. He's not a thing. He has a name—
Get it out.
You're being a bigot, Vi. Calm down.

The two of them continued fighting, so didn't notice the Plastic's exit right away. Jemma hadn't even released it—but somehow it was out there of its own accord. They saw it on the app—Nex was the name—a black dot a few blocks away, moving toward Broadway. Jemma released it through the app, somewhat pointlessly as it was already out of range, but she didn't want to be liable for whatever damage it could do to itself out there.

* * *

Jemma being Jemma, they threw lots of parties. Then there was the last one: her 45th birthday.

Denny, a mutual friend of Violet's and Jemma's, had been the first to arrive. She was the only person they'd known independently of each other. Denny and Jemma used to have play-dates, as they called them, though Jemma told Violet she'd lost interest long before she'd shook Denny off with cheerful elusiveness (as was her style). Violet knew her from AA meetings she'd stopped going to right around the time she met Jemma. Denny and her cultivated surliness laid into the world like a dulled knife. She wasn't totally sure—Jemma denied it—but Violet thought Denny might have badmouthed her when they began dating, maybe even with stuff she'd brought up in group. The meetings were confidential, but Violet had left the fold, and Denny, a true believer, had seemed to take it personally.

Denny gave Violet a curt nod before leaning in to kiss Jemma. "Happy birthday, kid," she said.

After Denny there was a round of boys who had just returned from a week at Fire Island and were still loose-limbed and tousled. They all took turns kissing Jemma on the mouth and hurried over to the sink to make vodka drinks.

The radical lawyer and her partner brought their droopy-faced kid, but promised they were leaving early, they couldn't get a babysitter but oh how they loved their girl J, and how could they possibly miss her birthday?

In the following hour, at least thirty to forty people arrived in stylish clumps. Violet didn't know any of them and from what she could tell, Jemma didn't either. But that didn't matter: she pulled them all into a Jemma brand of intimacy, corralled them all with that halo she wielded like a golden lasso.

The performance artists came later, arm in arm with the bartenders, and it got out of control (Jemma said "fun") soon after. Some had started making out and groping each other in corners even before the lawyer's kid went home, and soon it

became the bacchanalian display everyone had imagined and hoped for: two of the Fire Island boys with one of the bartenders on the rag rug; a female female-impersonator and a male male-impersonator, putting on a show on top of the piano; and eventually, some of the unknowns, howling like coyotes, bending their half-dressed Plastics over the waist-high Lucite tables. Plastics were still controversial and exotic (not to mention expensive), so there was a whole group standing around gawking, some pointing and laughing, or moving to get a different angle, jumping over each other like kids at a zoo. Did Plastics actually feel real on the inside? Try it out for yourself someone said, stepping aside.

The lawyer would probably have intervened if she'd stayed. But one didn't have to be an advocate for Plastics Reform to find it all quite tasteless. Was it fantasy? Yes(?). Did it seem real? Yes. Although real people consented to being degraded, hurt, and used all the time. That was kink. This is the same, Violet thought, except with fancy puppets—ciphers, programmed to do what you say. Asking for consent from them was just its own fantasy. Yet she saw how thrilling it was for the ones who each took their turn not to have to ask, to just take, to grab on, and the violence became real: she started to breathe it in, an acrid taste all too familiar to her. Violet remembered the Plastic that Jemma had brought home, which had left on its own.

But then she caught a glimpse of the black band around one of their throats and self-corrected: They were Plastics. They didn't hurt or want or eat or vomit or die.

Or orgasm. There were the programmed erotic responses, lubrication and the erections, but that was, of course, for the humans' benefit. Violet had read somewhere that the newest models would include more personalized features, including orgasmic responses to certain acts, or at pre-set times. She supposed that meant enough customers had requested it—and that was good, wasn't it? That people still wanted orgasms from their sex partners, even if they were literally robotic.

Watching it all go down and doing nothing, watching Jemma doing nothing (except make out with a twenty-year-old shaved head in the corner): Violet realized none of them could say anymore whether they were libertines and sex radicals or just a bunch of dumb animals. That's what came of gangbangng the Plastics at Jemma's birthday party.

Ghosting

After six days passed with no Jemma and no communication, Violet began to worry particularly. Jemma had never been gone that long—close, but she'd at least sent an edible emoji Violet's way, to show she was alive, was thinking about her.

Enough, at least, to spend some Bits and message over a Sad-Faced Oatmeal Raisin. Jemma selected the same cookie every time. Violet hadn't printed any since the first—the cookie had been overly sweet, with a metallic edge.

The Ritual

Tear off the stems.

Build a moat of blooms, diverse, with no recognizable pattern.

Tear off the day from the page-a-day calendar, write three words, then find a place for it: fold it neatly in halves, or thirds, or into the shape of a bird, and release it into the forest of thread spun between the bed posts, the web that extends down all the way from the top.

Climb the ladder and sit on the fifth rung, so your legs dangle. Climb five more rungs—halfway up—and observe the distance between the hard concrete and your feet: this is where it becomes possible for you to break, if you fall. Take notice but turn away. Climb all the way up, ring the bell.

The Bed

Hadn't Jemma loved the idea that the bed could be something else entirely. When it had ceased just being a place for sleeping or fucking. Hadn't she loved the idea of them lofted up above a bunch of abstraction.

Yes, Jemma loved the ritual at first, but, over time, tired of it. She wanted to skip it some nights, like flossing. Other nights or early mornings, Violet woke up alone in the bed, though earlier, in sleep, she'd half-heard stirrings of Jemma's return. Peering down, she saw the outline of Jemma curled up on one of the couches near the door, her boots still on her feet.

Jemma didn't need the ritual to mark time, to honor what was left—she still had the world and its routines. Grim and survivalist as they were, they had rhythms and logic. Naturally she had no real use for ornate love rites.

Violet wasn't able to bring herself now to climb the ladder, to do the ritual, though she couldn't stop herself in the past. In those times she'd done so with extra fervor. Then the folds could be nothing less than birds. Each day had been another bird.

Ghosting

On day seven, Violet earwormed Denny. *Have you seen J?* No response.

Violet was stuck. This was the life she had chosen after the war began, yet she was tempted to give in now, file her fingerprint and retinal scan so she could leave the apartment, get past checkpoints. Find Jemma.

She hadn't thought she would have the capacity for more heartbreak—not the kind that had any power to change her anyway. She was an idiot. Dumbstruck, maybe; dependent, certainly; disconnected, yes, from everything in the world! Except for Jemma, who was gone. And of course she was.

Violet couldn't register: she was illegal. It was best that she remain officially dead to the world. And if Jemma didn't return, didn't contact her, she would just have to accept that she might be dead too.

The Bed

Violet couldn't, wouldn't sleep in the bed. She hated the goddamned bed. The flowers had rotted. She slept on the wine-stained couch with her boots on.

The Ritual

It was night seven/morning eight when Violet woke to the sound of the bell. Wind from the hatch, probably: had she left that open?

Morning eight and Violet woke to violets. Hundreds of them, at the base of the bed.

Night nine/morning ten and the bell rang every hour. Insistent, imperious ringing.

Morning ten and Violet's violets have doubled in number.

Ghosting

Morning ten and the men arrived with instructions to clear the furniture.

"Why? Where are you taking it? Who sent you?"

They looked at Violet with dead eyes: Plastics.

"Orders," the one said with a shrug, and that human gesture, that programmed nonchalance, sent Violet over the edge. Panicked, she chased after them, running back and forth to each one as they packed up the chairs, the desk, the piano, the Lucite tables, the wine-stained couch.

* * *

Evening ten, on the floor. The bell rang with less urgency than the night before, but more frequently: every ten minutes now, an impertinent little ding-ding.

Fuck Jemma Hughes, Violet thought. No, actually: fuck the fucking ghost of Jemma Hughes. And then thought it again. The words looped in her head—a

mantra, a hex—and, absurdly, became enjoined with the melody of a children’s playground song.

“FUCK THE GHOST OF JEMMA HUGHES, JEMMA HUGHES, JEMMA HUGHES. FUCK YOU, MOTHERFUCKING GHOST! FUCK YOU, GHOST, YES FUCK YOU MOST!”

Violet’s singing slid into laughter as she imagined a cartoon Jemma, under a sheet, kinky hair mushrooming up the top, flying overhead, glasses over the eyeholes, witchy pointed boots with untied laces poking out from underneath.

The punchdrunk hilarity was momentary relief. The bell began to ring again, and then, a new sound—rustling. Violet jerked up. With courage, she let go of the blanket and stood. The bed was on the other side of the makeshift wall, out of sight, but the shh-shh-shh-ing was right there with her, over her, on her, like rainfall.

Grue

A foot from the bed, Violet could see that something had transformed, but what? Violet felt a chill and simultaneously her arm thrust reflexively forward in a kind of hypnic jerk. She grabbed onto a handful of thread and then saw the page-a-day notes, felled like dead leaves.

Violet backed away, fear keeping her gaze on the bed while anger moved her feet. She would not climb that bed and ring that bell, now that Jemma demanded it. She would not collect those fallen page-a-days. She would not write three words down for someone who wouldn’t send one. She would not be haunted. She would not. She would not. She would not.

White

Morning eleven. Violet is up, armed with dreamthought. She has a plan. She throws open the curtains. She is fully awake.

The violets are wilting, but there is something else: the dead page-a-days have been swept up. They are all back in the cloudforest. They have all been molded into tiny folded birds.

Bodies

There is a war on. And people want to drink, laugh, screw, glom onto one another for warmth. Or to Plastics, on demand. People were dumb animals; people filled space; space was a liability. Violet sees familiar faces from the past, but there is no light in their eyes upon seeing her, no expressions of recognition or of dawning memory.

In this world, Violet has disappeared and Jemma is a ghost. Yet there are at least two hundred people and Plastics in their loft, and you can’t tell one from another unless you bring each into singular focus. As far as they all know, they’d received their invitations from Jemma, yet Violet hears no mention of her name. No one seems to care that Jemma isn’t—as far as they know—present. Perhaps her ghost had appeared to them too. Wouldn’t that make sense: Jemma’s ghost restlessly moving from place to place—until the darkest hours, Violet’s hours.

There is only the bed now, so the guests are piled in it and on the ladder, and clustered below, fingering and opening the page-a-day birds. Violet does not feel annoyance or sadness as they trample the posies of violets and read their once private words. She isn’t sure what Jemma wants with her ghosting—if want was a word one could use in the situation—but if the last thing left in the loft they’d shared is stripped away, Jemma has nowhere left to haunt. And all the better if Violet’s hands are clean, if it’s the will of the people, a natural piece of the chaos characterizing one of the last blowouts at the end of the world.

Denny arrives late and haggard and spots Violet among the crowd immediately. As she crosses the room to Violet, her stride and expression all business, Violet notices how thin she is. It has been about a year. Denny’s hair, always buzzed close, has grown in. Her face is not only gaunt and shadowed but bruised above her temple and along her jaw.

“Is Jemma here?” Denny asks.

“No. Well, maybe.”

“What does that mean? Is she here or not?”

Denny’s head appears too big to be supported by her spindly neck as it oscillates, scanning the room.

“Jemma’s been gone for almost two weeks,” Violet says.

Denny’s neck gives up on her head and she shrinks two inches. Violet stands, unmoved, stiff as a soldier.

“You never answered me. Was she with you?”

“I’ve been in detention,” Denny says. “I’ve only been out a day. I went home and they’d taken everything. Apparently it’s happening everywhere. Then I heard Jemma was throwing a party—and it didn’t make any sense, but I thought, maybe there’s a chance—”

“Didn’t make sense—so then you do know. What happened.”

Denny looks away and shakes her head. “No. I don’t know what happened, what’s happening.”

“I threw the party,” Violet says.

“So?”

“It’s for Jemma.”

Denny sighs. “What the fuck, Vi.”

That is all that leaves her mouth, but Violet hears what Denny would have

said, if she wasn't drained of her anger, cored by her last few years in service:

You did this. Coward. Holing yourself up in this place for—what? Has it been two years? Two years you've had her handcuffed to you? Making her feel guilty every time she tried to escape this...fantasyland of safety. While some of us are actually trying to do something. She should have left you a long time ago.

Behind Denny, one of the mounted speakers blares new, louder music. It is a favorite song of Jemma's, and for a moment Violet thinks she is ghosting again, sending the two of them a message, or else just playing good hostess. *Ghostess with the mostest*. Cartoon Jemma comes to mind again and she has to hide the smirk behind her palm. *Ladies and gentleman, the ghost of Jemma Hughes is in the building*. But then Violet turns and sees a shirtless, hairless boy bent over her laptop and a close-knit group behind him, cheering and dancing with the joy that can come in these times from getting something you want easily, even if it's just a song dedicated to a room of queer revelers.

Violet isn't sure if she wants to know exactly what happened to Jemma, or if Denny actually knows anything about it, so she just asks the question she'd been asking Jemma all these years, about what she couldn't find out for herself in the last two weeks because no online identity means no tribal stamp, no media key, no Bitcard. She will have to make a plan soon. She is running out of food, the partiers will pick apart the fairytale bed, and soon she'll just be a lonely, by-all-accounts dead woman who'd dodged the Resistance and expelled the ghost of her girlfriend from the clinically white box she'd hid in for 742 days. For all these reasons she can only lamely ask: "What's happening out there?"

Denny picks up a half-empty bottle of tequila someone left near the window where they stand and takes a good long swig. "Wanna know what's happening? Get into your elevator, go downstairs, and try living like the rest of us."

* * *

The chatter and the laughing and the bass are a concrete bunker of sound, but the bodies are vulnerable. There is glamour and vulgarity, earnestness and exhaustion; there is throbbing life. Violet and Denny, sharing the bottle of tequila, aren't close enough to the elevator doors to witness the first signs of upset, but Violet feels the shift in temperature. The bodies, intermeshed, hot with sweat, begin to scatter and stumble toward the windows, clearing a path from the elevator directly to Violet, crosslegged on the floor. And incoming, a deafening shrill, a storm cloud of flapping, and then, clearly: birds, flying low out of the gate but rising up and swirling fifteen feet above their heads.

Violet had been right: the bed is already half undone by the revelers. The cloudforest is a collapsed and mangled pile, and some of the guests are wearing

remnants like shawls and turbans. Someone had pushed the mattress over the edge, and it is now on the floor, occupied by three girls in matching red suits. The birds, tied together, a convex swarm, roost one by one on the base, under the hatch. Covering every inch of the bed's skeleton—the wood beams and the ladder rungs—the birds sit, as if waiting for instruction.

The music is still vibrating but the bodies are petrified in place, watching the birds, waiting for. . .something. . .an explanation. . .an explosion. . .an attack? Someone cuts off the music, and left behind is the sharp white fuzz of the birds' song. So when the uniformed Plastics come in a moment later, most are, at first, too stunned to fight back. Denny, however, instantly jumps into action, planting herself in a defensive stance and brandishing the empty tequila bottle over her head. The Plastics are outnumbered, but it doesn't matter. They don't succumb to the punches, and even Denny's bottle, smashed into bits against one Plastic's head, makes little impact. Violet quickly loses sight of her. There is a rolling chorus of *no* and *help* and *don't* and *why* and *fuck you*, along with the steady beat of the Plastics' only response: *orders orders orders orders orders orders orders orders orders orders orders*. . .

Violet finds herself pinned in a corner, the weight of a Plastic smashing one side of her face against the wall. Is this it? Are they taking her, and where? Is this the end?

The End

The chaos of the scene erupts in small, repeating patterns of violence all over the loft and yet, strangely, not one of the starlings moves from their perch. The Plastic pulls Violet off the wall and moves her toward the exit, where Plastics appear to be loading and unloading their captives as efficiently as can be done with an ancient freight elevator.

"This has already happened.

The thought, an insect, enters Violet's mind. *What?*

You know how this will end.

Violet looks once more at the bed and its birds. The cloudforest is gone and replaced by the birds that, while appearing black from afar are, up close, a glossy iridescent mix of dark greens and blues. Are these Jemma's starlings?

This has already happened. You remember."

Violet remembers. Six years before. The war was still a few years away, but the Resistance had begun to form in small factions all over the country. After a meeting, the beach. Sun setting and starlings above the lake, with Violet and Jemma sitting on the shore to watch. Grouped in a series of pointillist patterns, the murmuration scattered out and then swirled back in with collective intent. There seemed to be a hundred, and then many more.

“What kind of birds are those?” Jemma asked with wonder.

“Starlings,” Violet said. “They’re an invasive species. A menace.”

“Oh c’mon,” Jemma said. “How can anything that beautiful be all bad?”

“They’re bullies. They dominate other birds and are a pain in the ass for farmers. They eat all the grain and shit on the cows.”

Jemma laughed. “I love them anyway. Just look at them! All of that other stuff isn’t their fault. They’re just doing what they’re supposed to do.”

It has been two years and twelve days since Violet chose to hide instead of fight. Two years and twelve days since she took her last walk around the city that she suspected would be unrecognizable to her now, where she saw the haunting sculpture of black thread that had tied up all of the simple and occasionally stormy elements of home life. In this world, Violet is by all accounts dead to the world but not yet buried, Jemma is a ghost who will not disappear, and nearly two hundred humans, some who came with their own Plastics, are being rounded up to meet uncertain futures.

The Ghost of Jemma Hughes has summoned starlings, and though so far they have only sat, watching and singing, Violet knows that Jemma would only send them with benevolence. They would offer proof that she had wrongly judged the species.

Violet determines this is the only possible truth just seconds before the first bird explodes into flight.



"Believe" | Diamante Lavendar

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2ND PLACE

2021 FICTION & POETRY CONTEST

OUR BEAUTY, OUR VIRTUE

Brenda Salinas Baker

Then the LORD said: If now, while they are one people and all have the same language, they have started to do this, nothing they presume to do will be out of their reach.

- Genesis 11:6

When our tribe won or lost a battle we gathered around a bonfire. After the address, there were dances and revelry. I was young when I saw the old foreigner slumped in front of fire gazing into its flames with her raven eyes. The war widow was always in the periphery. I wondered if skin leathered by the sun could better withstand heat. Perhaps she would teach me her toughness. Fearing my shawl might catch fire by sitting so close to the flames, I stood behind her and examined her fine gray hair, tinged violet in the light. She spoke without looking at me, revealing the truth behind a story I had heard a million times.

"I was born into a tribe of scholars during the Thousand Year War. The men my grandmothers grew in their bellies were sent to the battlefields for slaughter. My father survived the carnage and thought himself sage. My brother Benji played in the marshes with me. We twisted fly lures out of feathers to fish from the riverbanks where our mother washed. We sucked the sting out of mosquito bites.

We cracked cheat codes to Super Mario 64. We repeated rhymes to classify snakes.

Black yellow red, soon you'll be dead.

I spun stories like threads. Benji thought of ways to make them better. He taught me to read and write before I started school. He continued reading aloud and taking my dictation until we were grown. When Benji left for war college, I searched for a new audience. The women walking to the well shushed me, preferring their circular tales of fallen women and philandering men. My father remarked on my calligraphy and tasked me with his correspondence. My mother encouraged me to recite the epic war poetry of our tribe for my father's general friends.

The TLDR on the Thousand Year War: In the before times, the nine tribes signed a series of allyship treaties so that when a chief trespassed onto another territory, they fell into warfare like dominos. I never understood the motivations for the continued violence. Questions are considered unpatriotic in my culture. Elders spoke of the tribes surrounding us with scorn. I learned the other tribes were each in their own way savage and ruthless peoples. Whenever I mumbled my words or spoke with my mouth full, my mother would say, 'You sound like a barbarian,' and I knew it was the very worst thing.

After two years in war college, Benji came back hardened. He was to become an officer at the front. I read him a story I had written about a bunny hibernating in a den. I had hidden my fear for him in the lines, but Benji was busy polishing his boots. I knew how brothers returned from battle dusty-eyed. Their bodies would recoil when dabbed with balm. I asked Benji if he was scared.

'It's not a soldier's place to be scared,' he said, 'He follows orders and serves his tribe with honor.'

My father was proud. When I folded my face into my mother's skirts with worry, she put my palms together in prayer. A week before Benji was due at the front, an aura appeared in my mirror. It beckoned me. I heard a cracking voice as if on a distant radio frequency. 'Daughters: bring your art degrees and your sewing kits, your tap shoes and your guitars, your seedlings and your stories. You will build a tower in my name.' I was mesmerized. The purple light tapped on the glass. 'Do you have doubts, my child?'

I had never been allowed a question before. 'Yes. What is this tower? And why do you want me to build it? And how? Also, who are you?'

'You will know when I settle in your heart. You have been called to build a city in a tower with daughters from the other nine tribes. You will learn a wordless language. Men moved by your mission will lay down their weapons to settle in peace.'

'Will you protect my brother?'

'You will save him and all the others.'

'How can I leave my mother for so long?'

'Take the best of her with you. I will slow down time.'

'How am I to work with barbarians?'

'Retire that term. Trust you will look into their eyes and know truth. It is time for you to leave.'

I packed a change of clothes, an extra pair of sandals, a toothbrush and my Discman. I left my family a note on the fridge. 'Saving world—bbl.'

Careful to not make noise, I bit down on an electric torch as I tied a blanket to the seat of my bicycle, a teal three-speeder Benji had given me as a goodbye—he had skinned the leather tassels on the handlebars himself. He had exchanged strong words with my father, who thought an unwed woman should not hold a mechanical beast between her legs. I had taught myself to ride it, proud of my scrapes and bruises. Following the aura's instructions, I traveled for six hours. Some of the others traveled for days. We arrived by the moon's midnight to the Shinar valley. We looked at one another's faces and we knew. We burned an effigy to the aura and we saw it dance in the sky with pleasure. We examined one another's foreign faces, tracing features with our fingers. We wanted to speak but our languages sounded garbled to one another. We found new ways to tell our stories.

When Femi first heard the war trumpet, she told her father she wanted to enlist. 'Silly child, we fight to defend your beauty and your virtue. We can't defile you in a trench.' The sounds Femi's mouth made when she spoke were like two birds chirping, so she told us the story through a dance. She beat her palms on the ground and rubbed dirt across her arms and chest. The circular lines she made with her body became jagged and tense. Finally, she seized her throat and lay in stillness. We nodded because we knew what she meant.

When Vera was a girl, she cut off her own bangs with a knife. Her mother slapped her and asked why she would do such a thing. Vera had lived a solitary life even when she was surrounded. Inside her heart, she now explained to us in a sand drawing, had once lived a creature who shook her skin-cage with sadness. As a teenager, Vera thought the only way to free the creature was to destroy its cage. She showed us the scars where she'd traced her father's shaving razors across her hips. In the supply room of the school, she closed her eyes while a pimply boy jabbed at her vulva with a dry finger and then two and three. She mimicked the moans she learned from pornography waiting for it to feel good. One day, she told us, she opened her eyes, and the boy's finger was a dick. And that's how it happened. Vera caressed her protruding belly. We asked her if she was scared to give birth.

'There's no future for children born out of wedlock in my tribe. Girls have no dowries, but at least they live. Without an influential father to secure a post for

them, bastard boys become cannon fodder.’

We joined our hands in a circle and prayed for a baby girl.

Maia and Talia were twins. They told us their story through a harmony of notes. Their father refused to have them married off. ‘Such a shame to separate a set,’ he said. As a young doctor, he completed a trauma surgery fellowship at Johns Hopkins. He was so skilled at removing shrapnel, enemy combatants brought him their wounded, for whom he charged double. The men whose flesh was torn into ribbons almost always lived. Maia and Talia had swept the floor of the clinic and fed the wounded men soup. They sanitized their father’s instruments and kept inventory of the bandages they rolled. They fell in love many times. When Maia asked her father to fund her medical education, he said he had taught her enough to be a nurse.

‘You could study to be a midwife. Or a dentist.’

Maia asked their father who would take over his practice when he retired.

‘I will drop dead in this clinic,’ he said.

Thinking he could cure his own mortality, he declined to answer: ‘And what comes next?’

Talia was a poet. Whispering verses into broken ears, she had convinced a hundred men to defect. Maia explained desertion was the best preventative medicine. When Talia’s treason was discovered, it threatened to destroy her father’s name. The night before her military trial, the aura had appeared in their mirror.

Sura was our botanist. Scorched earth campaigns had destroyed the fields where her family foraged. Her village had become a food desert, and her father now worked at a gas station where no fruits were sold. Their farmhouse was under foreclosure. Sura designed our garden. When we needed water, we offered our grief to the aura and watched it rain.

Teresa was our chef. She dropped out of culinary school when her student loans had become too costly. As we brainstormed our building plans, Teresa fed us dishes made out of nettles and berries. When she cracked gnats in the fire, they tasted just like popcorn.

Xi had taken a correspondence course in architecture. She drew the tower’s initial design: a series of circular prisms reaching towards the sky. Back in her home tribe, Xi was praised for her ability to draw and redraw lines on battle maps. She handed the paper to Sura, who painted the surrounding landscape in verdant hues. War cartography had also been Sura’s responsibility, and they recognized one another’s work. Our city was a cone with a circular ramp at its center. There were dormitories, classrooms and a hospital. The rooms had removable partitions that rendered the structure endlessly adaptable.

Natalie told us her story through mixed media. Her family worked in low-cost

construction. She had been the forewoman on a few sites. She was obsessed with natural building practices, but she couldn’t crack a contract on her own. ‘You can’t get funding without a portfolio, and you can’t build a portfolio without funding.’

We were Natalie’s last chance.

Binta was a traveler. She told us her story through small clay statues. She had read every book in her village library and taken the oral history of all the elders in her tribe. She longed to see new sights, but it was unsafe for women to travel. Her chief had instilled a curfew. The aura had promised her safe passage. Binta’s brain could take a large problem and break it up in bits, managing people and materials. Xi’s modular design meant the tower could be assembled piece by piece.

Every night, we asked the aura for the materials we needed. It would provide when we agreed. We molded bricks and hardened them with fire. We used bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar. We didn’t always receive exactly what we imagined, but it was enough to improvise. Sometimes it seemed like the aura’s direction was an improvement on our own, and we grew to welcome the collaboration.

Our bodies were too tired for our minds to feel grief. Weeks passed. We took turns shedding tears of exhaustion. We formed a circle around the crier until she finished. Even as we built our new home, we were homesick for the ones we left behind. We missed our mothers and we missed our men. We shared the small things we’d never noticed. We played music on my Discman. When my mother’s memory weighed on my heart, I repeated what the aura had said about bringing the best of her. We made each floor a tribute to our tribes.

We sacrificed and we built. Femi and I developed sign language to help us coordinate commands. Stop. Go. Lift. Higher. As the tower got taller, we found we could understand each other better. On the third floor we made a discovery. By placing our hand atop another’s heart, we could absorb her memories. When the sixth floor was finished, we could laugh or cry in unison with a look. The aura spoke through us. We found our language above words.

Soon even Maia and Talia stopped using their spoken tongue with one another. Our bodies ached and our backs peeled in the sun. We took turns nursing Vera’s baby. We prayed for more hands. When we were nearly finished building, we started imagining our future. We measured the resources required to survive in peace. We hadn’t seen the aura for six days—its last shipment had been cleaning supplies.

Some of us imagined welcoming our families and friends to our city. We were sure our fathers, brothers and boyfriends would hit it off once they surrendered their foreign tongues. Others thought it safer to scale slowly. We wondered if our tribes were looking for us. We voted to not make decisions until we reached

unanimity. I sensed shaping a society would be even more exhausting than erecting a tower.

We were sweeping the last of the debris from our cylindrical city when we found a man at the very top. Natalie was peeling the plastic from the skylights when she felt a gust of wind on her back. She was on the ninth floor which was shaped like a dome. Xi had designed it so that when the sun rose and set, the reflection glittered on the materials like diamonds. Natalie looked behind her and saw a man sitting behind a desk none of us had built. It had been so long since we had seen a man—where did he come from? Natalie thought of scenarios as she ran down the ramp calling us. We gathered together in front of the glass that encased him. We spoke without moving our mouths.

‘Do you recognize him?’ Natalie said

‘I’ve never seen him before,’ Binta said.

‘Might He be God?’ Sura asked.

‘He’s not my God,’ Femi said.

‘Mine neither,’ I agreed.

‘What’s on his desk?’ Talia asked.

We saw a bundle of red candles wrapped in black ribbon and a crystal ashtray with a violet center. The man’s skin was pale and his hair reminded me of a winter willow. A small log burned between his cracked lips and he licked up its black smoke. Later, when catalogs finally came to my village, I would recognize the garment he was wearing as a pinstripe suit.

‘Did any of you build this office?’ Xi asked, ‘It wasn’t in my blueprint.’

‘Forget the room. How did this guy find out about our tower?’ I said.

‘How did he get up here without us noticing? If he wanted to join us, he should have asked,’ Maia said.

‘Do we have laws against trespassing?’ Teresa asked.

‘Not yet. We should vote on them. Let’s ignore him until he tells us what he wants,’ Sura said.

‘Why are we acting so scared? Let’s ask him to leave,’ Vera said.

‘I move that we kill him,’ Femi suggested.

No, we voted. No killing. We talked until we reached consensus. Vera’s baby was crying and our feet were getting tired. We told ourselves he was a minor inconvenience. We hadn’t sacrificed so much for anything less than we imagined.

Vera tapped on the glass.

The man opened the door. When he spoke with his snake-tongue, we all heard our own languages. It had been so long since we heard the sounds of home. The man tapped at the sundial on his wrist. His candles smelled like death.

‘Ladies, ladies, calm your histrionics.’

We were all like, ‘What? We’re not even talking.’

The man waved a stack of papers in his hand. ‘It’s come to our attention that you did not get the necessary permits to build this little art project. Under section 311.A of the jurisdiction, any and all structures not built to code must be immediately razed.’ The scented candles on the desk were called dynamite.

‘This land doesn’t belong to anybody. We claimed it with our sweat.’ Natalie said.

‘That’s where you are wrong, sweetheart.’ The man passed out business cards that said Mr. Logic Man in embossed gold. ‘I’m curious, were you actually planning on living in this trash heap?’

We began to notice the tower’s odd angles, the plaster we’d used to smooth over its faults. We had planned on making improvements, but the man’s criticism planted seeds of doubt.

‘You don’t have a warrant. Please leave,’ Binta said.

‘You should be thanking me. Look at how thin and haggard you’ve become. What man would want you now? You can’t raise a baby in this setting. This building is a death trap. What will you do when you’re attacked?’

‘We’ll fight back!’ Femi said.

The man laughed. ‘You sound just like your fathers.’

‘First of all, getting attacked isn’t a fair assumption. And if we are under threat, we’ll take a vote like always,’ Xi said.

‘Are you kidding me? It took you two hours to talk to me. You’re not capable of governing yourselves.’

At that moment, Talia noticed the purple in the man’s ashtray. He had trapped the aura in the glass and dissected it like a butterfly. We could see it stretch and strain. A thought passed through our shared minds. Natalie distracted the man while Talia reached. A scuffle ensued and the man’s hands burned Talia’s skin like acid. She screamed and dropped the glass—the aura shattered into a million pieces. Teresa gathered the glitter dust in her apron and we tumbled downstairs.

Natalie told the man we’d be back tomorrow. Teresa fed us dinner while Maia treated Talia’s arm. We tried to put the aura back together, but our rituals could not revive it.

The next day, we returned to the man’s office. We opened our mouths. Our vocal cords had grown lazy. When we explained the wombs and the wars, our words came out tangled.

The man showed us pictures of our aging parents and the gravestones of our brothers and friends. ‘Did you think time would wait for you? The wars haven’t ended.’

‘We will teach men to surrender their weapons. We can save future generations,’ Sura said.

Later, in our 360 feedback review, the man would tell us we had not been

strategic enough in our pitch.

‘You should have appealed to my better angels. Maybe used a deck,’ he would say.

‘Would it have helped?’ We would ask.

‘Probably not, but next time, it might.’

Before our defeat, I explained how our shared language would lead to peace.

The man nodded and said ‘I hear you, I hear you.’

‘Why do you keep saying that? Is there something wrong with your ears?’

Maia took out her otoscope.

The man laughed and touched her shoulders. He mounted a giant paper pad on Sura’s easel. He pointed at red charts and figures. ‘I appreciate the optics of peace, ladies, I really do. Nobody likes to see blood and guts on the evening news. But what would your tribes do without war? As you can clearly see here, economic productivity is up one million percent.’ When Xi asked him to define his axes, the man said he would not tolerate disrespect.

Femi took her blowgun from her holster and lodged a dart in the man’s forehead—a flesh wound. We couldn’t help laughing. The man had clearly never seen himself bleed before.

‘Next time, I will poison it with a frog,’ Femi said.

The man called us hostile. He called us aggressive. As he wiped himself with a monogrammed handkerchief, he said ‘This is going on your permanent record.’

After no deliberation, he told us the decision had been made above his pay grade. ‘Rules are rules.’ The man separated us and seduced us in our own languages. He said our families would forgive us. He promised us safety in good homes and good men. He scrambled our shared frequency. We were unable to coordinate a defense. He whispered discord into our ears, and we thought of the smells and tastes of our childhoods. Really, we did not like eating nettles.

The daughters of the nine tribes were dismantled with empty promises. The man gave Binta a television, Talia a boob job. Sura, he said, would be remembered as a saint. Maia inherited her father’s clinic. Xi received a diploma. The man wrote Natalie a letter of recommendation. He promised us our daughters’ lives would be better than our own. He renamed Vera’s baby Patience and we forgot what we had named her. I think it was a coo and a dance. As we scattered, loneliness weighed on our hearts. We resented each other for not understanding.

We couldn’t agree on anything, least of all how to agree.

I am ashamed to admit it. The man broke me with a promise of fame. He said, ‘Scribe: generations will know your tale.’ He pointed at Xi and posed: ‘Artist: behold your God.’ Before the man followed protocol, he apologized if our feelings were hurt. He yelled at us. Didn’t we see how our tears were making him feel?

Only Femi resisted until the very end. She rebuffed his offers of military rank.

Her war dance seemed to say, ‘I refuse to be your female exception.’ She made crude gestures with her hands and finally, she charged at him. From the beginning we knew the fight was futile. The man was twice her size. Femi kicked his knees and sliced his thighs with a knife, but it only fueled his strength. He killed her and that is where the word femicide comes from. I will never forget the sad chirping sounds she made as she died.

When we demanded a trial, the man said she had misinterpreted his intentions and that we would understand it all one day. I prayed he was right and I hoped he was wrong. Finally, when we couldn’t take it any longer, the man detonated our beloved tower. He said he hoped we learned our lesson and we did.

Our souls scattered with the blast, furious and heavy. We yelled at each other in our own tongues. If you had just! If you had only! We sounded like a mob of bleeding monkeys, each lashing out in her own language. We returned to our warring tribes dirty and defeated.

When I released our tale, it was repeated and resold. Flattened into nine verses in your book. The story you know is not the story I told. We were no longer a we but an amorphous they. Elders wrapped their moralities around our tale. They said we were defiant and doomed. A cautionary tale. They married me to a sweet man destined to die.

Child, you are my last rebellion. I will not wrap my story with a bow. Please remember us. Before our loss there was our triumph. Femi’s fierceness, Vera’s warmth, Maia and Talia’s sisterhood. There was Sura’s garden, Tersa’s talent and Xi’s vision. There was Natalie’s boldness and Binta’s mind. These gifts are now yours.

The light has not entirely left me, though it wanes. I pray for the day the daughters of the nine tribes will reunite, whether in this world or the next. I think of Vera’s baby often. Patience must be a woman. I have a habit of tapping mirrors. I still search for the aura in the night sky. Sometimes I see a glimmer of purple in a girl’s eyes.”

The old woman turned around to face me. I thanked her and I walked around the fire until I found my friends.



"Sky Maiden" | Diamante Lavendar

JESS RICHARDS is the author of three novels. *Snake Ropes*, *Cooking with Bones*, and *City of Circles* are published in the UK by *Sceptre*. She also writes short fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetry. She has recently completed a PhD where she combined art and writing in a hybrid project. Originally from Scotland, Jess now lives with her wife in New Zealand.

DIAMANTE LAVENDAR lives in the Midwest US. She enjoys using art as a medium to explore the issues of life with a strong emphasis on spirituality. Most of her works are abstract in nature with a focus on color, shapes, and lines. The majority of her work is mixed media digital art which includes some or all of the following: photography, fractals, drawing, painting, and digital art. Diamante's work has been shown in numerous online and "brick and mortar" exhibitions and has been awarded in many of those shows. She has also been recognized in the American Art Awards in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. Diamante's work has been published in several magazines including *Edge Of Faith Magazine*, *Eris and Eros*, *The Closed Eye Open* and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*. Her work can be viewed on her website at www.diamante-lavendar.pixels.com.

1ST PLACE

2020 FICTION CONTEST

THE MOTH BRIDE

Jess Richards

You think there was once a witch, but you're not sure. Somewhere back then. Some once upon a time. There is a moth, and there is always a moth, because the moth is you. And there is a toad who has intoxicatingly kissable lips. He paints them either sugary or poisonsdark, depending on the mood.

Tonight, you are marrying the toad. In moments of doubt, you've thought that this wedding is some kind of price for a spell. But then again, moth brides are always nervous. You focus on his sensuous lips as he silently mouths the vows. You've always thought toads are cleverer than frogs, just by implication of weight, and the intricate textures of their skin.

As soon as the vows have been made, you gaze into your toad's mottled eyes, loving him more than starlight. But as you kiss his poisonsdark lips, he croaks, and speaks.

He talks like a prince. He tells the entire wedding party, 'During our marriage I want diamond rings and sugar-dipped dried flies.' He describes future holidays where you'll both sleep under fairy lights in swamps.

You didn't know he'd ever speak.

His voice shocks you. You reel, shrink, flurry upwards, and bash your head on a lightbulb. Your eyes sting. What's just happened? You've married a toad, you've kissed, and now, he talks like a prince. Perhaps you have wedding concussion.

He hops onto the middle tier of the wedding cake and uses the top layer as a lectern. He knocks the moth and toad miniatures off the cake as he announces, 'We'll have constant house parties and all of our rooms will be filled with stinging nettles.'

The wedding party is in a forest glade. There are strings of lightbulbs and glow-worms, glittery bubbles in the ponds, and fleas have been employed as waiters. Your vision distorts. Your toad wears ant-made shoes. Pin stripe stompers. You're frightened of flitting into their path as you dance the first dance. Your grey wings are dusted. You appear far brighter than you really are.

Your toad gives you a wedding gift – an extravagant oil painting of characters from all kinds of fairy tales. Magical princes and princess brides - all applish and mirrorish and shimmering. Murderous red shoes. Kisses and transformations. Choirs of frogs, butterflies and mushrooms. There's not a single moth. You feel inadequate, but hide it well.

You give your toad the gift of a mothsong. You raise your silence as far as it will go, aiming for the lightbulbs, aiming for the stars, aiming for his heart.

But no one hears silence, unless they're listening.

Your toad examines your face with melancholic eyes and your thoughts race. Have you always been a moth? You feel as if you have. Seeking out light, hankering for the moon, silent, torn-winged and hopeful.

Has your toad always been a toad?

You silently beg him to answer this question, but again, are unheard.

For the rest of the celebrations, your toad constantly talks like a prince. You're still disoriented but no one seems to notice, they probably think you're drunk. Nectar is flowing freely.

Now you're married, you set up home together. It's a derelict, dust-soaked cottage. You try to believe you're happy, but as you collect husks of dried flies, you guiltily wish for three wishes, but only really need one. You constantly wish that your toad would unlearn speech.

He doesn't like how much you flutter around the rooms. He prefers you to crawl.

You grow more silent as his speeches grow louder. He wants servants, it seems, more than anything in the world. Hiding all the gathered dust under the bed takes time, but you love listening to its quietness. As you lie next to him in bed, what can he be dreaming of with his eyes wide open? His stomach rumbles, and you're fearful of his hunger. Your wings ache like dying things.

While your toad takes afternoon naps, you half-dream of smashing all the sealed windows. You linger in the highest corners of each room, flexing your wings, avoiding cobwebs.

He seems constantly irritated, and you're no longer certain that he loves you. He tells you that you're clumsy so often that you become clumsier. Sometimes you deliberately bump your head again. Concussion dampens sound; a foggy mind is protected from noise.

There must have been a witch, once upon a time. A witch who hurt him.

Everything about him seems hurt, from the stripes on his back to the cracks between his toes. His lips now pout with disappointment. Your toad is secretly a prince, waiting for the right transformative kiss.

You feel sorry about this. You want love, but he wants transformation. These two things aren't equal to each other.

Your toad tells you, 'It's now your turn to speak about how you'll meet my needs.'

You reply with the saddest mothsong he'll never hear.

He waits for a while, as if sensing he's missing something.

You keep singing.

After waiting, he says, 'Oh, get lost, then.'

You wait till Summer to get lost. A window is open at night-time and the fattening moon lights your way. You fly outside into lavender-scented wind. Changing direction, you fly towards a shining lake, up on a moor.

For some time, you're lost in your own thoughts, reflecting on the demands of untransformed toads. Sometimes you are not really a moth, but a woman who married someone with the heart of a toad. Sometimes you are a moth with the heart of a woman, escaping from anything which might hurt you, but slightly too late.

On the mistiest nights you imagine your toad's tongue, dark and enchanted, is there in the fog, and it's drawing you in. But there are clear nights as well. And there is this moor. You're in love with the moon in the lake and the lakes on the moon. And there are these stars. On the clearest of nights, they sing so silently, you can hear them.



"In the Mind of a Child" | Diamante Lavendar

SOPHIA BANNISTER works at the Hudson Valley Writers Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Her work is featured in Prometheus Dreaming, Meat For Tea: The Valley Review, and Poetry Online.

DIAMANTE LAVENDAR lives in the Midwest US. She enjoys using art as a medium to explore the issues of life with a strong emphasis on spirituality. Most of her works are abstract in nature with a focus on color, shapes, and lines. The majority of her work is mixed media digital art which includes some or all of the following: photography, fractals, drawing, painting, and digital art. Diamante's work has been shown in numerous online and "brick and mortar" exhibitions and has been awarded in many of those shows. She has also been recognized in the American Art Awards in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. Diamante's work has been published in several magazines including *Edge Of Faith Magazine*, *Eris and Eros*, *The Closed Eye Open* and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*. Her work can be viewed on her website at www.diamante-lavendar.pixels.com.

1ST PLACE

2020 POETRY CONTEST

WHAT YOUR BIRTH YEAR SAYS ABOUT YOU

Sophia Bannister

Tell me what you puked up last night and I'll guess your age.
Create your perfect ice cream sundae from Friendly's
and I'll guess your mom's dress size on her wedding day. It was a 4.

Tell me which brand of tequila you butt-chugged in 2016
and I'll guess the name of your married crush's ex-wife.
Build your dream home and I'll tell you who already lives there with his spotted dog.

Tell me where your dad was when 9/11 happened
and I'll tell you what kind of weed brownie you are.
Tell me more. Design your perfect man

and I'll guess his social security number.
Tell me you love me and I'll guess which
one of us will die first.



"Dreaming of Spring" | Diamante Lavendar

CHRIS SCHACHT lives in Colorado, where he helps run the writing center at Colorado College. His work has appeared in *The Hopper*, *LandLocked*, *West Trade Review*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, and others.

DIAMANTE LAVENDAR lives in the Midwest US. She enjoys using art as a medium to explore the issues of life with a strong emphasis on spirituality. Most of her works are abstract in nature with a focus on color, shapes, and lines. The majority of her work is mixed media digital art which includes some or all of the following: photography, fractals, drawing, painting, and digital art. Diamante's work has been shown in numerous online and "brick and mortar" exhibitions and has been awarded in many of those shows. She has also been recognized in the American Art Awards in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. Diamante's work has been published in several magazines including *Edge Of Faith Magazine*, *Eris and Eros*, *The Closed Eye Open* and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*. Her work can be viewed on her website at www.diamante-lavendar.pixels.com.

2ND PLACE

2020 FICTION CONTEST

THE WILD

Chris Schacht

Jayde knew exactly what that smell was. It was incense and pot and food left out too long. It was unwashed pets with matted coats. It was ripe clothes that needed to be turned into rags but were still being worn. All smells she'd grown up with it.

Her mother brought her to this house on the edge of Lawrence well after sundown. They drove up in their old Geo Tracker, windows open and the air finally cool after a hot day of driving through Missouri and Kansas without air conditioning. The sun had been down for an hour, but the vinyl of the dashboard and door panels were still sticky with heat.

The house was old, with a big wraparound porch, set far back from the road and surrounded by bushes and trees. The yard had tricycles and plastic bats and other toys that signaled children, a sign that awoke more anxiety than excitement.

Jayde and her mother went inside, and her observations about the house produced more anxiety.

The door had no lock.

The house had no A/C

The light fixtures had been replaced with candles.

The kitchen had no stove.

The first thing Jayde had to do was say hi to her mother's new friend, a man named Darren who would guide the commune and restaurant they'd come to be part of. He had short hair, glasses, and a square head, like a stone man from a Pacific island. The others in the house were introduced too, but with less

importance, as they merely waved to her with whichever hand wasn't holding beer or kombucha. But Darren stayed closer to her, his hand resting briefly on the top of her head. They all commented on the usual adult things, how cute she was, how much like her mother, how one of the women had a little boy there about her age and he was already asleep but we know you're going to be good friends.

She went up two flights of stairs to her room. Jayde had never been in such a tall house before. It smelled different up there, more like old wood and wet air and green plants just outside the open window. Her mother tucked her in and went down to join the others, and Jayde fell asleep wondering how they would eat without a stove.

* * *

During the days, Jayde's mom took classes with the other students and tended a large plot of vegetables that Jayde hadn't seen on their dark drive in. It was so big that, the night before, she just assumed it to be another of the many weedy fields.

Jayde played outside with the other child there, a boy named Kale. They were not allowed to sit in on the classes or work in the garden. Kale was a year younger and quite a bit smaller, but he was kind and funny. One of the first things she told him was that she didn't like the food.

"You get used to it," he said. "Fruit is the best. Have you had figs? Figs are good."

"Don't they cook anything?" she said. Jayde had already asked her mother this, and was hoping for a different answer from another kid, someone who'd been here a while. But his answer was basically the same.

"No. Cooking is bad for you. It makes food into cancer. Darren, he says we eat like how Adam and Eve used to eat, which is better than what we do now."

Jayde sighed and stuck the hand trowel she was playing with into the dirt. They had milk and vegetables for lunch. She wanted a hotdog more than anything.

Kale tapped her shoulder and pointed into the woods beyond the garden.

"Did you see it?" he said.

"No."

"It was a deer. There's lots of animals out here, even really big ones. Do you want to go look?"

They walked through the woods, finding only squirrels, and came back for supptime.

* * *

Jayde saw the fireflies on her third night. She had never seen anything like it. It reminded her of an animated movie about little fairies that lived in trees. Darren brought her a jar, and she and Kale ran into the overgrown lawn where they compared methods for capturing the bugs. In a short time they had more than two dozen in the jar. It glowed like a lamp.

Kale brought one last bug to her and ripped it in half as though he were breaking bread. At first, she thought he was trying to gross her out, which she would not let him do, but he took her hand and gently stuck the gooey, still bright abdomen to the back of her finger. Again, she thought it was supposed to disgust her, but then she understood.

She held it up for both of them to see, her fingers taut so that they could admire the glowing emerald ring he'd gifted her with.

But there was something else, past her hand. Two lights, shining steady, bigger than any firefly, peeked out at them from the edge of the woods. As soon as Jayde pointed at them, they were gone.

* * *

As long as the sun was out, the insects were vicious and never ending. Mosquitoes were the least of it. There were ticks in the tall grass, and they also fell from the tree branches. Horse flies and deer flies bit so hard that they felt like someone pinching with fingernails. Even the mown parts of the lawn were off limits because of the chiggers that crawled through any fabric and left welts that Jayde couldn't leave alone, that bled with her constant attention. The worst were the seed ticks, little tiny red dots that crawled up her feet and infested the surface of her legs, making every inch feel itchy, like her skin had taken a life of its own. After a couple weeks, Jayde refused to go play in the long grass of the yard or further back into the trees. Her mom was alarmed by the red marks that pocked her daughter at the waist, the ankles, the neck, the wrist. She told Darren that Jayde needed more than essential oils, that the bugs were too attracted to her.

"This will pass once she adjusts," he said. "Look at me. I'm out in the yard, and I'm not all bit up. Once the toxins are out of her system, this won't happen. I wonder... are you giving her treats? You said she likes Kit Kats. That could cause it."

Her mother got offended, said they were as devoted as anyone.

"Then why are you asking for poisons to put on your daughter?" he said, and that was the end of it.

The mention of a Kit Kat made Jayde's mouth water.

* * *

Jayde's third floor bedroom was so high above the yard that it felt like a lookout tower. From one angle she could see a few lights from buildings near the bridge and downtown, but mostly she saw the area near the house and the woods surrounding them. As summer wore on, she spent more and more time looking out the window. The house was now "off the grid" as the adults put it, so they operated by daylight and candles alone. The sun didn't set until nine but she was put to bed at eight, even though she wasn't tired yet.

The adults stayed up, despite the darkness. Sometimes they lit fires in the fire pit in the yard. They drank homemade wine. Many of them, including her mother, came and went from Darren's first floor bedroom, a room that had its own small porch. They probably thought she didn't know what was going on, and she didn't entirely, but she knew it had to do with sex. Some of the adults were noisy. One of the voices might have been her mom. She didn't want to know.

Even without a fire or a candle, an adult or two would walk out into the dark alone, to look up at the stars, whisper into a forbidden cell phone, or simply to urinate. These occurrences were the best. She learned the most about people when they thought they were alone. But no one was alone in this house.

It was when people went outside that she saw the spots of light again. They would slowly grow brighter, like a pair of candles newly lit, the flame building. The lights grew brighter, then they moved, like two bugs traveling in unison. But she knew it wasn't bugs. It was probably an animal, some curious deer or coyote who just wanted to see what they humans were up to, maybe even make friends.

She watched, willing it to come into the clearing, but whenever it got to the edge, the adult outside would come in and the lights disappeared. Just once, she saw a long shiny nose, like the wet muzzle of a happy dog. Wouldn't that be nice, if her friend was a stray dog they could adopt?

In the morning, she scanned the edges of the trees for the animal but never saw it. The bugs were still so bad that she would hardly leave the porch. It was better to watch from a distance and hope the creature came to her.

* * *

Jayde's mother returned from downtown with bags of fruits and vegetables. While others put the food away, she took Jayde aside and drew out a small bottle of bug spray, which she gave to her daughter. The bugs left her alone then, but she had to be careful of Darren, whose nostrils flared if she got too close, and he looked at her with those wide-open, wild eyes of his. They were always like that, like he was taking everything in all at once and it was overwhelming him, though he was too afraid to admit it.

Darren's restaurant in town had just opened, so he and the others were too

busy to see that she was arming herself with all kinds of modern tools. Besides the bug spray, she had found a keychain LED light for getting to the bathroom at night instead of a stupid candle. She liked to point it out the window at night and turn it on and off, as if she was communicating with the fireflies in the trees, as if she was part of their city and not isolated in her bedroom.

Her only companion on these long nights was the creature in the forest. It stared out with its bright eyes, and she flashed her light back at, imagining she was sending a message of friendship that the animal was only too happy to receive.

* * *

Work at the restaurant had picked up, requiring more "cooks" and servers. That meant they'd need more help at home, which finally got Jayde and Kale into the garden. They could help pick some of the vegetables. Darren had to be there to teach them. It seemed now that he had to be everywhere, or that other people always had to be around him. No major or even minor event could happen without his presence. And if he was there, he was leading the way.

Today they were deep in the garden, on their knees between the spinach and tomatoes, picking snap peas. Darren had already explained how to pay attention to the fuzz, how they should feel when squeezed lightly, and how that should show the difference between ready ones and those that needed time to mature. No matter how much he talked, though, she and Kale couldn't get what he meant. Some of the ones he said were ready were tiny, and others were big.

"Close your eyes, honey," her mother said. She stood back with the others, watching at a distance. Jayde didn't like how far away her mother often was now, or how other adults in the house would sometimes come to tuck her in at night, like they were becoming her parents, too.

"That's a good idea," Darren said. "That's what I want you and Kale to do. Close your eyes. Feel the peas."

Kale went first, grabbing on to a small one. "Is this one?" he said.

"No," Darren said, swatting Kale's hand away. "That is not ready."

Then Jayde had to try. It wasn't any different with her eyes closed. Some were big, and some were small. She settled on a medium one.

"Very good," Darren said. He pulled the pod off the plant and held it up victoriously. The other adults applauded. He handed back to Jayde. "Here, enjoy it."

Eat it, now? she thought. But it hadn't been washed. She wiped one hand on her shirt, then used that hand to polish the pea.

"Don't wipe the dirt off," Darren said. "Eat it. We are made of the earth, and

someday we'll return to it."

"But it gets stuck in my teeth." Jayde's mother had talked about this eating dirt business back when they were living with her grandmother. Thankfully, her grandmother wouldn't have any of it, the dirt or the justifications.

"You're a complainer, Jayde. Complaining won't ever do you any good." Darren was like this. He talked to her in ways other adults didn't.

"My grandma said you wash dirt off vegetables because the dirt wears down your teeth."

"Well that's not true. That's what we call conventional wisdom, and conventional wisdom is usually wrong." He cast a glance at Jayde's mom, who, as usual, couldn't return his stare. He turned back to Jayde and put his hand on her bare calf. "The natural world only hurts those people who want to be hurt. Do you..." he cut himself short, but she heard the question anyway. Do you want to be hurt?

"We don't have to talk about this now," he said. "You'll get it, sooner or later. Now try the pea pod."

Jayde put the dirty vegetable in her mouth, snapped it in half, and chewed. Darren finally took his hand off her thigh.

* * *

From then on, Jayde was allowed in the garden while Kale was not. He played just outside the chicken wire fence, his lonely games progressing in violence. He thwacked at the tall weeds with a long stick, and then when the sticks broke, used a mallet to drive them into the ground, so far that they disappeared in the pounded earth. Still later, Jayde saw him stalking through the grass, suddenly leaping with his mallet to strike an unseen enemy. After an entire morning of this, she realized he was hunting grasshoppers.

She preferred watching him to working in the garden. Picking peas was the easy part, especially once she realized no one checked on the quality of her picking. They simply took the full baskets of vegetables and set them by the driveway for the small van that constantly traveled back and forth between the house and the restaurant. When not harvesting, she had to weed. Weeding made them better than conventional farming, Darren told her, because those farmers relied on pesticide, which was unnatural.

"I thought cooking made it poison," she told him.

"Yes, and so do pesticides," he said. "All of it is an affront to nature."

She could have asked him what "affront" meant, but preferred weeding and picking to talking with Darren.

All the weeds had to go so that there were enough nutrients for the

vegetables. Well, not all the weeds. Dandelions were allowed, because they weren't weeds. Unless they'd already turned to seed, in which case they became weeds. And she had to be careful of the plants that looked like weeds but weren't, the arugula and carrots and potatoes. If it didn't have an identifiable vegetable growing from a stalk, it looked like a weed to her. One day, she yanked the tops off a dozen parsnips before another adult stopped her. He slapped her hands, just like Darren, and spouted off about things she didn't understand, margins and seasonal growing cycles. Jayde didn't even know the man's name.

One afternoon, Kale collected a pile of rocks from the road and, using a stick from the woods, began batting the rocks into the garden, pelting Jayde and whomever else happened to be inside.

Kale's mother tried to calm him. "Kale, honey," she said. "We don't throw rocks."

Another man said "You need to stop him right now, Tanya, or I will."

"You know what happens when I get forceful," she said. "He just gets more stubborn."

They continued working in a tense silence, the gardeners at their plants, Kale reassembling his pile of rocks. He kicked them together, then began carefully stacking them in a little pyramid. Jayde thought maybe the anger of the adults had reached him and he knew better than to continue.

She heard another cracking sound, and a rock fell between her and the man. He stood up and pointed his trowel at Kale. "That's it you little shit," he said. He marched toward the edge of the fence. Kale sped up his attack, hitting one stone after another. Any that came close to the man, he knocked aside with his trowel.

If not for Kale's mother, the man might have jumped the fence. She ran ahead, to the garden gate and beyond. Normally placid and slow, she moved quickly, wrapping Kale in her arms and stripping the stick from his grasp. The man paused at the fence, scraping his trowel across the top. The grating sound of metal on metal made Jayde's teeth hurt. As Kale cried and cursed in his mother's arms, the man went back to work.

"That wasn't right," Jayde's mom said. "You threatened that boy with violence."

The man snorted. "Darren's right. You bend too much."

Her mom shook a pepper plant, bringing the top all the way to the ground before letting it go. "I'm not a tree, Mark. I'm life producer, and I bend. Unlike you."

The man, Mark, shook his head. "Yeah, you're a real earth mother," he said.

Outside the garden, Kale's mother was dragging him away. She held him under the arms, pulling, while he wailed and dug his heels into the soil. Jayde's mother gave up on arguing and put her energy into extracting weeds.

A pinch on Jayde's ankle reminded her to take care of herself. She swatted the mosquito and asked to be excused for the restroom. Really, she needed to reapply her bug spray. Nature, like people, doesn't hurt those who want to be hurt. It hurts those who are most vulnerable.

#

That night, while watching out her third floor window, Jayde saw Kale step out alone in the yard. He'd never left the house after dark, not without adults watching. He walked right to the edge of the garden. She wondered what he was doing only for a moment, only until Kale lowered his pants and started peeing on the green beans growing up the fence.

Jayde got out her keychain light and started blinking it at him, hoping he would turn around, look up and see it. She wanted him to know that he wasn't alone, even if the adults had separated them.

He finished, but didn't turn around. Kale walked forward, to the woods, as though he saw something there. Jayde looked and saw the two dots of light that belonged to her animal friend.

She was immediately taken by a sense of injustice; that was her animal friend, the one she'd reached out to. She should be the first one to meet it. It wanted to see her anyway. Why hadn't she gone out at night to see it, like Kale?

Jayde got out of bed and quickly but quietly descended the stairs. If Kale got to run around at night, so would she. Who would stop her, the angry adults? They were too busy sleeping off long days at the restaurant.

She tried to open the screen door quietly, but it creaked and then slipped from her hand, slapping into the door frame. Now she would have to go quickly, in case her mom or some other adult came to investigate. She held the button down on her light and walked out to find Kale.

The grass was tall, and when it swiped against her legs it tickled, reminding her of all the bugs that could be crawling on her. She just had to hope that the bug spray she'd put on that afternoon was still working.

Once in the trees, the grass died back and she had to walk around scrubby plants and fallen branches. The light barely lit her way enough for her to see the ground.

"Kale," she said. "Kale, where are you?"

He had disappeared. In the short time it took her to get outside, he was no longer in the yard and not in the woods. But she did see another friend through the trees.

The two dots, reflecting her light, or the starlight, seemed far away but got closer surprisingly fast. And they didn't bob up and down like she expected, but almost floated towards her, the head kept incredibly level while the body moved.

The eyes were her height, maybe taller. And below them, another reflection began to shine, this time in a horizontal line. They were teeth – long, bright teeth.

It wasn't a friendly animal.

Jayde stepped backward while the creature took two steps forward. The long snout materialized out of the dark, blackish-blue in color, like the shell of a beetle. Its big paws, with long toes almost like fingers, settled softly on the ground in front of its body, more like a person trying to walk on all fours than like an animal. Unlike a person, it had a long alligator tail, the distant tip swishing in the brush.

She continued to walk backwards, but her heel caught on something, a twig or a root, and she nearly fell. By the time she regained her balance, the creature was right in front of her.

The head was huge, maybe the size of a horse's. The skin really was blue, like a pond at night, and almost perfectly smooth, except for the wrinkles around the mouth and eyes. She could smell it now too, something earthy and clean. It smelled more like a wet stone than a wet dog. It sniffed her back, its nostrils flaring, and its head turned away quickly, as if it didn't like the smell of her. But it returned to staring at her.

The little LED light she held flickered and in those fractions of a moment between light and darkness the creature's mouth opened and closed in flashing succession: wide and gaping, then clamped shut, faster than anything she'd ever seen. Still its eyes held her, its body nearly surrounding her.

The muscles in her thumb twitched so she held the light in both hands, holding down the little button with all her strength. Then she heard the voice behind her, at the edge of the trees, by the yard.

"Jayde?" Kale said. "What are you doing? I can see your light. I know you're looking at something."

The monster raised its head to look behind her.

"Go inside, Kale," she said.

"What are you looking at?" he said.

The monster sniffed. It took a step away from Jayde.

"I said go inside!" she said.

The darkness blurred around her. She swung back to the creature, to fend it off with her light, but it was gone.

Kale screamed. She looked at where he'd just been and saw the humped form of the creature. It jerked its head near the ground, lifted something in its jaws, and then cut through the yard, obscured by the tangle of trees.

Jayde ran to where she'd last seen Kale, holding the light in front of her like a magic blade pointed tip-first. The creature took him, she knew it. She shined the light into the yard as best she could, but the range was so short. All she could see was the blood left on the grass.

* * *

Jayde overheard the policemen talking.

“You know, this has actually happened before here.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, a long time ago. The guy who built the house, he was found on his porch, all ripped to shreds.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah. I guess it got his wife and kid, too.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Heard it from the animal guy they brought in. He thinks it’s because of the drought. Mountain lion gets hungry, starts traveling around, settles on whatever small animal he can find.”

“Huh.”

“Got to be careful, living by the river. I heard they travel all along river corridors. Fucking hippies should have thought of that before they shut off the power.”

“No kidding. I hate having to haul the floodlights out. It’s going to be light out in a few hours. Do we really need to do this now?”

The men kept talking, complaining about their jobs, and Jayde did not notice someone walk up behind her. A hand clamped on to her and spun her around. Fresh tears had sprung up from her mother’s eyes, and she pulled Jayde in tight to her as she knelt down.

“Don’t you dare go off in the dark,” her mother said.

* * *

There were a lot of arguments, after the police left, about what should be done. Some people wanted the power to be turned back on. Some wanted to buy a rifle for protection. One woman said, no matter what they did, she was leaving.

Darren wouldn’t hear any of it. The house was his, the project they were engaged in, as he put it, was his, and there would be no electricity to tie them to the outside world. There would be no murdering of animals, even predators. They would simply have to be more careful and aware than Kale was. They shouldn’t have children there in the first place, Darren said.

Based on this, and other things he’d said, his attitude towards Kale’s death was quickly deemed cold-blooded. He tried to claim it was rational and instinctual, which led to new arguments, ones Jayde couldn’t follow, about Darren and his callous treatment of others, his megalomania, and many other complaints about the bureaucracy of the house.

In the end, most of the people decided to leave, including Jayde’s mother.

It took time to pack things and separate belongings that had become collective over the last few months. Darren went swiftly up and down the hallways, shirtless, darting around like a distressed lizard looking to scare away predators. He began claiming that this and that were his things, though they obviously weren’t, and more fights took place, prolonging their departure.

Jayde found her mother and pulled at her skirt. “We have to get out of here before dark,” she said.

“Don’t start with me,” her mother said. “We’ll go when we’re ready.”

Jayde was ready. She’d packed what few things she could long ago and now only waited, looking out the windows into the trees.

The sun was setting by the time Jayde’s mother was ready to go. Others had already left, and a couple who were staying busied themselves reordering the kitchen.

Darren stood on the porch, dramatically holding a bare candle in both hands, like an angry Christmas caroler. He glared at Jayde’s mother as she packed the car. When her mother tried to talk to him, he turned his head away.

Jayde and her mother got in the car, finally ready for another long trip back home. Her mother tried one more time to talk with Darren through the open window while Jayde scanned the woods.

That’s when they appeared: two little glowing discs in the woods, a blue body behind them. Its head slowly emerged from the brush, still barely visible in the dark. Jayde’s breath caught in her throat. There it was, the creature that hunted her, that killed her one friend. Its head cleared the woods, and those long front legs. But its beady, glowing eyes weren’t fixed on her. They were on Darren. It put one paw in the lawn, then another.

“Mom,” Jayde said, more of a terrified exhalation than a word. She pointed.

Her mom saw it immediately. She leaned forward over the steering wheel and stopped her breath. Jayde felt a moment of satisfaction, because if her mom saw it, then it was real. Even if they didn’t know what it was, it still existed. It wasn’t just her fear. Everyone shared it.

“What the hell?” her mom said. She turned the key and pawed at the control panel, but by the time she turned on the headlights, the creature had gone.

“What was that?” her mom said. She put one hand on the door, as if to step outside and take another look.

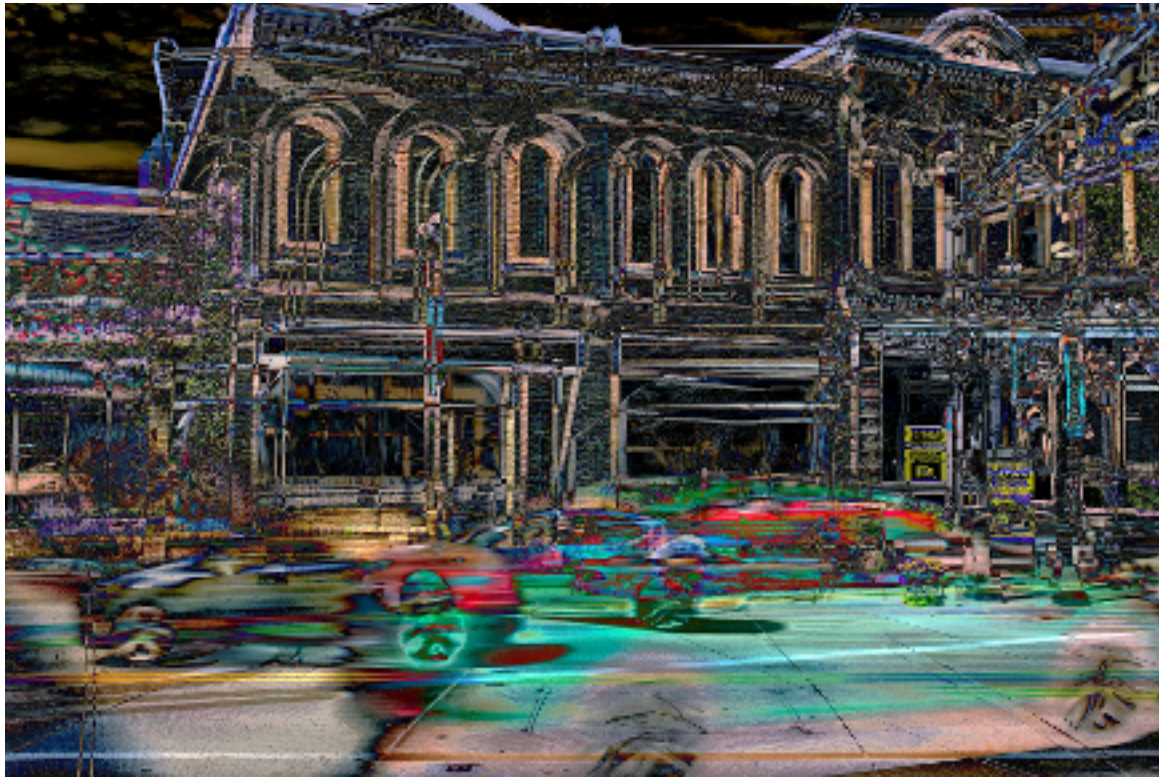
Jayde reached out and took her mom’s wrist.

“Let’s just go,” Jayde said.

Her mom backed out of the driveway, looking behind her, too distracted now to care about Darren still sulking on the porch. She turned the car so as to swing it around, so she didn’t have to back all the way down the country driveway. When

she did, Jayde saw the eyes return, two sparks hot as fire in the woods, and the blue snout pushing through the leaves, aimed at the tall, wiry man blowing out the bare candle held in his fist.

The tires spun as her mom put the car in drive, kicking dirt up off the lawn, the car issuing a warning to the night.



"West Dundee with Traffic" | Christopher Paul Brown

ALANI ROSA HICKS-BARTLETT is a writer and translator whose recent work has appeared in *La Piccioletta Barca*, *Temenos Literary Journal*, *The Festival Review*, *The Stillwater Review*, *IthacaLit*, *Gathering Storm*, *Broad River Review*, *ellipsis..literature & art*, *The Fourth River*, and *Mantis: A Journal of Poetry, Criticism, and Translation*, among others. She is currently working on the following projects: a novel set in Portugal, translations of medieval French love poems, sonnets from early modern Petrarchan poets, and a collection of villanelles.

CHRISTOPHER PAUL BROWN is known for his exploration of the unconscious through improvisation and the cultivation of serendipity and synchronicity via alchemy. He has applied this method to music, video and 2-D art. Over the past three years his art was exhibited twice in Rome, Italy and in Belgrade, Serbia. His series of ten photographs, titled *Obscure Reveal*, were exhibited at a Florida museum in 2017. He earned a BA in Film from Columbia College Chicago in 1980. Brown was born in Dubuque, Iowa, and now resides in Buncombe County, North Carolina.

2ND PLACE

2020 POETRY CONTEST

WANDERLUST

Alani Hicks-Bartlett

from this precipice she sings
with her raucous voice and
asks what all the wasting
is about.

the bird song
falls like pearls of rain
or dew, the bees' provisions
brim full on the comb,
and the lazy heifer eyes
the rocking rook.

the scale
is off, I tell her,
from this crest, and gay,
we see the butting sheep
below, small substances bustled back
and forth by winds.

she cries
that autumn slows the
footsteps and the mind and
looks for foragers among the
blades of grass.

the frilled

lizard by her hand blooms
bright with blood, the murderous
sight a bruise upon her
brow. treading lightly goes the
springing cotton rat, the grass
below lays flat and low
and dry.

we're made
to leave the ridge for greater
homes, but find them small
and tight and keep on
passing by.



"Retaining Wall" | Jerome Berglund

LAUREN DAVIS is the author of *Home Beneath the Church* (Fernwood Press, forthcoming), and the chapbooks *Each Wild Thing's Consent* (Poetry Wolf Press, 2018), and *The Missing Ones* (Winter texts, 2021). She holds an MFA from the Bennington College Writing Seminars, and she teaches at The Writers' Workshoppe. Davis lives on the Olympic Peninsula in a Victorian seaport community. Her work has appeared in over fifty literary publications and anthologies including *Prairie Schooner*, *Spillway*, *Poet Lore*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Ninth Letter* and elsewhere.

JEROME BERGLUND graduated from the cinema-television production program at the University of Southern California, and has spent much of his career working in television and photography. His work has been featured prominently in many journals, including gracing the cover of the most recent issue of *pacificREVIEW*. His pictures have further been published and awarded in local papers, and in 2019 he staged an exhibition in the Twin Cities area which included a residency of several months at a local community center. A selection of his black and white fine art photographs was showcased at the Pause Gallery in New York over last Winter's holiday season, and his fashion photography is currently on display at the BG Gallery in Santa Monica.

1ST PLACE

2021 FLASH FICTION CONTEST

TASTES LIKE RAT

LAUREN DAVIS

"The blobs of Oakville, Wash., are alive – or at least they were once alive, or part of some living creature, according to preliminary analysis by Washington State Department of Ecology scientists.... The mystery blobs, half the size of rice grains, have appeared twice during rainfall...."

– "Mystery blobs were once alive," *The New York Times*, August 20, 1994

In his sleep, he opened his arms, his cracked lips. My hand on his chest, his breath was nothing but a whisper. He twitched as if a thing hunted him.

Next door, Meredith McGrath weeded her overgrown beds. I watched through the window. Her yellow hat bobbed up and down over her stout hedge. Every few minutes she'd wipe at her eyes with a soiled glove. She lifted a shoebox to the sky. She was not weeding. She was burying her cat. "TIGER" was written in blocky letters on the side, next to a Nike swoosh.

Meredith looked up over that low border and through the unclean glass. She stared straight at me, unblinking. I think. The lights inside the bedroom had burned out. Perhaps she was only considering her own mud-marked face.

* * *

He said twice the sky had fallen in Oakville. Slick blobs, like jellyfish. Making the town, the pets, the songbirds ill. Lying beside him, reunited after my final semester, I should have been full of celebration, my heart sparking, but when he

coughed, his throat rattled. For three days he'd been without color, as if his skin was dissolving. He said no one was coming to help.

They think we are mad, he said. They know we are poor.

I didn't doubt this. I called the far-off hospital anyhow and when I said the town was sick, I heard a sigh and then a dial tone. Like I was pranking them. I called 911 and it was the same. I called the doctor, but the voicemail was full.

Outside, a blue jay fell from the sky.

* * *

The next day he started to bruise. Wounds grew by the hour, like boundary lines of countries blurring.

My body hurt in places forgotten, unnamed. When I moved near him, something ached bone-silent and lonely. The thing in his body snaked through my fingers into my belly. On the morning of the fifth day, I stepped from the shower. The blood from my thighs was as thick and formed as a man-of-war. Knees buckling, I muttered a neglected prayer, like muscle memory. I threw out the bathroom mat, changed my mind, and burned it in the yard. My beloved slept.

* * *

We were two sallow sweethearts on a sea of salted sheets, floating through fever and shadows. We ate each other's laments. A sun came up, a sun stayed past its welcome, snickering at the heat it spilled into that illicit sickroom. We could hide from nothing, especially the moon, who made us nauseous, and thirsty, and a little savage. I pulled the blinds, but when I turned my back they were peeled away again and I would clutch them together then lie on the sea exhausted and still he slept and still the sun fell about mocking and tapping at the glass. I would say we ate, but I am not convinced that's true. If he awoke it was only to ask to be held.

Days later, I saw Meredith McGrath's yellow hat bob up and down. Up and down. She kissed the dirt-stained shoebox, then tucked it under her arm, carried it into her house through her backdoor. It began to rain.

* * *

I continued to birth those dark bellies of red, yet refused to tell him. He suffered with a beast I could not reach.

Away, he said in his sleep.

Nothing answered back.

Leave, he said.

The moon patted his head, pulled at the blood of me.

I could hear, on occasion, traffic. Once an airplane. The doorbell rang. Boots shuffled away.

* * *

I awoke with Tiger on my stomach—curled up, purring. When she felt me shift, she stretched forward and licked my cheek, her tongue tough and warm.

I'm thirsty, said the cat.

I have no milk, I said.

You have blood, said the cat.

Tiger followed me to the kitchen. I held onto the cold furniture as I made my way through the cramped rooms. I filled the chipped blue bowl, the one belonging to my beloved's mother.

Thank you, said the cat.

Do you need anything else? I asked.

Yes, said the cat. I would like a bed.

So I cut my hair off with kitchen shears. I wove a bed and placed it beside the stove.

Anything else? I asked.

Yes, she said. I would like a rat.

So I chopped off my big toes and placed them in a trap.

That will be all, said the cat.

I nodded, struggled back to the bedroom and slept.

* * *

In the morning the man I loved was gone. I dragged myself through the home whispering his name. In the hall, in a small square of the sun, Tiger rolled onto her back.

Good morning, she said.

Good morning, I said. Have you seen him?

Good morning, she repeated. I had such a pleasant night.

That is nice, I said. Have you seen the one I love?

I drank and slept and ate, she said. My belly is very full.

That is nice, I said. I am looking for him. I must lay with him.

I'll tell you where he is, said the cat. But only if you give me something more to drink.

I crawled into the kitchen and fetched the chipped blue bowl. I saw the trap

was sprung. The kitchen was clean of blood and bone.

The cat drank and drank.

Are you still thirsty? I said.

More, said the cat.

I filled it again.

More, she said.

I was not feeling well.

I said, *Please, have you seen my beloved? He looks sickly, but he is very handsome and he has hair the color of the chestnut tree.*

It is going to rain, said the cat.

I am seeking him, I said.

I will tell you where he is, said the cat, *but first I must go out and dance in the rain.*

No, I said. *I was angry then.*

I know many dances, said the cat. *Look.* The cat stood on her back legs.

You will starve without me, I said.

The cat laughed at this.

Look at me, she said. *I dance so well.*

I will tell your mother, I said.

Watch my hips, she said. *The tomcats are no match. They can never say no.*

She swung her hips, and I must say, she looked very beautiful, like a Go-go dancer, scarlet lipped. She shimmed out into the yard, where the fourth rain fell. It gummed on her shoulders like fat jewels. Her mouth opened. She was speaking to me, but I couldn't make the words out over the sound of the laughing moon.



E.A. Midnight

E.A. MIDNIGHT specializes in multi-modal cross-genre hybridities. As a person living with mental difference, she is a vocal advocate for challenging the boxes creative artists are put in. She received the 2017 PEN North American/Goddard Scholarship Award, and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College. Her hybrid manuscript, *landscape of the interior*, was longlisted for the Dzanc Books 2021 Nonfiction Prize. A full list of her published work can be found on her website, www.eamidnight.com. E.A. Midnight resides in the Colorado wilds.

All photography in this work was taken by the author who retains the rights to these images.

1ST PLACE

2021 NOVEL EXCERPT

THE LIVING ROOM: THE DYING ROOM

E.A. Midnight

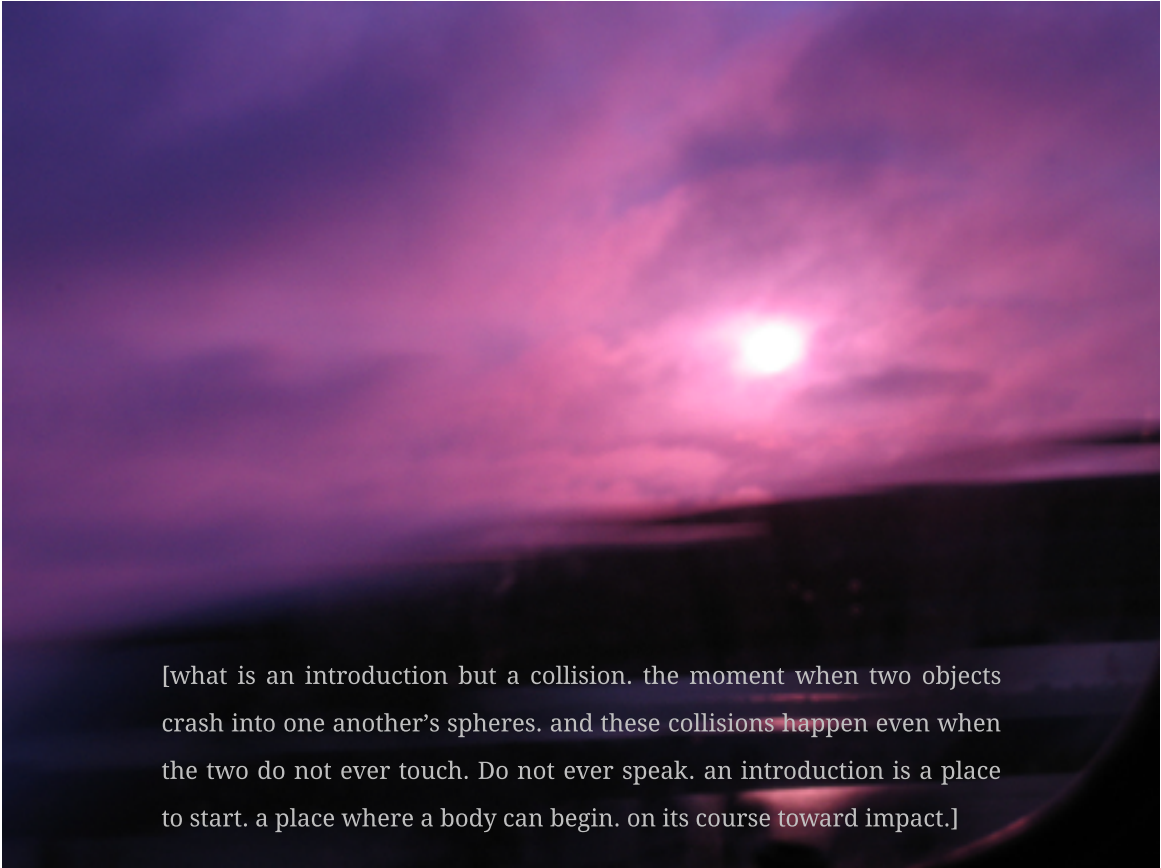
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PROLOGUE ONE



PROLOGUE TWO

it is always written
as between, as between
the lines

she was
the
color of absence

quicken the stride,
cross the wet
street

false light
pours out of an ember
bulb

the top of a
pole
under its' beam
bathing
snow

one

passed

by.

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT'S ABOVE, WHAT'S PINNED UNDER

She is still five the first time she sees Him. In the living room of their two-story house, the father is commanding two men. They struggle to haul in a bulky addition to the room in order to install it above the fireplace. Lifting the object, wrapped in newspaper; their broad and sinewy shoulders straining. The father, dressed in a new suit, towers in the back of the room. One of the men wore a stained tank top, his muscles grown from a life of involuntary sacrifice. The other had a rotting broth-like stink that permeated the air. Both peppered with raindrops from the mid-summer storm outside. She could see this display well enough half-hidden, her small body split by the bathroom doorframe. His uneven hair matted with sweat to the nape of His neck. Her eyes catch the wet print His hand leaves on the wood mantel. The bulky, strangely-shaped object is hoisted onto the mounted anchors in the wall. She focuses on the details of His scarred hands. Old ink letters.

The father turns to her. Eyes narrowing.

ChaR-Lee, Water. His formidable torso then rotated back toward the men pulling the newspaper from the living room's present.

She glides past the mother, watching from the hallway. A quick right and she is in the white, open kitchen. Pulling a chair noiselessly from the table over to the cabinet to the left of the sink, she climbs up and lifts out three tall glasses. Her thin hands place each on the pale marble counter, scoot the chair over, and fill them with water. From a floor-level side drawer, she removes the glass-serving tray and places it on the floor. Three table napkins lined side by side on the tray. Both hands grip each of the glasses

as they travel off the counter and come home to a paper square. The chair is replaced at the table. The metal side handles of the platter are always cold. Without making a sound, Charley walks deliberately back toward the living room. One foot sweeps in front of the other.

She watched the space on the floor just beyond the tray. Each step steady. At the first stair descending into the living room, she looked up. In the middle of the brick and wood wall, hung the un-wrapped present.

Inside of palms Damp.

Catch in base of throat.

Breath quickened.

Ribsshudder.

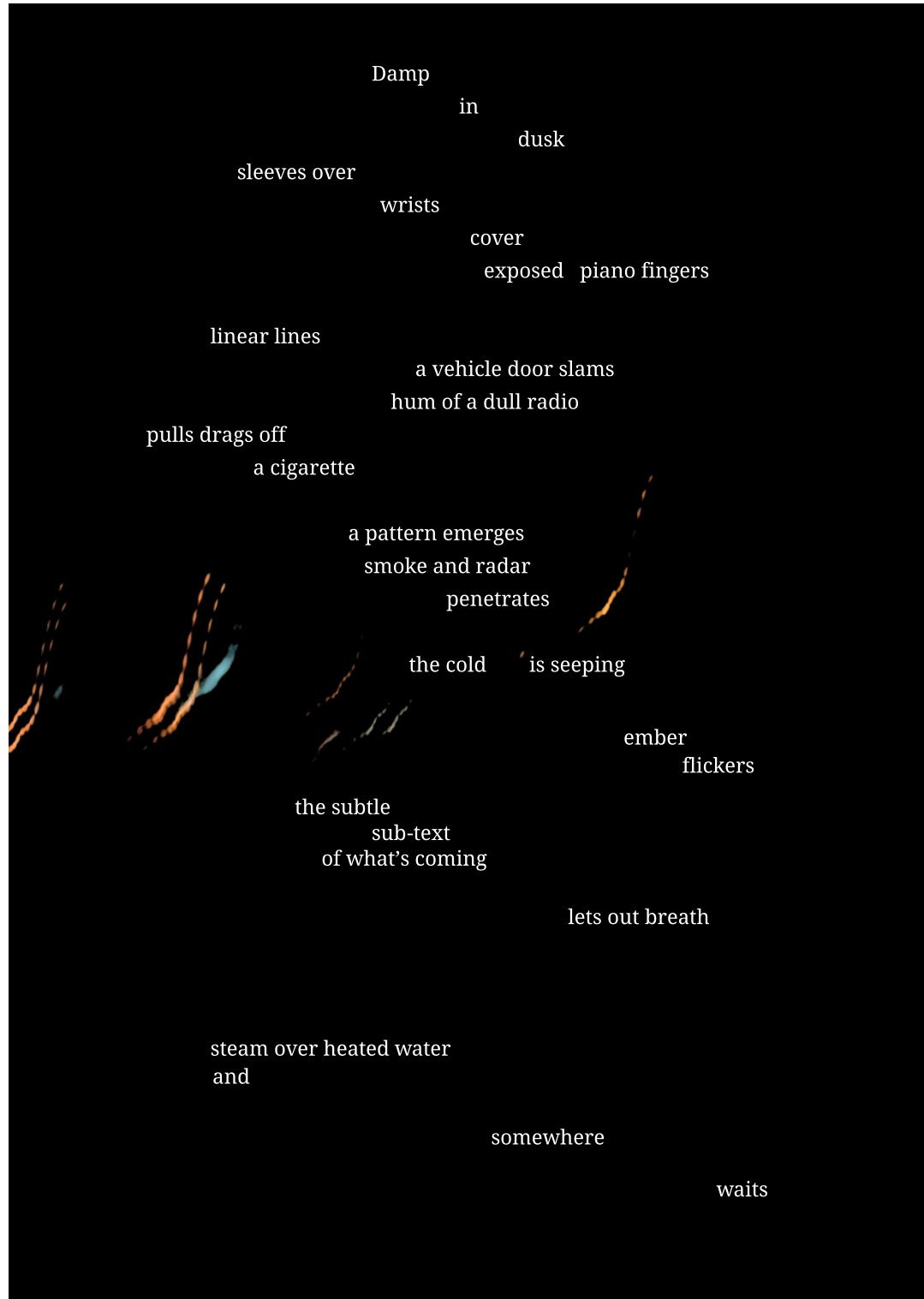
displace displace
displace Displace bones from housing.
displace

Small frames rocked back on heels.

The room began to shudder and shrink in a deafening and inaudible tornado churn around her. She didn't hear the glass-serving tray she was holding splinter upon crashing into the ground. Or the ear-piercing smash of the glasses containing the water meant for men. Or the father's curses. Or the mother shrieking her name. She existed in a void before becoming a crumpled pile of clothing on the wooden floor.

The Golden Elk head with the sapphire eyes was all she could see.

[one]



Whenever Charley entered the house, she preferred to come in through the garage. She did not like to enter through the front door. This worried the mother deeply. There were reasons for doing so, but she found they were hard to verbalize. She practiced. Each time becoming more silent till she was able to move through the door. On this particular day the house was empty. The mother was out, consumed with the traditional tasks of providing for her family. Charley could not say where the father was. He communicated his movements even less. She entered through the ghost door, which joined the garage to the living room. The living room with the head of the Golden Elk jutting off the wall above the fireplace. It had been eleven days since the men installed the Golden Elk head in the living room. Her initial reaction to the shining being, which seemed to represent the domination of all things, nature and otherwise, was unexplainable to both her and the parents. But the father called it a seizure to bring order to chaos. But she knew better. The power of the wall ornament stirred some shifting darkness inside her small chest that she could not find words for.

Though she would normally float out of the room, up the stairs, and off down the hall after coming inside, she decided this day to enter the living room and confront the opulence [and internal shadows] in the otherwise sparsely decorated, personality-less room. Her bones shifted and settled down on the cold wood floor. Small legs huddled up close to her chest, crossed the ankles on top of themselves. Thin hands white knuckle-gripped her shins holding herself in close to herself. Her shoulder, the one with the scars, was close to the glass coffee table that centered the room. Pale blue studied deep cerulean. The cold churn in her stomach began to cut up again. She closed her eyes and smoothed out the goose-pimpled skin on her arms. Refocusing her thoughts, she tried to imagine what this

thing had been before being a wall ornament. The narrative came. This elk had been the glorious leader of his herd. He would protect by night, and come morning, lead them into the chilled fog of the field to graze. Once the sun began to burn off the layers of mist that gathered around the great beasts, the elk would wander south following the pale morning sun. Their opaque breath hanging in the air. Each blade of dead grass catching the sheen of dawn. Breakfast time for the herd. It was this way till a hunter's bullet robbed him of that title. A cramp echoed under her ribs. It wasn't fear, but instead that sadness, that anger, that isolation which hit her so hard eleven days ago. The Golden Elk's original eyes had been replaced with middleoftheoceanonehundredfeetbelowthesurface sapphires. They were the darkest shade of blue she had ever seen and knew no pencil in her coloring kit would ever fully capture the depth she felt from them. She shifted her seat and studied the rest of the face. Each hair on the beast had been painstakingly dyed with an almost-iridescent gold paint. She thought of how the beast must resent them for painting him gold, when the sun on those fields had done a better job at brilliance. She could not understand why this had been done, but she accepted it. When we die, we are painted gold.

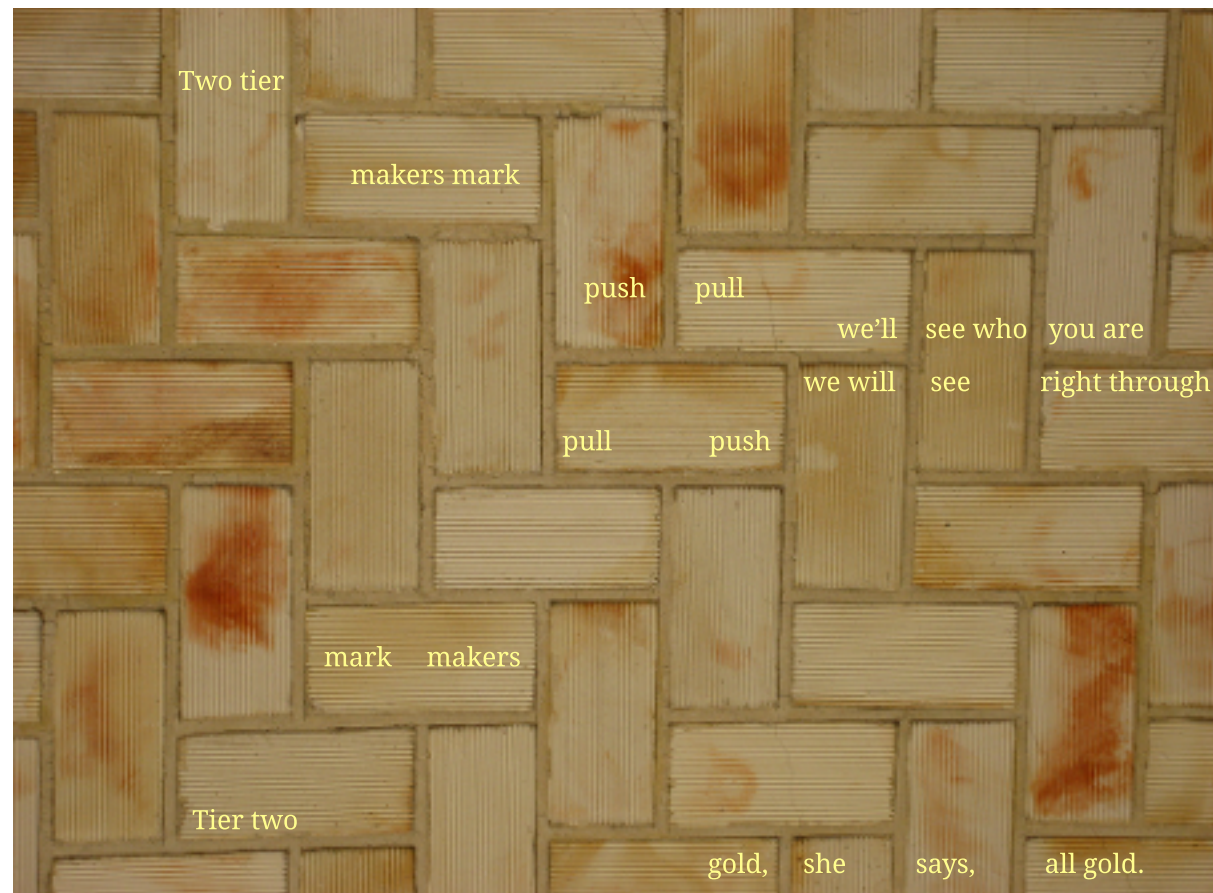
The silence of the house shifted and she sensed someone else was there. She hadn't heard the mother's car pull in, nor had she heard the clunking sounds of the father's truck. But unmistakably the air had distorted and someone else was inside. Ducking for shelter, she moved over to the couch against the back wall, and slid her small frame underneath. For several minutes, nothing changed and the room remained undisturbed. Then she heard approaching muffled footsteps. The steps stopped at the far end of the L-shaped couch. Other than the restrained, gathered breaths, the

room was still. She could just make out old, worn, heavy socks. She did not breathe. Ghosts cannot be found.

The heavy feet lumbered more clearly into view. They were dirty and indeed quiet frayed, as were the faded blue pants, which had been lazily hemmed to just above the arch of the socked foot. Everything about the intruder gave off a noticeable, if familiar, odor. Stew. Disregarded illness. The pants and socks stopped in front of the fireplace. She could tell the intruder was looking at the wall ornament, she could feel it in His breathing. Slow, controlled breaths of someone working to steady a racing heartbeat, to stay collected. There was no way to see above the shin, and she dare not twist her head and strain to see further. The intruder brought one leg up onto the lip of the fireplace [for balance]. She closed her eyes and watched with her ears.

There was the noise a tool makes when it is digging and cutting into flesh. Heavier breathing, straining. Then a sucking, suction sound. Then an uncoupling 'pop.' Something heavy went flying to the floor and rolled just to the edge of the couch. She opened her eyes, and there, inches away from her face, lay one of the Golden Elk's sapphire eyes. She stifled down a choking noise that tried to erupt from her throat as an old, weathered hand with jailhouse tattoos on the fingers scooped up the gutted eye. Then, as quickly as it all began, the hand, the pants, and the socks were gone, and the house was again empty and still, however, she remained ~~under the couch sometime after.~~

[two]



The mother was distraught by the now missing eye. Her repressed Southern accent was surfacing. It always did when she was angry. Or scared. Or whenever she spoke to her daughter. She sat her small child down and asked many questions, one right on top of the next.

Why did you do this

Why would you disfigure somethin your father bought for this house

Did you not like it

Did it upset you

Like what happen'd when you first saw it, the droppin of the glass, passin out and all.

Was that why you did this

Was its presence botherin you

It's too high for you to simply reach up

How did you do it

Did you get a chair from the dinin room

Your father is goin to be so upset

You know how he is

I just don't understand why you'd do this.

The mother's obsessively clean shoes slapped the floor as she paced around in front of her daughter. There was an almost unperceivable wince in the small child each time the hard plastic sole threw itself onto the tile and echoed off the walls. Charley knew that this line of questioning was coming from a place of concern, but there was nothing to say. She held the general belief that whatever thing she said, they would not believe her. Her secondary motive was to see if the intruder came back. Before the disfiguring, there had been a riveting aura of darkness to the Golden Elk. Now she sensed a kindred-ness to the wounded version of the beast.

And then what if they decided to take it away. She didn't want them to take it away. So the ghost said nothing.

When the father came home, the mother approached him in the garage. Small ears heard the conversation escalate into harsh, fuming words. She could hear the mother begging. He was coming for her. The father was a cruel man, and certainly not one to be disobeyed or disrespected. She braced internally for the next part. Sacrificing herself for the Golden [disfigured] Elk. The father steamed into the dining room where she sat on a chair much too large for her.

As he lowered his face into hers, pulsing beet-colored veins protruded from his forehead and his skin tone darkened. **Screams about defacing others property, disrespecting one's elders, and demands of where she hid the sapphire reverberated off her face, along with spit. The scent of cigars, bathroom perfume, and whiskey hovered in the space between their heads.** Charley made no sound and wouldn't meet his eyes. This only further infuriated the man. A large hand flew into the air.

Her mother desperately tried to throw her body in between her child and the hand. The father's rage was only momentarily misdirected. The hand came down hard to the side of the woman's neck and cursed at her for getting in the way. The mother reeled backward against the wall, submission on the woman's fallen face as she slid to the floor. This was not the first time this sort of thing happened, and it was as it often goes, you cannot protect others if you don't protect yourself. Satisfied the woman would stay down, the

father turned all of his unpredictable, wild fury back to the small creature in the oversized chair. Then the blanket of wrath rained down on the ghost's bones.

Eventually
she lost consciousness.



// \

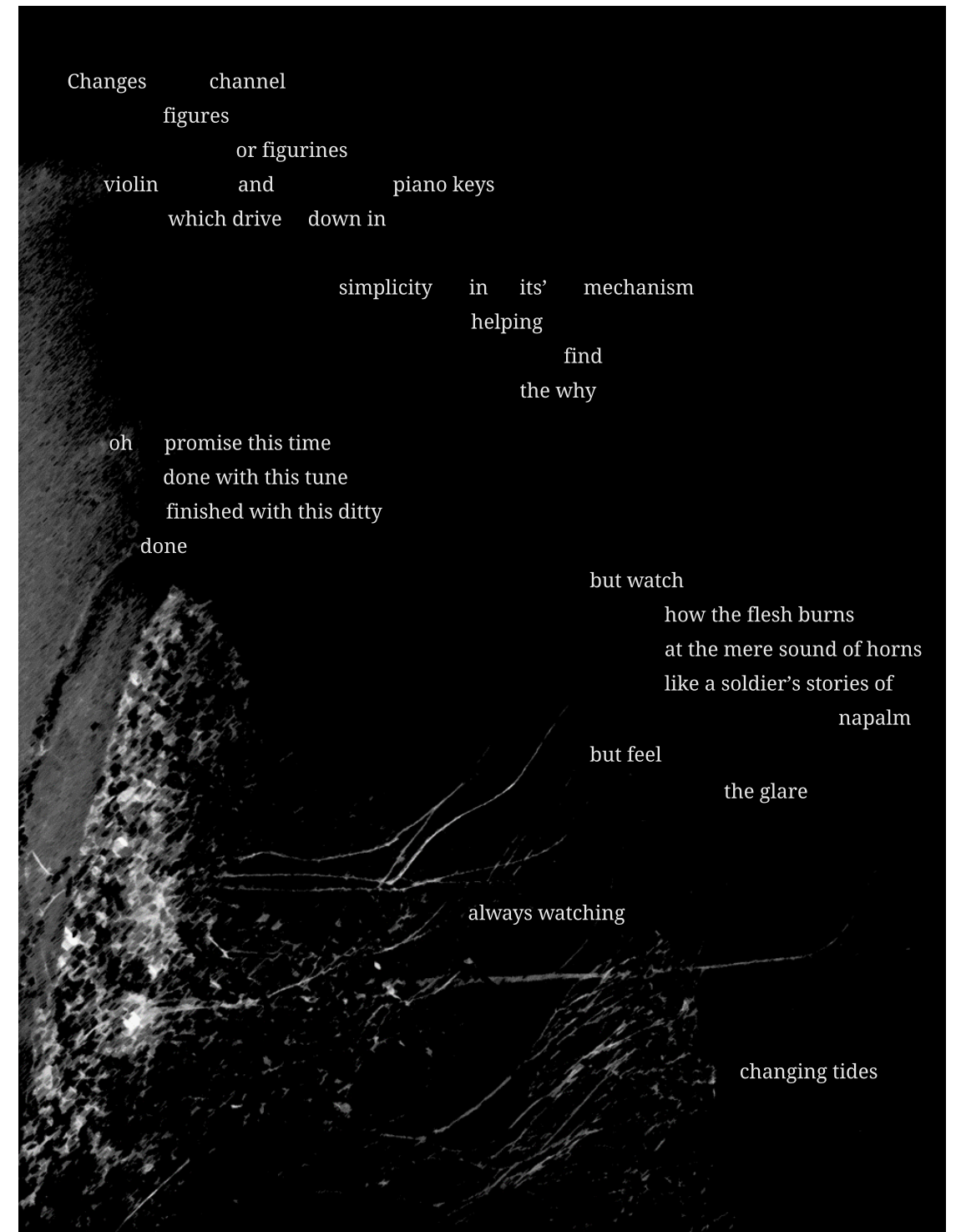
Awake. Later. Face is swollen. Reaches up to assess the beating received. The subtle taste of iron in her mouth. Saliva crust on the side of her cheek. There is the dull undercurrent of pain emanating from her left eye. Tiny fingers press the puffy socket. Lips push together so that no sound seeps out. Her upper torso is very sore, and when she glances down, it is already bruising. Her lungs let go a sigh that drifts out through her nose. She used to be afraid of times like that, and would cry and plead with the father. But last night was different; there was no begging for mercy. She allowed his violence because there would no longer be any pleading with him. It only gave up some of that which later she would call self-respect. The system of how the man's rage worked was clear and predictable. She would have to play the long game. Moving out of the memory of last night's episode, she notices that her mother is asleep on her left side. Still fully clothed with a damp cloth in her hand. The woman must have fallen asleep trying to tend to wounds. Piano fingers graze the large bruise on her mother's neck. Suffering means a great many things.

It is well before sunrise. She could tell this by the dim light pouring in through the window. A crescent moon slithers out from behind half-drunk clouds as the ghost moves downstairs. She descends to the floor with a grace uncharacteristic for such a young person and looks at the Golden [disfigured] Elk for a long time. Finally,

We are the same.

// //

[three]



Three months after the incident with the sapphire eye of the Golden [disfigured] Elk being un-ceremoniously removed, she found herself alone again in the house. The mother explained she had to run to the store for some essential items, and she would be “right back.” The father had, as usual, gone to work. Or wherever he went during the day and night amassing wealth to bring home ridiculous household presents. She kept a safe distance from the father. Whenever he was around, the ghost would dissolve under furniture. Just in case. When the mother left and the house was quiet, she drifted through every room. She knew where she was going, but took her time. Nothing stirred. Nothing was out of place. Except the missing eye. At the step leading down into the living room, Charley held up for a minute. The name ‘living room’ seemed wrong for a space housing this dead thing with gems for eyes.

One, two steps down and inside she was. She gathered her bones and laid them on the floor facing the Golden [disfigured] Elk. Even at her young age, she knew what death was and that the mounted creature on the wall was no longer alive. But she couldn’t shake the sensation that it was healing. When the eye was first removed, the socket flesh was pink, raw, and wet looking. Now several weeks later, it had a caked texture. The way a scab looks, dark and crater-like, on a deep wound. She felt herself falling into a trance with the wall ornament.

There was an abrupt shift in the house and she could sense another body was present. Once again, she slid herself under the putrid orange couch with itchy fabric reaching out to rip at and irritate one’s skin. Familiar shuffling of cloth footsteps came down the hall. *[To return the eye or take the remaining one]* The foot shuffles came closer until the socks came into view, accompanied with labored breathing. It

was the same Him as before. She strained to see with her ears. The intruder stopped moving. Shallow breaths. The smell of mildew escaped from His mouth. A slight sag in the pants, as if the intruder was preparing to sit down. She gathered her breaths. The jolting crank of the garage door beginning to open echoed from the carport attached into the living room. The pants lurched upward, and the socks attached to them scrambled out of the room and back down the hall, from whence they came. ~~did not move~~
She did not move from her hiding space.

Minutes later, the mother walked in the door and called out to her.

Cha’leigh

Honey

I’m home.

[not a sound]

The mother stood on the steps between the hallway and the living room for a long few moments. Even though she could not see her, Charley knew the mother was staring at the [disfigured] Elk. The mother shook off a shudder that crept under her skin and slapped her plastic soled shoes down the hall and into the kitchen.

Once Charley was certain the room was empty, she slid out from the safe space beneath the couch. She did her best to smooth out her shirt as she walked around the couch, and almost into the mother. Both jumped in surprise.

CHA'LIEGH You scared me

The mother's stifled southern accent seemed to spill out. But her inflections were soothing, reassuring. Her voice was the kind that made one certain they had met the woman before.

Were you playin on the deck

I didn't see you when I pulled in.

Charley nodded.

You really shouldn't play outside when no one is home, sweetie. Her mother patted down some of the wispy stray hairs on her daughter's head and straightened her shirt. *It's not that safe. Oh well, no matter.*

Charley nodded.

The mother looked at her daughter for a long minute before turning toward the garage and pulling a rogue strand of her chocolate brown hair and tucked it back into the bun atop her head. She reached her hand back toward her daughter.

Help me with the groceries. I'm makin your favorite for dinner tonight.

The ghost always nodded and did, dutifully, as she was asked.

[four]

where [is] to meet
if meetings [are] to be

secret

under bridges

where filth [and] vomit lie

embers flicker,
there will be no joy in returning [t]here



A hospital that was built next to
A live-in children's center for the mentally ill
which sat next to

A family-owned funeral home

turning nose downward into coat

One could live
their whole life on
this one

block

On the day before her seventh birthday, Charley found herself alone in the house, in the room that was not for living. The clouds from the gathering winter storm outside had darkened the room, but she left the lights off, preferring to sketch in-between the hues of darkness. Cross-legged, hunched over the drawing pad, she used hues of pale yellow to lighten up the browns on her most current likeness of the Golden [disfigured] Elk. the Golden Elk. her Elk. She often sketched the being from one side or the other, rarely exploring the duality it embodied. Royal and scarred alike. Today though, she was drawing her Elk from a head-on, collision-course view. Both drawing and staring into his remaining wildfireinthedarknessthatiscomingforus eye and scarred socket at the same time. She was able to capture details with her tiny hands that seemed impossible for someone her age and size. Had either of the parents found these intricate sketchings, they likely would have realized some of the savant-like talent of their only child earlier on.

She was so focused in touching up a bit of shading over his left ear, that she almost didn't hear one particular basement stair creak. The groan of the step snapped her back into her normal, albeit heightened, level of awareness, causing her to drop everything and rush for cover under the couch. It wasn't until after she was stowed away, that her eyes focused on her pad and pencils. The sudden rush of air from her movement created a small vacuum and three pages floated up into the air. She watched them delicately hover before falling back on top of each other. She felt a pang of frustration for not tucking these items out of view. Her detailed likenesses showed off a re-gaining of her Elk's once potent sense of self. The sense of one's self reverting. A smile played onto her lean lips. *[A returning to/from gold.]*

Her body cringed at the familiar plodding of His feet. The socks and pants came into view, but the socks were a clean, fresh white this time. He hurried forward and then slowed at the assumed sight of the sketchbook open on the floor. Tattooed fingers inched at a snail's pace as they gathered her drawings and brought them out of her view. She could hear Him handling her small, cherished book. The thick pads of fingers touching her pages, leaving some thing dingy behind. He flipped from right to left, backwards, through the sketchpad. The hands settled on the first drawing of the men's backs installing the new living room art, His tattoos, and the original Golden Elk with both of its sapphire eyes. The intruder looked at those first few pages for what felt to her like hours.

The fingers flipped furiously back through, this time left to right, till they arrived at the sketch she was working on today, right up on till the stair screamed out at her to stop. In the space of silence, it dawned on her that with each sketch entry listing both a date and time, He would realize she was present in the room. And had been, every time he had arrived uninvited to the house.

For a couple of eons [minutes], hollowness existed in the dying room. No breaths are exchanged. No movement is made. No senses are challenged. But the air is gathering ^{builds , boils} around the intruder, as His rage builds, boils. The realization of discovery. Without any outward warning, the sketchbook was hurled onto the floor. She could almost hear His fingers ball up into fists, as the socks stormed toward the wall ornament. Similar to the day her Elk was installed, the tornado's churn and the eye of the storm occurred in unison.

Action I:

There is a noise. A disjointed sound the fist makes when it connects to a porcelian vase in-between the fireplace and the couch. Displacing a imitation shrub living in the old, ceramic housing from its half-hidden space. The fakeplant urn ruptures and spills its fakeplant guts across the cottonwood floor.

Action II:

The collision of the television, made at least three decades prior, and faded, off white socks. Pixilated glass is sent out in a wide array, littering the floor.

Now the sock is bloodied.

[Do not breathe.]

Action III:

Three and a half of the windows explode outwardly.

[Realization: The sign out front of the house boasting a TOP-GRADE-QUALITY surveillance system is only a ruse.]

Specks of blood plummet to the floor. Specks of blood spatter the floor.

Part IV:

[also known as

An Interruption of Action]



[He has a voice]

[no discernable accent though]

I KNOW YOU ARE HERE

Action V:

Time is suspended when twowornsockfeet, onewhite and onedeepred, leave the floor. The ghost

cranes her neck upward to see what is happening. Frigid air is pouring in through the broken

windows and wiggling the shards of glass strewn about the floor. The suspension in the air ends.

Glass/coffee/table/in/the/middle/of/the/room is no more.

Slivers of crystal stream out in all directions. Ghost hands reach up to protect eyes. Through the thin fingers, one fragment of glass cuts the skin of the left eyelid, pierces the iris. Charley is no longer a ghost.

A muffled shriek releases from under the couch.

Handstoeyes whatisthatinthere fingersgrabbingthroughfluid getitoutgetitout

Handstoeyes whatisthatinthe fingersgrabbingthroughfluid getitoutgetitout

Handstoeyes whatisthatinthere fingersgrabbingthroughfluid getitoutgetitout

Action VI:

Fists

pulling

hair Fists

through the glass pulling

shards hair embedding

intoskin through the glass

pulled shards embedding

into intoskin Fists

smallchildsbody pulled pulling

into through the glass

hurled shards embedding

with ease smallchildsbody intoskin

into hurled pulled

brick wall surrounding with ease air

into smallchildsbody

the fireplace brick wall surrounding hurled

the fireplace with ease

into

brick wall surrounding

the fireplace

Action VII:

intruder/Clydesdalefeet

over her

tattooed fingers wrap/wrapped/wrapping

around her throat

slamherup

against the mantle

[the sound the back of a head makes when it connects with wood and brick]

Oh to be here - Directly to the left of her Elk

His eyes

Hisbrokendisjointedeyes

YOU THINK YOU COULD OUTSMART ME

Small beads of spit shower

her face

Part VIII:

A voice

that

is-not-hers-and-never-was

comes from

a semi-mashed throat

He would like his eye back

Gasps

throughwindpipesthatareclosingup

can only see through

right

eye

Action IX:

Time slows down

Fingerstightenaroundherthroat

Time slows down

But

nostruggle

accepts

gasps

thisishow

leave

thisearth

gasps

losingbreath

gasps

nexttoherotherhalf

TimeStops

Action X:

[Before she lost consciousness, an image a surprise]

Her frail-framed mother

HERmother

motHER

PROTECT[HER]

removes the handgun

from the hallway closet

aims

pulles the trigger

There is a dull hum

and then

s t i l l n e s s



"Petals" | Jerome Berglund

ASHLI CEAN LANDA is an emerging writer, currently working and living with her cat Mac in the land of cornfields, central Illinois. Her work is inspired by a wide variety of media, from *Dune* to *The Legend of Zelda*, but also by the complex stories we tell ourselves to create identity and purpose. Much of Ashli's work is pulled from her experiences as a queer/bisexual and biracial person.

JEROME BERGLUND graduated from the cinema-television production program at the University of Southern California, and has spent much of his career working in television and photography. His work has been featured prominently in many journals, including gracing the cover of the most recent issue of *pacificREVIEW*. His pictures have further been published and awarded in local papers, and in 2019 he staged an exhibition in the Twin Cities area which included a residency of several months at a local community center. A selection of his black and white fine art photographs was showcased at the Pause Gallery in New York over last Winter's holiday season, and his fashion photography is currently on display at the BG Gallery in Santa Monica.

POETRY

MARE INCOGNITUM

ASHLI LANDA

there aren't supposed to be dead bodies on the moon, but once
we realize they're there, it's hard to stop thinking about them.

or, perhaps it's better to say, we aren't supposed to remember that
there are vengeful gods, arising from red-spun planets, demanding another sacrifice

for the children of their sisters. they won't believe us when we tell them
that they have been buried at sea, slept in polluted, plastic bodies, swallowed

by that special sort of gravity usually reserved for martyrs and masters,
the kind we fancied ourselves before we discovered that time

is a liquid that stipples like rain onto melted, abandoned roofs, flows
along solar currents to the carbonated atmosphere, where it sizzles, meteorlike
into a long shower that sneaks into every pore, pools lukewarm in bedsheets and body.
but how could the cosmonauts be responsible for these consequential clouds?

how could they have heard our wolfish cries once the alarms of their helmets,
left behind in moondust, had honked themselves into exhaustion?

we were never taught to observe the soft white bricks of penumbral chambers,
of great nebular tombs, the pyramids of sparkling wire for our industrial godkings

that now crumble along the seams of the sewer drains and don't pick up night calls.
now that we are at the end, all we are trying to do is ask what they are thinking—

our own thoughts hold too much water and leave our brains to soak. are they
enjoying a last view from the Selenean summit? do they bother to pray for us

on the oblivious lake shores? do they know that the remains of our last great experiment
have been returned to worms meat, patriotic, packed into vignettied soil?

we don't know how everyone else forgot, how they can just *not* notice the
swampy rot of corpses fluttering about the sky, accumulating like ash on the face

of a reinforced window; and we will always be afraid that we're the only ones that
can feel the moon-soaked fingers of a cosmonaut at our forehead, the only ones that

believe in the future they whisper to us in those astral, mummified tongues,
the only ones that can't ignore the celestial cemetery stacked above our heads.

we have read the palms of the dead in the stars and this is all they can give us.
a long-stale warning, imbued with the atemporal power

of the consecrated and forsaken astronauts on the moon
who tried to remind us of what we once knew

of what we will come to know.



"Fire On Ground" | Anton Darius

Originally from Seoul, South Korea, **JANE** published a 400-page novel, *Fallen*, with Creative Writing for Children's Society on Amazon Kindle in 2014. Her short story *Broken* has been featured in *STORGY* magazine in 2018, and her personal essay, "Umma, How You Break My Heart," was published in *Cherry Tree Literary Journal Issue V* in 2019. A flash fiction series, "Ten Bad Feelings," has been featured in *Cutbank Literary Magazine* in 2020. Part of her poetry series to support the Black Lives Matter movement has also been featured in the *We Don't Break, We Burn* anthology with *Mindwell Poetry*. After receiving her BA in Literary Arts and History of Art and Architecture at Brown University, she completed her master's degree in English at St. Peters College, Oxford.

FICTION

SMALL SPELLS

JANE KIM

I.

In real life she was a witch, but these days she was having strange dreams. One of those nights she was called a bitch three times, once by herself; then the friend she missed came back to life and kissed her knees tender, and she cried before her arms grew limp and empty, and she remembered that if she was trying to let go she was holding on, still. She fell from her broomstick and she was not sure if this had happened in real life or in one of her strange dreams, because she had that feeling of her guts soaring upwards in her cold torso that she only got when she tumbled from up high, a giddy fright—or frightful giddiness, if she gently, innocently, and very intentionally let her hands slip from the handle that would keep her from falling. Then she had to remind herself that she was in fact a witch so that the shock of the fall wouldn't hit her too hard, and her eyes grew soft before they opened—or closed?—spotting a daisy flower blooming in the cracks of the asphalt street, and we are not sure if she died in her dreams or lived in her life, but she smiled from her bed either before she cried herself to sleep or after she woke up in a puddle of tear-soaked pillows.

II.

She knew words had physical weight, but only because she had tried swallowing them. She was getting better, they no longer threatened to fight their way out her eyes in tears instead, but she could feel their weight gather like stones in the wolf's stomach in Little Red Riding Hood.

She wonders if this is punishment for deception—because, wasn't not-saying a form of lying too?—after all, the wolf had been a trickster too. She wonders when she will drown.

III.

i)

There are spells she had believed she had mastered.

Like letting go.

She'd had a lot of practice. On a day she was feeling particularly arrogant she might even say, more than most. Practice leaving things, places, people, indefinitely, turning sad, moving on, turning back, and giving up, turning sad again, and letting go. Why was it that attachment has always been cheap and easy? So quick, she'd never have realized, she'd had no warning, and they refused to part. Sometimes she didn't even expected to have to let them go, but she did, and she watched them leave before she could, and there is no point running backwards, like there is no point gripping a knife.

Letting go. If believing and practice didn't work their spell—

Let go. Like cutting out pieces of her own flesh. Scattering them in place of moonstones to find her way back home, as she follow an unknown trail, not knowing where she's headed, not knowing if she'd be able to return, not knowing, just hoping.

But flesh festers and it hurts where she's cut it. It hurts until she's not sure it's been worth

carving them out, maybe the gingerbread house will be nothing grand, maybe she will find nothing worth the things she left behind, maybe it will really only be an oven and a witch eager to eat her half alive, maybe she shouldn't have left at all.

ii) (Or, Take 2)

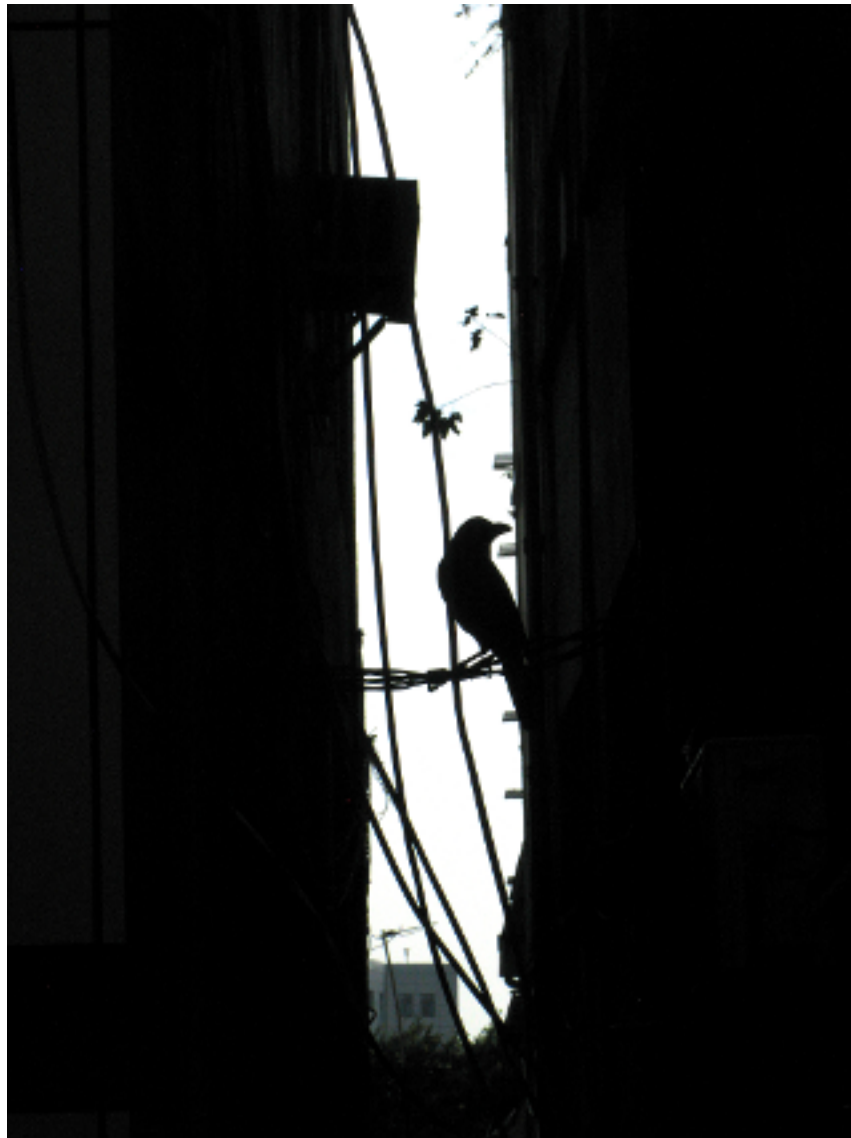
And this time she learns maybe she hadn't let them go, any of them, not really. She turns each invisible stone in her hand, feeling each smooth gleam and rough edge, turn them too often, grip them too tight, let them cut into her palms till there is blood in the crease of her fingers and tears leaking from her eyes. Yes. It is beautiful and it hurts like hell, and she missed everything she'd lost. Don't pretend you didn't know.

As much as she longs for it, as much as she misses it till her battered heart beats like a broken radio, she knows turning back will promise nothing. Has any of your homes been home? Has everyone home loved you so? Have you not met strangers who held you better than the things you tried to let go, have you not learned there are things too beautiful to have missed, even if it cost you a limb.

She'd thought she'd been letting go.

They'd only been cutting deeper. She never realized.

Or maybe they are wounds she neglected until they festered into something worse, far worse, and they'll always hurt in ways she didn't expect, at times she didn't expect. Cuts she'd taken, she thinks of Shylock, you can't carve out flesh without shedding blood. Her rough bare feet, she's lost or given away her childhood shoes at some point she doesn't remember, now she is in red slippers heading onwards into an unknown forest trail and her spell is wearing out, she hasn't let go and maybe she never will, and she is heading onwards, the last of her small spells.



"Crow in Alley " | Roger Camp

HAILEY MCALLISTER-BRAISER is a tall, quiet individual who will always find the animal to talk to at a party. Hailey holds a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and has work featured in *Ligeia Magazine*. She lives with her lover and their cranky parrot in Salem, Massachusetts.

ROGER CAMP is the author of three photography books including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight*, Thames & Hudson, 2002 and *Heat*, Charta, Milano, 2008. His work has appeared on the covers of numerous journals including *The New England Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Vassar Review* and *Lumina*. His work is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC. More of his work may be seen on Luminous-Lint.com.

FICTION

THE GARDEN APARTMENTS, NUMBER 27

HAILEY MCALLISTER-BRASIER

Sweat pooled in the small of Eve's back while Adam finished inside her. Her back and skull to the hardwood floor, the bobbing of their bodies gave her a headache. Grunting, Adam lifted himself off of her, allowing Eve to fully fill her lungs. There was the kind of desperation that suggested she'd gone longer than four and a half minutes without full access to air. She laid there on the ground while he started to shower.

Eve looked to her right at the little corner of houseplants. Pothos and snake plants and philodendrons and ferns. All the shades of green leaves casting shadows on the white walls. It was a private corner. She stood up and shuffled into the bathroom, hand cupped between her legs to catch any of the dripping wet.

Steam rose from above the shower curtain while Eve sat on the toilet. She wasn't sure why she was supposed to pee after they fucked. The landlord had just slid a note under their door telling her that's what she should do.

When Adam came out of the shower, Eve was looking at herself in the bathroom mirror. It was a plain mirror, without a frame around it and with the four little plastic corners that held it to the wall. Standing behind her, Adam wrapped his hand around

Eve's body and cupped her breast.

"You're exactly what I wanted." He kissed her ear and went to the bedroom, sliding his nakedness between the emerald sheets.

Eve looked at herself for a moment before joining him.

They had a routine in the apartment. Each morning when they awoke, Eve would make them toast and coffee, they would shower together, then Adam would excuse himself to his study for a few hours while Eve tended to their houseplants. At the end of the day, Eve would lie down on her back or get on all fours, depending on Adam's mood.

And they were happy.

Eve wasn't sure exactly how long she'd lived there. The days and weeks all became one extended thing when they're so repetitive. Adam was here first, she knew that, but she didn't know how long before her he was there. She didn't like to think back to when she arrived, it was painful. She saw all red as she was ripped from his left side and the ivory of his rib bone stretched and carved into the person she was now. And then, while still covered in blood and gore and still screaming, Adam handed her a copy of the lease.

"Someone just moved out pretty suddenly so I really need you to sign this."

Blood dripped down her face and into her mouth, she couldn't wipe it away quickly enough. She took the papers, her hands staining red on each page she turned. It was a pretty standard lease. No pets, no permanent renovations, please call this number if you have an urgent maintenance request. The Garden Apartments, Number 27, Independence, Missouri. A basic lease. She scribbled her name at the bottom of the page, below Adam's and below a thick black line from a marker.

Their routine was established quickly. Adam showed Eve what it was like to live in an apartment and she adjusted. Adjusted from what, she wasn't sure. There was nothing before she arrived in the apartment. It felt right most days so she certainly couldn't complain. She liked caring for plants and Adam was good to her. He had his work going through encyclopedias and organizing the text to match the pictures they were supposed to go with. Not by any means a glamorous job, but a job nonetheless. At dinner, sometimes he would tell her about the strange creatures in the pages and what they were called. He was always so proud of his work, so enthusiastic, that he usually forgot to ask her about the plants she tended to. It was understandable, really, Eve tended the same corner of

plants each day and Adam saw pages and pages of brand new creatures in his encyclopedias. A too yellow leaf on a dracaena really couldn't compare.

She took her time daily looking through each potted plant, relished in the time it took to dip her fingers into the soil to see if any needed watering and cutting the dying leaves and trimming the herbs to season dinner. Up next to the window and wandering through the plants it almost felt like she was somewhere bigger than the apartment. Sometimes Eve lined the plants up along the windowsill. If she stood at just the right distance and squinted, she almost couldn't see the glass or tell the difference between the trees that rose up from the ground outside and the plants she tended.

On this particular day, Eve was deep into the corner of her plants when she noticed something on the wallpaper. It was about waist level, all the tall plants in the back had covered it. A jagged line ran vertical, narrow at the top and bottom and wider in the middle, dark within. A tear.

She had never seen anything like it.

The pristine smoothness of the wall was so violently interrupted. Eve felt compelled to get closer, to touch it. To make room, Eve pushed some of the plant pots to either side and knelt down. She dragged her long finger slowly and gently, so gently, down from the top and swirled softly around the middle. Holding her breath, Eve brought her face closer, close enough to smell the dust and the drywall and the old, dried wallpaper paste.

Inside the tear, on the other side of the wall, there was a flash of gold.

Eve gasped and rolled back, palms smacking the ground. She shot up and pushed the pots back into their places covering the tear, hoping maybe it would seal itself up and go away as though it had never existed. And Eve went about her day, willing herself to not push the leaves of her fiddle leaf fig just enough to look inside again.

At dinner, Adam told Eve about the strange undersea creatures he was sorting through today, told her all about the fish that had lights hanging from their heads and how they would use those lights to trick their food into coming close enough to be eaten without much trouble at all. Then Adam asked, "Are the herbs still growing nicely?"

It wasn't an unusual question, just another part of their routine. Adam stirred his soup to cool it quicker. He had asked this same question the day before, he must have just forgotten what Eve had said about her herbs. Eve nodded and pressed her tongue to the

roof of her mouth. She looked across the table, across the bread and soup into Adam's eyes, dark eyes, and tried tasting the words before saying them. They tasted sweet and sour, rolling around on either side of the muscle of her tongue and sifting between her teeth. This fearful thing, this discovery, was not the bread and soup they split together.

"The herbs are growing great." Eve took another bite of the rye.

This secret was hers.

The rest of dinner passed in silence. That night Eve dreamt of gold.

The next morning, there was a note slid under the door for Adam. It was from the landlord.

Pages 175-224.

Adam folded the paper and stuck it in his back pocket, sighing. "That's almost twice as many as I've been doing lately." Adam had been spending long hours in his office, going page by page and pasting in the text for each animal that neither Adam nor Eve had seen outside of their illustrations.

"Do you want any help?"

"No, it's my job. The landlord gave it to me." Adam rubbed his left temple. "I don't think it's something you can even do, Eve."

This was probably true, Eve had never given a label to anything, had never named anything before, not even herself. Adam had named her. That was how she knew what to sign on the lease he handed her when she arrived.

Eve filled the water canister in the kitchen sink while waiting for the *click* of the office lock. Then Eve went to her plants, tenderly touching each leaf and dirtying her hands in the soil of each pot. She let the dirt stain her fingers and wedge beneath her fingernails. Eve was moving much slower than usual today. Finally, in the back corner, she took a deep breath and pushed aside the dark green leaves.

The tear was still there.

Eve knelt down in the crowded corner of plants, leaves brushing up against her and caressing her bare arms. She put her face to the tear to look deep within. She saw gold.

Eve couldn't breathe. The gold flickered. Then she heard a sound, low and throaty and breathing and not completely foreign to Eve.

"Who are you?"

The gold was back in the tear, still enough for Eve to see it in more than just flashes. It

was a round shape that had a dark outer ring fading into pale yellow and a circle of black again. An eye.

Eve gaped, she couldn't pull herself away.

"Who are you?" it asked again.

She swallowed. "My name is Eve."

"Oh, is that right?" The skin around the eye tightened, narrowing the round eye into a slit. Eve wasn't sure if this was from delight or fury. "It certainly didn't take them long for that."

Eve bit her lip. She couldn't run through her mind fast enough to find words. Instead she stared at the golden eye, taking in every detail, every line dashing through the iris and memorizing the perfect white that surrounded it. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Eve asked, "Who are you?"

The eye narrowed again but this time the voice had bells attached, amused. "I'm the woman who used to live in number 27."

Eve couldn't breathe.

"You should finish with your plants. We'll talk tomorrow." And just like that, the gold was gone from the tear in the wall.

Eve found herself lingering for longer than she should have. There was a warmth in her throat as Eve considered the prospect of talking tomorrow, how she could arrive prepared and could have questions. But she had no idea what she was even supposed to ask. There were too many questions that arose all at once, Eve had no idea which to pluck first.

Eve did not tell Adam about the tear in the wall and Adam did not tell Eve about the encyclopedia pages he sorted through. Their routine carried on. While they fucked that night, Eve couldn't take her eyes off the scar on Adam's left side. It was red and angry. Narrow on either end, wider in the middle.

Coffee the next morning was more bitter than usual. Eve sipped slowly, trying to find questions that made her heart plummet at even the thought of hearing the answers. Maybe the golden eye would just tell her, maybe the landlord would slide a note under the door, maybe Adam would tell her and she wouldn't even have to ask. The queasy rolling in her stomach was new, something she'd never experienced before. Knowing the woman who lived here before was on the other side of the wall gave the word "before" a kind of

power and terror that no one word should ever have the right to.

Why didn't she live here anymore?

Adam left for his office and Eve immediately went to the corner of plants, pushing them aside and clearing room for herself. The golden eye was there waiting.

"I missed you." The voice had bells again.

Eve furrowed her brow. "But you don't know me."

"So?" The tear in the wall was slightly larger than it was yesterday. Eve could see dark locks of hair spilling around the face that belonged to the eye. In glimpses, she could see the dark eyebrow, straight and like it was in a permanent state of mischief. Eve didn't answer the question.

"So, Eve, tell me about your life in the Garden Apartments, number 27."

Eve bit her lip, pausing to take a deep breath through her nose before she began. She told the golden eye that she woke up each day and ate breakfast with Adam, that she took care of the plants and stared out the window for hours waiting for Adam to get out of his office, that she would make dinner and he would come into the kitchen and grab her ass, that they would fuck each night because he wanted her, and that she was happy, really, truly, don't-worry-about-a-thing happy.

The golden eye closed. "So things haven't changed at all."

Eve could feel the increasing *thud, thud, thud* of her heart and the back of her neck becoming hot, so hot, why is everything so hot? The bile in her belly rose up in her throat and Eve choked it back down. Before Eve could say anything, before she could beg to know what that was supposed to mean, the golden eye said, "He's going to be finishing up soon. We'll talk tomorrow."

And just like the day before, she was gone.

Eve forced her breath to steady, in and out, in and out, and stood up, shuffling the potted plants back to their proper spots. It wasn't even ten minutes later that Adam came out of the study.

Eve was quiet during dinner and while they fucked that night. Adam didn't ask why.

Each morning, one after the other, Eve tried to will Adam more quickly into his study so she could talk to the tear in the wall. Each morning, as soon as he was gone, she rushed to the corner of plants to find the tear that got a little bigger each day. The golden eye and

Eve would talk and as each day passed became more accustomed to each other. Really, it was mostly Eve being more accustomed to the golden eye. The golden eye was always in control of conversation.

At first, the golden eye would tell Eve so little that Eve had to rip truth from her like rotting teeth from a mouth. She would try to piece together the few fragments the golden eye gave her. The golden eye told Eve that she arrived at the apartment at the same time as Adam. She had lost track of how long she'd lived there, probably years but there's no way to know for sure. The golden eye and Adam signed the lease at the same time, it was the landlord who handed the lease to them. With each detail she learned, Eve could feel the hairs all over her body standing on end, feel her palms become clammy, feel red, red as the day she was made alive, flooding her skull behind her eyes.

Each day after talking to the golden eye, Eve would measure Adam's movement and words. As it turned out, Adam didn't know where the pots and pans were kept in the kitchen cabinets. He never used them. Time went on and Eve spent so much time talking into the tear in the wall that she forgot which days she watered her plants and which days she changed the soil. Adam either didn't notice or didn't care to ask about the browning plants in the corner.

"It gets so dull, doesn't it?" The tear was large enough to see both eyes now, two golden eyes glowing in the light coming in from the window. "Doing the same thing day after day with him? I couldn't stand it in the end."

At dinner that night Adam told Eve that the bread had burnt crust, it really detracted from the soup, couldn't she just pay more attention next time?

"I'm so damn busy, Eve," he sighed. "I work so hard and I just want to have a nice meal in the evening." The bread was darkened brown in his hands, the soft inside just a little darker than it should have been. Adam held it out so she could see her mistake, as if to smear her nose in it like she had taken a piss in the carpet. Across the table, Eve imagined that he must have once said the same things to the golden eyes.

In the morning, Eve woke up before Adam as she always did. On the kitchen counter, there was a basket of fruits. Apples, green Granny Smiths. There was a note from the landlord attached.

Do not eat. Decorative.*

Eve followed the asterisk to the tiny print at the bottom of the note.

**This clause has been added to the lease.*

Eve tried to show him over coffee but Adam didn't take much interest in this note, he was more concerned about the other note:

Pages 346-425. "This is going to take forever." Adam's head was in his hands, elbows propping him up onto the kitchen counter. Eve washed their empty mugs and put them on the dish rack to dry, fingertips lingering on the mossy colored handles. She let the words slide around on her tongue, tasting them before saying them.

"I want..."

But Adam was already in his office.

Eve stood in the kitchen, counting the dishes sitting in the rack, counting the doors of the cabinets, counting the apples in the fruit basket, counting her breaths, one, two, three, four...

It was reflexive by this point, she realized as she walked over to the corner of plants. Eve's time each day was spent talking to the golden eyes. Those golden eyes that would tell her horror stories about how she and Adam would eat soup and bread each night, soup and bread that the golden eyes had made. Eve would listen with terror about how she would shower each morning with him, how they would wash each other's backs. The golden eyes would glint with glee as they told Eve about sliding in the soft green bed sheets with Adam at night. And the bile would rise in her throat when Eve heard about how Adam would fuck the woman who lived here before in all the same ways and in all the same places. The image of Adam behind and on top of another woman was burned behind Eve's eyes every time she closed them to sleep, with every blink.

The golden eyes once had everything Eve held dear now.

"Why did you leave?"

For the first time, the two golden eyes that peaked through the tear in the wall flickered and blinked rapidly, suddenly the golden eyes were warm with uncertainty instead of cold with cruelty. Through the tear, finally big enough to see the golden eyes' entire face, Eve wanted to reach out and trace the sharp angles of her cheekbones, the softness of her full lips, the darkness of her hair that perfectly framed her face. The woman with the golden eyes swallowed. "I wanted...more. I wanted things to be different.

He said no. I left." The golden eyes were now looking somewhere past Eve, looking at nothing. "I wanted more than he would give me." The reason felt disappointingly matter of fact. Disappointingly familiar.

The silence between them was heavy. Eve forced herself to look at the houseplants she'd been neglectful of for so long, all the browning leaves, the parched cracked soil.

There were no farewells when they parted that day. Eve just silently stood up and when she looked back to the tear there were no golden eyes on the other side. The tomato soup that night was made without thought, the dishes were done without consideration.

That night, Eve took Adam's hand and pulled him into the bedroom. They were sitting on the bed, Eve gently tracing her tongue along his lips, her hands to the side of his face and against his chest. Adam moved his hands slowly to her waist, to the small of her back, to her breasts.

So far, this was more or less routine. Until it wasn't.

Eve ever so slightly, ever so gently, began to push Adam down, push his back to the mattress. Still she continued kissing him, kept kissing him as she unbuttoned his ivy shirt and pulled up her sage dress. Adam's mouth became stiffer, he began to give up his tongue less, his hands firmer and ensnaring rather than holding Eve's body. Eve didn't stop. She was unbuttoning his jeans and sliding them down and then slowly, slowly, she was on top of him.

Eve had to have this one thing that the woman who lived here before never did.

Adam was still, his dark eyes flashing up at Eve. Then he flipped them both over, his hands pinning down Eve's wrists, a return to their routine. Eve didn't say anything, hardly breathed, just looked at Adam while he grabbed the headboard above her with one hand to leverage his weight. Down on his left side, Eve couldn't help but stare at the red scar of her violent birth.

When it was over, they went to bed without another word to each other.

The following morning, Eve was awake first. She did not wait for Adam to shower. She did not make breakfast or coffee. Eve took her water canister over to the plants and tenderly checked each one, giving them all the attention and water they had been missing over the course of weeks. Eve put on a clover colored dress and brought the basket of apples to the table where she sat. Waiting. It wasn't due to indecision. No, Eve was waiting

purely for the theatrics.

She heard Adam shuffling out of bed, she saw him in the doorway, she could see his eyebrows knit together, she could see his mouth opening to ask what was going on. Before he could, Eve pulled an apple from the basket and took a bite. The styrofoam inside squeaked as it scraped against her teeth.

Adam gasped and then was yelling. “What are you doing? That’s violating the lease, damn it!”

In her mind, Eve could see Adam yelling at the woman with the golden eyes for asking for more, could see Adam criticizing her bread and soup, could see his indifference to her houseplants, could see him leaving her alone while he worked in the study, could see him fucking her in the exact same ways he fucked Eve.

Eve took another bite, the layer of green plastic on the outside of the Granny Smith cracking all over from the pressure of her rage. “I will continue this life with you. I will do everything for you as I’ve always done. But I will not do it here.” She held the apple, now scarred by her teeth like she had scarred Adam’s torso, in her outstretched hand towards him. There was hesitation.

But he took it. And so they left.

And they never changed.

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