

From the Farther Trees



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From the Farther Trees

A Magazine of Fantasy

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Wrapped in Brown Paper

K.Blair

K.Blair (she/they) is a proud member of London Queer Writers and helps to run and host their LGBTQ+ spoken word night, SPEAK =. In June 2017, she took part in creating “A Poem For London” at Spread the Word’s Young People’s Laureate for London Poetry Lab, and in 2019 was part of Apples and Snakes’ project, “The Writing Room.” They have been published in *Spoken Word London’s Anti-Hate Anthology*, *The Valley Press Anthology of Prose Poetry*, the *Dear Damsels* website, and *Opia* magazine. Their favourite band is The Mountain Goats, their favourite ice cream flavour is mint choc chip, and her husband didn’t really die in mysterious circumstances, that’s just the way she dresses. Twitter: @WhattheBlair. Instagram: @urban_barbarian.

“Wrapped in Brown Paper” © 2021 by K.Blair.

Hello, are you looking for something? You look a little lost. I’m sure I can help if you show me the address. Oh, I know exactly where that is. Shall I show you? Come along.

Tucked between the optician’s, the one with the sign shaped like a monocle, and the launderette that always smells faintly of almonds is the faded door to the Laceflower Bookshop. One might think it’s the entrance to a flat, what with the lack of sign and the buzzer with its rain-run labels. None of them are easy to read but if you know about the bookshop then you know which one to press.

I’ve always hated the stairs up to the shop. They appear uneven. Unstable. I feel as if I’m the olive in a martini glass of an eccentric heiress telling a funny story mostly through hand gestures. Reaching the top is an achievement, at least for me. There’s a guarantee I’ll slip at some point, fail to properly place my foot on the step and teeter backwards, grasping for the bannister as anxiety floods my veins and I imagine myself sprawled at the bottom, neck broken and blood pooling around me like a shattered bottle of wine on a supermarket floor.

Press the buzzer please, this one right here.

The layout of the Laceflower is entirely dependent on who's behind the counter when you arrive, although some features remain the same. The pale pink datura hanging from the ceiling, the bishop's weed growing in the cracks around the windows, the painted gold ram skull behind the counter. The shop is owned and overseen by a married couple, whose real names I've never known as I have never asked, and they have never offered. I have given them each a nickname, although I would never address them in that way. We are familiar but not friends.

Oh, thank you for holding the door, how chivalrous.

I met Arsenic first. I named them this as I have only ever seen them in Paris green dresses, all trimmed lace and bustle, delicate bows and pearl buttons, the colour so vibrant I fear the pigment might really be poisonous. As far as I have seen, their hair is never relaxed, only ever carefully styled into braids or bantu knots or hidden beneath an emerald headwrap.

If it is their turn to mind the merchandise, the shelves are arranged counterclockwise, spiralling in on themselves and if Arsenic likes the look of you, they will provide you with string so that you may find your way out again. Arsenic favours books about obscene poetic forms, the art of puppetry and brutalist architecture; you'll have to navigate your way through those sections first before you find what you need.

Need, never want.

Arsenic believes in the bare minimum of guidance, the slight incline of their head to point you in the right direction but to find the right book requires you to search on your own. It is far more satisfying that way.

Watch your step, this one in the middle likes to play tricks.

Arsenic's partner I nicknamed Guillotine because of the red ribbon always tied around her throat. The ribbon is velvet, carefully tied. A delicate reminder of suffering. Guillotine is tall. She towers over me; in her presence I feel like a blade of grass being inspected by a deer. Sometimes when I arrive, she'll be speaking to someone on the lemon yellow 1930's telephone, whom she refers to as 'sœur'. Her voice reminds me of pressing a boot against freshly fallen snow.



If Guillotine is not on the phone, then she is willing to guide you through the disordered stacks. She loves the frustration caused by disorder, how nothing is where it should be. There are books about photosynthesis next to books about interpretive dance; all piled on mismatched stacks that could topple over at any time and send their pages spinning over the wine-dark wooden floor. Guillotine likes novelty buttons, the more obscure and

fanciful the better. Such a gift will make her guidance helpful rather than deliberately misleading.

The reason I am so forceful about need is that books are tricky things. We think we want them to inspire certain emotions in us, that we must read great works of literature to ascend above others and know the truth about life and death and the meandering path we take between the two. But the reality of the matter is that want, and need are not the same thing so you must listen to Arsenic and Guillotine if either warns you away from a book. Owning a bookshop lends itself to expertise on the matter, they know how to read people, they know the book you're supposed to find but that does not mean that temptation is present along the way. I thought I was ready, I thought I could handle what was waiting to be revealed inside the paper and ink.

I distinctly remember the slam of Arsenic's hand on the satin purple cover, how it reverberated through the shelves.

"Not this one," they said. But still I tugged it from beneath their hand, clutched it close to my chest.

"I'll be fine."

I wasn't.

There are no words to describe the shapeless horror that dwelled in the hollow of my chest after I had finished reading but I will try, for your sake. Do you know the process for preparing ortolans? They're a type of bird; tiny, fragile things. They are drowned in brandy, roasted and served whole. It is custom to place a napkin or veil over your head before eating in order to truly appreciate the aroma. Bitter Armagnac, sweet figs and the hot scent of melting fat. But in reality, the shrouds are to hide your cruelty from the eyes of God as you devour the creature in one mouthful.

In this scenario I am the ortolan. Devoured less for flavour and more for the transcendental experience of suffering.

So, heed my words and theirs, take the book you need and not the book you want.

Here we are, we've made it to the top. A small cause for celebration. Why don't you go in first?

I think Arsenic and Guillotine are together today, which means there will be no shelves, nor towers of novels to navigate around. Instead there will be a polished wooden side table, the kind you might sit at to play a game of chess. Arsenic and Guillotine will be lounging on the window seats, watching you with cat-like disinterest, as you peruse the three packages waiting for you. The books are wrapped in brown paper, tied with string and you'll be expected to pick one. Make sure to pick the right one. You might argue that it is difficult to pick the right one when you cannot

see the covers or read the blurbs but bear in mind that you made a choice when you rang the bell.

Choices have consequences; you cannot play these kinds of games and expect to get away unscathed. Not all bookshop staff are benevolent.

Well, in you go. Go on, don't be shy. Haven't I given you enough advice? It's time to decide.

One, two or three?

Oh. That one. An interesting choice but a good one, nonetheless. Don't worry about payment this time, this one's on me though you best make sure you start carrying around old coins and pink lemon sherbets, although strawberry liquorice will do in a pinch.

I'd hurry along if I were you, that novel seems impatient to be read. You can come back to the Laceflower whenever you like now that you know where to find it. Oh me, well, I've still got some browsing to do.

Make sure to close the door behind you on your way out.

I'm sure I'll see you again soon.

The Weird Sisters, Hand in Hand

Anisha Kaul

Anisha Kaul is a poet with Masters in English Literature. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in *Dwelling Literary*, *The Minison Project*, *Beir Bua Journal*, *Small Leaf Press*, *Analogies & Allegories Literary Magazine*, and *Visual Verse*, among others. You can reach out to her on twitter @anishakaul9.

“The Weird Sisters, Hand in Hand” © 2021 by Anisha Kaul.

Weird in appearance and deed
Accompanied by silent familiars
Three charming sisters
Through sealed lips murmur
Unheard rhyming couplets
Thunder and lightning.
At an unnamed heath
They brew a cauldron of prophecies
Of which worthy Macbeth sips
Though murder still unpronounced
The air of Scotland grows foul, and
Stranger daggers hang in mid air
In paradoxical speech they unveil
Weaving crossroads of fate and choice
Riders of wind and wings
In thin mist, they vanish

Marnie and Celine

Mallory Hobson

Hailing from the rainy Pacific Northwest, Mallory Hobson's work has appeared in such venues as *Hex Magazine*, the *Salal Review*, *Seshat*, and *Dark Lane Anthology Volume 3*. Her poem "City Dweller" was nominated for Best of the Net 2018. She is the Editor-in-Chief of Washington State University Vancouver's *Salmon Creek Journal*.

"Marnie and Celine" © 2021 by Mallory Hobson.

She has always been part of the ocean—roiling, wild, drowning. She is part of the moonlight, too: pale and ethereal, hair like seaweed, glittering under a wreath of distant stars. She dances in the waves under the full moon and slips into the dark waters beneath the new moon, one with the cool silver fish and the dusky sand. In the water, she no longer has skin. No longer even a She, for that matter; no longer a presence at all. Only one with the sea.

During the daylight, when the sun's sharp gaze falls over the scrub grass and the sheep, the little sandpipers and the twists of driftwood, she becomes a form again and clambers into the old shipwreck. No longer even a ship, but a skeletal hull mostly buried beneath the sand, it's a perfect place to rest. Even nature spirits slumber; at least, the smaller ones do. In the sunken cabin, protected by the salted wood and rusted shadows, she dreams of the freedom of night.

By day, too, come the humans. She is older than any mortal thing, and she's seen them all before, over and again. The fisherman, with their hand-knit sweaters and thick trousers, are a common sight. Sometimes, when she cannot sleep, she drifts beneath their soft grey boats in the early morning, directing the fish towards or away from their lines and nets as her whimsy decrees.

She knows the children as well: they poke and prowl and shout around the shipwreck, although very rarely are any brave enough to clamber inside, and none are so bold to go deep enough to find her dwelling there.

She doesn't begrudge them this noise. She respects the cheerful chaos

of them all, yelling at the waves, collecting shells and shiny pebbles. They dance as she dances—albeit far less gracefully.

She does not know the women. Not well, anyway. The mothers occasionally follow their children to the shore, toting babies too little to toddle through the surf themselves, but they are distant figures. They wear long dresses, knit shawls, sturdy brown shoes. She is always barefoot.

She cannot imagine wearing a shawl.



The night is never quiet. The ocean continues its roaring song, beating like drums against the sand. The wind howls or whispers—sometimes both—and the nightbirds shiver and sing. The lights from the village glitter, closer than the pale stars above but far less tasteful to her.

She is quiet. She has no one to speak to. She dances and leaps to the sea's ceaseless rhythm, and dives in and out of the waves, silent as the fish around her.

The dawn breaks quietly as well, but soon enough comes the raucous gulls, the laughing men. She waits in the sea, or in the shadowed hull; her form is not for them to see. Soon the sun will be overhead, and the children will tumble in with the afternoon; then the fishermen will come back as the sun drifts low.

Perhaps her mistake was in assuming herself to always be the watcher.

Perhaps she has simply grown so comfortable in this endless routine of cycling moon and wheeling sun, days and nights of waves and sand, that she thought herself untouchable.

Regardless of the reason: with the earliest streaks of dawn coloring the grey sky above, she does not notice the woman until it is far too late to hide.

The woman is equally startled. Wide brown eyes: amber eyes, earthen eyes. A shawl—a dusty-colored thing, all looping knots and patterns—and a skirt. The woman's hair is a muted red, brown in the dull light, bobbed below her ears, wind-tossed.

She is naked. She always is. No shoes, no shawl. No short red hair, just a dark tangle that never dries enough to reveal its true color. She does, however, have the same shocked expression. She is not sure she has ever felt so suddenly, horribly exposed. She doesn't need to breathe, not really, but somehow her breath is catching in her chest.

Finally, the woman speaks. "Do you live here? In the shipwreck?"

She doesn't reply. She simply launches herself in a desperate, fluid motion away from the wreck and across the sand, and in three long strides,

disappears into the sea.



She doesn't emerge from the water for a long while. At first it's novel, watching the sun scatter across the waves from underneath: a vision she hasn't seen in a long, long while. But soon enough the light loses its novelty; she misses the moon and the shipwreck.

Finally, in the dark of the new moon, she climbs carefully out of the ocean, across the sand, into the sunken hull. What she considers to be her cabin is untouched: it's really too deep within the creaking structure for even curious humans to easily find.

By the opening of the wreckage, however, in a basket covered with a woven-plaid shawl, is a quilt made in shades of blue and grey.

There's also a bowl of milk, slightly sandy now, but kept cool by the cold sea air. An offering for house spirits: the kind that keep hearths warm and babies safe, not wild nature spirits.

But she supposes the thought is kind enough.

She takes the quilt into the deepest cabin, curls up on top of it, and sleeps.

She wakes with the moonrise, and waits, this time, in the shipwreck. She doesn't dance in the surf, or dive through the waves, only sits, perched on a salt-crusted piece of the ancient ship.

The woman doesn't appear until dawn. The woman is wearing a different skirt, she notices, but the same shawl.

"Hello," the woman says. The woman's eyes are very round again—surprised to find her here, she supposes. Surprised it wasn't a dream. She has not spoken with any human in a long, long time. Do they still believe in fairytales, in folklore? Some superstitions must have been passed down, for the woman did bring the bowl of milk.

But not passed down very *well*, since she brought a bowl of *milk*, after all.

She doesn't say anything, just watches and waits.

"Are you..." the woman's voice is soft. Cautious, but not fearful. "You're a selkie? Fae? You live in the shipwreck?"

"Not selkie." Her own voice is odd. A little rough, a little low. She has not spoken English for a long time, and her accent is older than that of the woman's. "Fae, I suppose."

Now it is the woman's turn for silence—this time in awe, it seems.

"Thank you." She has not forgotten politeness. "The quilt."

"You're welcome," the woman replies. "I just... I thought the shipwreck

looked cold.”

“It is,” she says simply.

“What’s your name?” the woman asks. “I’m Marnie.”

“Marnie.” She pauses. She doesn’t really have a name —not one she can remember, anyway. “I’m...” she tries again. “I’m... my own self. The water. The shore, here.”

Marnie shivers, glancing at the horizon. The sun, though growing brighter, does little to ward off the chill in the air. “No name?”

“No name.”

“That’s alright.” Marnie pauses, then asks: “How long have you lived out here?”

“Longer than you,” is the only answer she can give.



She knows the short conversation between her and the woman will not be the end of it. Humans are curious. They dig and dig until they find what they’re looking for, be it clams or gold or lost cabins in sunken wreckage. She steels herself for the others, for Marnie to lead them with picks and shovels to pull up the rusted planks, to demand favors and wishes and fairy wine. It’s what humans do, and she readies herself to dive back into the waves and disappear until they all forget once more.

Instead, the next morning, there is another basket. This one has scones, and a small pillow embroidered with hills of heather over the sea, stuffed with soft wool.

She isn’t sure what to make of this. Not the quilt, nor the pillow, nor the visits that continue, quietly, without picks or shovels or demands for three careful wishes. They meet as the sun rises, in a dawn-place that’s not quite day and not quite night.

She has not had a friend in a long, long time. Or rather: she was her own friend, only ever holding her own hand as she fell into water. So it is curious, even thrilling, to suddenly have this entire new person by her side. Marnie is enthralled by everything: by the small gritty pearls she can find with ease, with the dances she teaches Marnie in the moonlit surf, by the way she can become water or woman, creature or spirit.

She finds herself, likewise, intrigued by Marnie. The woman brings her blankets and baubles, even a shawl, for the shipwreck: she does not wear the shawl, but keeps it draped across the bed-nest she’s made from Marnie’s mortal quilts. They eat sandwiches on blankets swept over the crabgrass, and Marnie tells her of the town, of things she has never dreamed of. While she was happy with her aimless life, humans were not:

they moved, it seems, ever onward. Automobiles! Telegrams, telephones! Radios! Airplanes! Marnie tells her of ships so unlike the little wooden fishing boats they have here, she almost doesn't believe the woman.

"May I give you a name?" Marnie asks one morning.

She's taken aback, stunned into temporary silence. She has never been offered this before, and she's not sure how to feel.

"What name?" she finally asks.

"Celine," Marnie says. "Like the moon, and the sea."

"Yes," Celine says. "I would like that."



While Celine remains the same, she realizes, one day, that Marnie does not. She knows, of course, that humans age and grow, but she was not prepared to *care* about them doing so.

"You're older," she says to Marnie, and she can't keep the concern from coloring her tone. She studies Marnie's face: the faintest of lines are gathered in the corners of her eyes.

"Yes," Marnie laughs, "and I plan on being even more so, someday."

And then, before she knows it, Marnie marries: a fisherman, of course, because they are *all* fishermen here, or fathers or wives or cousins of fishermen. A man with the same faint, faint lines in his eyes.

"I'd like you to meet him," Marnie says one almost-morning, just before the sun has risen. "I really think you would like him. And I know he would like you."

Celine dips one pale foot into a tidepool, stirring up chaos for the tiny crabs and urchins within. "I will love him because you love him. But I will not meet him."

"Why not?" Marnie's hair is longer now, curling at the ends, and the wind tosses it into her face.

"You are more than enough humanity for me," Celine finally says, and Marnie nods her understanding, unhappy but accepting.

Marnie is calm and kind, Celine knows.

But she also knows that most are not like Marnie.

She spends the day not in the cozy confines of the wreckage, but under the waves, rising with the tides and the fishing boats. She finds the boat that belongs to Marnie's lover, and quietly coaxes the fish into his nets.

She is not a particularly strong spirit—she can nudge the sea life and dance with the waves, but she cannot control the ocean—but she does have some small sway, and when rain threatens to fall over the men, she whispers it away.

•

There is a new routine, now. Celine slumbers in the evenings, for the nights are for gamboling carefree beneath the starlight, and the dawn is for seeing Marnie—and the first half of the day, now, is not for sleeping.

Instead, she watches over Marnie's Fred, pushing away what small gales she can, helping him with his catches. Marnie can tell she does, and is openly grateful; Celine shrugs it off, feeling oddly shy about this new trick, this helpfulness.

This new routine is broken, occasionally, with new guests. Celine intends to stand steadfast in her old rule (only Marnie, no Fred or any other humans), but finds herself making allowances.

First is Georgie, with a little white outfit hand-knit by Marnie's mother.

Then, when Georgie's crumpled pink face has finally grown into something rather more rosy and loud, another small exception by the name of Henry is brought before Celine.

"He is so ugly, and so small," Celine marvels politely, as Marnie beams proudly. Georgie giggles from behind his mother's skirts, making small grabbing gestures until Celine takes his hand to find shells and bits of sea-glass under the cloudy sky.

Marnie leaves, taking Georgie and Henry with her, and the clouds continue to build, darker and more violent as the day grows. The storm sweeps in, dark and thundering, and there is nothing Celine can do about it. It tosses her the same as it tosses the boats, and though she drags five men to shore, none of them are the right man.

"I'm sorry," is all Celine can say when Marnie comes next. "I'm so sorry. I tried, Marnie, I tried. I'm sorry..."

She did not love the fisherman, but for her friend's sake, she mourns.

•

Marnie keeps growing older, and Celine doesn't know how to stop it. The red in her hair is fading, and she no longer brings the babies.

"You have no sense of time," Marnie teases. "They're not even babies anymore. George is twenty-eight."

"Henry, too?" Celine asks.

"Oh, Celine." Marnie just laughs, and Celine touches the grey in her fading red hair.

"It's the same color as the sea," Marnie says cheerfully. "My mother greyed early, too. I thought it was pretty when I was little. I still do now."

"It is pretty," Celine says. "I wish it wasn't there."

“Oh, Celine,” Marnie says again.

They talk for an hour more—and then Marnie gathers herself to leave, brushing off sand and fixing her coat as Celine clammers into the dark of the wreck.

And then she wakes, suddenly, during the brightest part of the day.

“Hello?” The voice that woke her echoes down the creaking ship, through the empty galley, the sandy stairs. “Celine? Hello?”

It is not a voice she knows. Admittedly, she only knows a few: Marnie, of course, and the children that play, and the fishermen that talk. But that does not change the matter. In fact, it only makes it more alarming.

Cautiously, she rises from the pile of old quilts—so many she no longer feels the hard wood beneath them all—and moves towards the top of the wreckage. There, standing in the opening, is a young man: barely out of childhood, gawky and gangly, with Marnie’s wide eyes and a lot of reddish hair sticking out awkwardly beneath a baseball cap. She waits in the shadows, and while he notices the movement, he doesn’t see her.

“Hello?” He calls nervously. “Celine? My name is Jonathan. My grandmother sent me to find you.”

“Why do you know my name?” She asks, and he finds her. He stares at first, looking shocked: then he flushes red and looks away, at the ground, the roof, anywhere but at Celine’s naked self, before finally settling back on her face.

“I—” he stammers, “you’re—Celine? You’re real. You—fae—you’re not— Here, take my coat,” and before he’s finished speaking, he’s taken off his jacket and is handing it to her, eyes fixed firmly and politely above her neck. She finds clothes distasteful, but is vaguely touched by the gesture, so she wraps it around her shoulders, holding it more or less closed in the front. This seems to help the boy, at least partially, and he’s able to say once again: “You’re Celine?”

“I am Celine.”

“My nan, Marnie, sent me to find you.”

“Marnie?” This startles Celine. It shouldn’t—Marnie was the only one who knew her name, the one who gave her the name, so of course this boy must be from Marnie—but it does. “Why doesn’t she come herself?”

“She can’t,” the boy, Jonathan, replies. The shock is fading from his expression, replaced by... sadness, maybe. Mourning. “She wants to ask if you’ll come and see her. She can’t make it down here anymore, and...” He pauses, and his next words are reluctant. Quiet. “She says she doesn’t know how much longer she’ll be here.”

“Be here?” Celine interrupts. “Where is she going?”

Jonathan seems bewildered by the question, then sad again, and Celine

feels dizzy, suddenly, as she realizes what he means. The strange, overwhelming fear that gripped her when she first saw Marnie—the sudden tight stillness of the world, the urge to run and hide and get away—washes over her again, but all she does is grip the side of the shipwreck.

How long has it been since Marnie last came? A little while, yes. A week? Not a month. A month? Not a year. Five years? She was always so bad at time, so lost in the small daily cycles of sun and moon and tides and sand that the *bigger* routines escaped her.

“She just wants to see you,” Jonathan says softly. “She sent me to find you. She can’t leave her bed, now.”

“She’s in town?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll see her,” is all Celine can manage, and then she turns, launching herself in a desperate motion away from the shipwreck. In three fluid strides, she’s in the ocean, no longer Celine but part of the deep and unfeeling sea.

She has never been to the town before. She rises from the ocean in the middle of the night, when the full moon overhead is at its peak, bouquets of stars around it illuminating the sand. She picks up Jonathan’s jacket from the sand, sodden and shapeless now, and begins to walk. Across the shore, until she realizes the boy is still there, huddled and shivering against the shipwreck. Asleep, until she touches his shoulder.

“You’re not gone,” Celine says.

“Marnie said you might run away,” Jonathan explains, blinking the sleep from his eyes. “She asked me to wait. At least for a bit.”

“I’m sorry about your coat,” Celine says, and he shrugs. Kind and calm, she thinks, like Marnie. “Can you please take me to your nan?”

Jonathan leads her up the low hill dotted with scrub-grass, up the little road used by the fishermen. She can see the docks at the end of it, the boats clustered together like sleeping animals, and the town at the other. The houses look like standing stones, whitewashed and glowing beneath the full moon’s light, and she leaves damp footprints behind as she follows Jonathan down the grey-paved roads.

He takes her to a house with an unruly garden overflowing with color, and a plethora of - automobiles? they must be, with wheels and shiny paint - huddled in front of it. Quietly, he unlocks the door, leading her past a room with a small piano and framed photographs and a couple sleeping in the middle of it all.

“My mom and dad,” Jonathan whispers. “They had to use the pull-out couch, and I’m on a cot. We drove in from the city, because my Uncle Henry said...” he trails off, then restarts and says simply, “Nan’s in her

room.”

She follows him down a short, dark hall, leaving watery footprints behind her. Jonathan stands uncertainly at the doorway, but Celine moves to the bedside in a few quick steps.

“Marnie?” She whispers. The woman in bed is old, so old, hair as white as surf, tiny in a nest of quilts and blankets. “Marnie?”

Marnie opens her eyes, dazed at first; then she smiles. “Celine! I knew Jonathan would find you.”

Celine is appalled. Marnie’s voice is still low, and calm, and kind—but it creaks like a ship in a storm, and the faint lines around her eyes have splintered into a hundred sags and cracks and wrinkles all across her face.

“Marnie, when did this happen?” is all she can manage to say.

Marnie laughs, which turns into a cough. “Oh, Celine.”

“I didn’t know,” Celine says. “Not so fast.”

“You have terrible timekeeping skills,” Marnie says, smiling. “Thank you for coming.”

“I’ve never been in town before.”

“I know. I appreciate you coming here. Truly I do.”

“What can I do?” Celine asks. “How can I stop this?”

“You can’t,” Marnie says. “I just...wanted to see you.”

In her mind, in the tightness of her chest, Celine can see the storm again. Pulling all those men to shore, but never the right one.

She can’t pull Marnie to shore. Not now, not ever.

All she can do is sit besides her, perched on the bed, and hold her hand until the dawn.



Jonathan sits in the rocking chair; he wakes to sunlight falling through the window.

“Nan?” he asks, and gets no reply. Celine is gone—if she was ever there. He’s half convinced it was all a dream, his imagination taking his grandmother’s bizarre request and weaving it into his slumber. A water spirit living in the old shipwreck! His grandmother did love folklore, that was for sure.

“Nan?” Jonathan asks again, rising. His grandmother doesn’t move. There’s a dark spot on the bed besides her —water, he realizes, reaching to touch it. Freezing cold, and smelling of salt and seaweed. His grandmother is cold too, when he brushes her hand, and a sense of dread overtakes him.

“Mom!” he shouts. “Dad! Mom! Nan?”

No matter how much he shakes her shoulder, his grandmother doesn’t

wake up.



She has always been part of the ocean—roiling, wild, dark and dancing. She is part of the moonlight, too: pale and ethereal, glittering under a wreath of distant stars.

But now she is part of the land as well; the sand beneath her feet, the white-washed town on the low hill. She doesn't talk to humans—Marnie was more than enough humanity for her. But she visits their graves, Marnie and Fred, leaving trails of damp footprints and arrangements of shells and pearls behind her. She watches after Jonathan, too, now. She refuses to lose any more time, and so she watches carefully, precisely, from afar as he grows into a man and moves into Marnie's old house. He has children eventually, a little girl with reddish hair and a boy with wide eyes, and then she watches them as they play in the surf, directing glittering fish their way, warding off the undertow.

She doesn't show her face anymore. But she watches; and when she curls up in the quilts at night, she dreams of herself and Marnie, together in the hours just before dawn.

3 Poems for Keys

Timi Sanni

Timi Sanni is a writer, editor, and Muslim literature advocate. A NF2W scholar in poetry and fiction, his work appears or is forthcoming in *Olongo Africa*, *Palette*, *Down River Road*, *Drinking Gourd Magazine*, *X-R-A-Y Literary*, *Cypress Press* and others. He is a reader for *CRAFT Literary* and *Liminal Transit Review* and an editor at *Kalopsia Literary*.

He is the winner of the Fitrah Review Short Story Prize 2020. He was also nominated for the 2020 Young Writers and Creatives Award for Short Story/Flash Fiction. Find him on twitter @timisanni.

“3 Poems for Keys” © 2021 by Timi Sanni.

I

A key is a temptation. There are doors that have been opened. There are doors that will remain shut forever. There are doors that will open and never be closed. There are doors that will be opened and never close. There are demons behind some of these doors. There are more doors behind every demon. A key is a temptation. A twist, a turn, and you open your soul to an overpowering. Sometimes, curiosity is a question answered by death. Sometimes, the end of a question is the ash of silence. Ask the cat, it knows this tale so well, because nine lives could also mean nine deaths. Once, I found these words engraved on a rock, the letters like the shape of dreams. Once I read something and wished I hadn't. The words burned through my skin like brimstone on the people of *Fil*.

II

I have a fascination for spare keys—the power in knowing that when all else fails, your man will return to find you. He will brandish you, like a legendary sword, and kiss you. One day, he will lose his beloved key and you will be his only hope. These thoughts make loneliness into a golden lustre for a key condemned to dust. But there is a secret in this poem: I am

the man, I am the 'loved key, I am the door that seeks to be opened. Today is the day I lose everything I've ever loved and go looking for myself.

III

Some keys are like questions, crooked into a sickle, opening the mouth of the sky to let down red rain, say as reminiscences of God's love, or say, as a reminder of the first extinction. Yesterday, I went to the lake of Avalon with a key on the end of my reel. Some keys are like fish hooks dangling off a line into the sea's belly to catch the throat of an eluding truth.

Traces of Ten Visitations

Ashley Van Elswyk

Ashley Van Elswyk is a Canadian writer and recent graduate of the MA Creative Writing program at the University of Windsor. When not working on fantasy fiction, she seeks out inspiration while improving her photography on nature walks. She can be found on Twitter @ashvanewrites.

“Traces of Ten Visitations” © 2021 by Ashley Van Elswyk.

I

The trees cast shadows like a crowd of figures. One of these stands out, the silhouette of a woman, still and silent in spite of the wind. You forget, even trees breathe a little, need to stretch their limbs.

Who are you?

Where are you?

Your surveying piques my curiosity, but I hope you're not getting too comfortable. Unfortunately, you've stumbled on a home already haunted, and I can't allow another ghost. So let me find you, dear stranger, or else find me first if you dare. I'll be waiting.

I'll be watching from above, restless in the border of night and morning.

II

Wings flutter-beat under the closed curtains, so fragile, so pale. Miniature clouds hushing the night.

A white film blooms against the glass.

There is no wind here.

I stand behind the curtains and listen while their soft bodies beat, beat against the glass, and the moon beckons from without and they cannot cry. I pity them; they don't know any better, can't possibly understand what halts their flight, why I can't let them free without revealing, trapping, myself.

On the other side, your fingertips leave smudges where you tried to reach through. Opaque impressions of yourself for me to find in the morning. Traces for me to follow.

A failure; a challenge.

Tonight I remain well-hidden, and you'll catch only your reflection across the dust of frightened creatures.

III

Nothing but the barest wisp of smoke remains by the time I arrive. Too late to meet you.

I'm tired of waiting. Today, it's my turn to play the hunter, dear quarry, following your trail through the twigs and crushed leaves crackling underfoot. This rounded clearing you chose is peaceful. Standing in the centre, I'm reminded of an insect trapped in a basket, surrounded on all sides by a soundless wall of woven wood.

Through which crack did you wiggle out? Did we narrowly miss, separated by a single tree? Or was the veil of shadows and branches between us too great to even dream of breaching?

Have you gone very far?

I can't bring myself to be angry, no—I'm more driven than ever. The emptiness of the air thrills me. And I think it thrills you just as fiercely.

There's a little orange left in these coals. I nudge them with the toe of my boot, and they wink up at me from the ash.

Against my better judgement, I smile, and leave without stomping them out.

Are you watching?

Enjoy this brief victory. You've burnt away your trail, for now, and left nothing for me but a memory of smoke, and the dwindling warmth.

IV

You're standing motionless in the corner of my bedroom, a creature of the night, a half-living ghost. It's too easy to catch someone in their sleep.

Harder to wriggle into their dreams, but you've managed before.

Harder to keep up the pursuit with eyes closed and body paralyzed, but I manage tonight.

This is *my* hunting ground, and you're hesitating. You should have brought the nightmares, but you've come empty-handed again. Not ready to end things so soon? Perhaps neither of us are, dear opponent.

In the dark, you might have stepped closer, might have leaned over me

then, shadow falling, tickling my cheek.

Let the dream consume me. If this is reality, I am lost.

When I finally open my eyes, the room is empty.

V

Imprints in the carpet, pressed by sturdy shoes with fine heels. They make lovely tracks to follow, heel-to-toe. Distorted exclamation marks. Each one heightens your presence, a percussion line directing me to you. Louder, closer.

Through one door, out the other—it's quite clear, dear lure, that you want me to follow.

Why?

Footsteps echo and echo ahead. Mine? Or mine and yours, one after the other?

Gone is the nagging urge to stop, stifled along with the chorus in my belly that doubts and wails against wondering.

Around the house I stalk, until the windows blur together and the only difference becomes the light outside them, sunstreams fading into starlight. I've passed through this door already. Still tracking a single set of footprints.

Full circle and spiraling onwards.

My shoes fit into your steps, and leave them unaltered. Am I following or leading? I can't remember who took the first step, whether you or I laid down the first blow.

Who runs from who?

Were you ever here at all? Or are you still watching from afar, hidden somewhere behind the glare of the stars in the windows, snickering while your hunter vainly chases her own shadow?

I press stubbornly on. Pray I'll catch you before the next cycle begins.

VI

Three knocks.

I send a response, a series of soft taps, barely rattling the picture frames. Unlike yours—typical sing-song confidence.

You proudly inhabit the walls, each knock a teasing reminder of how easily you moved in while my back was turned. Crawled and clawed your way into the woodwork, the space between rooms. Into my home.

I'd never have thought to check the walls. You've hidden yourself away cleverly, dear echo. Still out of sight, out of reach—but now, we speak. We

seek each other through the messages we send, and leave ripples in the dust on the wallpaper.

Is it strange to feel myself relaxing around you? Do you enjoy this brief pause in our chase?

Fingertips gently drum. An open-palm slap—BANG! We've brought the house to life. Into the morning, our knuckles tap the walls in sleepless unison, heartbeats directly over each other.

A conversation is so much clearer without the limitation of words.

VII

Over the vanity, the ever-present lavender haze is cut through by something sharper, disrupting the sleepiness of a dawnlit routine.

This new perfume sticks in the back of my throat, sinks into my lungs. I hold my breath to keep it down.

What is this?

I wish you'd tell me, but I'm sure you'd prefer I guess. Guessing promises a chance of victory.

Bitter citrus—blood orange, bergamot?—spills through the air, intoxicating.

You've poisoned my body, my mind, dear housemate. Stolen even the smallest comfort, something I'd forgotten, become too accustomed to. How cunning. I must find a way to return the favour.

More and more, the ghost of your presence fills my home. Across the vanity, the floor, rising to the ceiling and out the door. Across my skin, mingling strange and familiar.

Yet another way we continue to meet without meeting.

A new scent settles in our home, and it isn't unpleasant at all. After a while, I forget it ever wasn't here.

VIII

Inside and out, you keep leaving your mark.

You've torn up my garden of weeds, and rebuilt it with brilliant colours and a labyrinth of yet-unfolded petals. The bees sing over your work.

I need to know—are you only following my trail, continuing our dying hunt? I planted questions, clues for you under the lace flowers. Did you find them in your reconstruction? You've left everything but a clear answer.

Dear, dear companion. Every day we manifest a new language with which to provoke each other. I throw stones, you return petals. You

abandon fire, I leave puddles. Our pursuit transformed, we dance on opposite ends of the world and remain only a single step out of sync. What has our haunting become? I've never felt more alive.

I peel open the petals of a tulip to find your response. Words etched into nature's most delicate canvas, an acknowledgement just for me. Us.

Somewhere in the gardens, I know you're watching. Amid the swaying greenery, your silhouette hovers, always too still.

IX

Dear...

I'm not sure how to name you anymore.

You're with me always: your steps beside mine, your breath over my tongue, your touch on every surface in this home. Day, night, ahead, behind, and all the places in between. You're so close.

Closing in.

You've settled here quite nicely—and so stealthily, how could I have stopped you?

You've overtaken my home. My home.

Is it? What's mine or yours? Who pursues who? This might have been your home all along, and I the ghost haunting it. Whether anywhere in this world is ours or no ones, whether anything but us exists, or if we exist at all—I can't say. Reason is gone, motive is dead.

Maybe we're each alone and desperately reaching for a fleeting reflection of ourselves.

The clock ticks in this hollow place, punctuated by creaks in the walls, and none of this is enough anymore. I know where you are.

I could let you catch me now.

X

We've met in fragments a hundred times over.

Shadows and scents and sounds, footprints and flowers. Dreams, night after night. You and I have shared them all.

Now for the first time, we meet directly face to face, and you are real.

The cold departs—a discarded memory—and warmth sweeps in from every aching corner of the world. We've avoided each other, outrunning advances, kept up the appearance of a hunt long after it turned into a game, then a courtship. Time for something else.

No more taking, no more lost and stolen traces. We've caught each other piece by piece, hoarded them in our pursuits. Acquired enough parts

to reassemble each other.

Two warring poltergeists are brought to peace, and I couldn't be happier for it.

We wrap ourselves in each other's arms and quietly return, recover, our stolen selves. Discard our guises of strangers, predators preying on one another, ghosts haunting the same home.

Dear love—I swear, I could embrace you forever.

Together, we are at rest.

Attack, Decay, Sustain, Release

Sidney Dritz

Sidney Dritz is at an in-between point in life. She finished her three-college tour of America at the University of Southern Maine, and recent poetry and short story credits include *Gone Lawn* and the *Lumiere Review*. She writes about movies and television monthly in the Stream Queens column at @dailydrunkmag. Follow her work as it develops on Twitter at @sidneydritz.

“Attack, Decay, Sustain, Release” © 2021 by Sidney Dritz.

“In sound and music, an envelope describes how a sound changes over time.... The most common kind of envelope generator has four stages: attack, decay, sustain, and release (ADSR).”

—Wikipedia, “Envelope (music)”

We did it in one shot on the way there, and there was really no reason why we shouldn’t have been able to do the same thing on the way back. Ellis hadn’t even taken a driving shift yet, and yes, that was a little bit because he had the kind of hangover that actually made Carey worry that he might need medical attention, but that was that morning, and he’d had hours of driving to sleep it off. We should have been able to do it, is my point. Instead, around 2 a.m., Cass pulled over to the side of the road and said, “Either someone else is taking over or I’m taking a nap here.”

So of course Carey had to go and ask me, “Didn’t you say that your auntie’s place isn’t far from here?” because I *had*, because I’d been so certain that we’d be doing our damndest not to stop for the night (Ellis had a seminar the next afternoon, and wouldn’t come to the festival at all without the promise that we’d get him back in time for class) that saying so hadn’t felt like a risk, and they’d already been looking askance at me for knowing the shortcuts.

“Yes, but auntie’s not expecting us, and the house won’t really, uh, accommodate our group.”

“It’s not like we each need our own guest room or anything,” Cass said, and she wasn’t whining specifically, but there was definitely something a little drawn-out and annoying in her tone. “I’m happy to crash on a couch, or, like, the floor. I just don’t want anyone to drive off the road, and I really don’t want to get murdered sleeping in a car by the side of the road.”

“Yeah, okay, no one wants to get murdered tonight,” I said, and I knew I was stalling, but trying to explain my family to three sleep-deprivation-drunk friendly acquaintances on my way home from an EDM festival at two in the morning sounded pretty much like the definition of hell. “But really, what do you think? That murderers patrol the highways looking for pulled-over cars full of sleeping people? This can’t come up much.”

“Actually, the more realistic danger is either exposure or trying to avoid exposure by turn-ing on the heat and inhaling fumes, or something, I think,” Ellis said around a yawn or three.

“Can you promise me we definitely won’t get murdered?” Cass asked both of us, and Ellis and I exchanged a look—that was fair, we’d both feel pretty stupid if we woke up stabbed. There was a bit more than that, but the long and the short of it was that I was nineteen and still figuring out how to truly shrug off peer pressure, and before I knew it, we were turning down the road to auntie’s place.

We pulled up and the house glowered down at us, hulking and almost organic-looking around the edges, trees and ivy and decay softening all of the right- and obtuse angles some long-ago architect must have envisioned, and I could see what Ellis meant when he asked, “What do you mean, there won’t be room for us, this place is huge?”

Still, “That wasn’t what I said.”

I *said* that the house wouldn’t accommodate us, and I was right, but no one ever believes that until they see it for themselves.



They didn’t like the vines, of course, but no one likes the vines when they first meet them. “I told you we should have stayed in the car,” I told Carey. She squeaked in surprise when the first tendril broke away from the writhing mass encasing the first-floor walls and wrapped around her ankle. “Just kick it,” I told her, and she did, sort of, but it was more of a spasmodic jerk than a real declaration of intent. Those vines are like dogs, they can sense your fear. It was really no wonder that the other vines just

took the movement as a sign of something interesting.

“What is this place, Katie?” Ellis asked, and it must have been the remnants of the hangover that left him sounding like a doomed sidekick, but it still wasn’t sensible, the shake in his voice like that.

“We’re pretty deep into the woods,” I tried to explain, “and the house has been here a long time. I told you we would have been more comfortable in the car.”

There was a thud behind me, a squeak, the sound of Carey kicking out at the six or seven vines which had joined that first pioneer vine twisted around her ankles. We weren’t getting anywhere like this, and the hours in the car, and the late night at the festival the night before, were starting to catch up with me, so I’ll admit, I lost my temper a little at that point. I spun around, bringing the flashlight beam with me, and cut it right across the vines, and my tone was definitely a little agitated when I told them, “Enough. Cut it out or we’ll be back with the clippers in the morning.”

It’s a stupid threat, really; everyone knows that clipping vines doesn’t really do anything besides make them mad. If you want to get anything done for real, you have to go for the roots, and these guys’ roots are deep enough in the foundation to make that more than just an emotion-al impulse project. Still, they skittered back as I watched, and I was tired enough to take that at face-value.

Carey was the loudest about it, so she was the one I was half-paying attention to, and it wasn’t until I heard the muffled thud of Cass’s body hitting the floor that I realized she was having even more trouble than that. I almost yelped when I saw the way the vines were dragging her body through the thick dust across the floor, and into the shadows, but Carey was already screaming, and so was Ellis, and someone needed to be the calm person in the room, so I kept my voice loud but low as I told her, “Stop thrashing. It’s like a finger-trap, the more you move, the tighter it gets.”

“So if I stop moving—” Her voice was quavery, and I knew that if she finished her sentence, she’d say something hopeful and untrue, and I’d have to correct her. Instead, before she got the chance, I agreed like I thought she wasn’t going to finish with *they’ll let me go?*

“Yes,” I told her. “Just breathe,” I told her, and she did, and one moment she was being dragged into the shadows, and the next, she was the shadows. It’s kind of beautiful, if you think about it like that, though most people don’t bother.

There was a pause, and then, “Katie?” Carey asked me. I waited, but there wasn’t a follow-up, just the silence of Carey and Ellis standing still enough that the vines were sure to be tightening their hold.

“Come on,” I told them, and, “We’re almost to the stairs now.”

They still didn’t move, and probably it would have been kinder to try to talk them through to some kind of acceptance, but it was late and we were all exhausted, and it wasn’t like we had a ton of time to kill, so I kept shuffling towards the staircase, pausing every few steps to reach both and grab the creepers wrapped around my legs and yank, pulling them from the place where they connected with the walls to trail behind me. After a moment, a sneaky one wrapped around the handle of the flashlight while I was busy with the ones on my legs, and sent the light source skittering off to get swallowed up into the shadows. I didn’t look back because I knew that the moment I did, they’d have questions, but after a moment I heard the scuffling sound of at least one of them hurrying to follow me, and Carey’s voice calling out, “Wait! Don’t leave us here!”

Ellis, voice pitched low enough that I probably wasn’t supposed to hear it, was saying something about maybe staying in the car after all, which, “A little fucking late for that, Gerald,” I told him over my shoulder, definitely a little regretful. “I told you,” and then, “And I’m telling you now, keep up,” and apparently that’s what it took to send the two of them scrambling up behind me onto the staircase.

We were half-way up by the time Carey finally asked, “But what about Cass? Shouldn’t we go back for her?” and the length of time it took had me almost offended on Cass’s behalf, even if it was handy for me that they were far enough up the stairs behind me that I suspected that venturing back down into those shadows wasn’t going to be on the menu until they were chased away by the dawn.

“She isn’t there anymore,” told them, which was mostly true, and then, “Stay close.”



The second floor is prettier, if you like that kind of thing. I stopped on the landing to go up on my toes and feel around until I found the matchbox stashed up on top of the moulding running above the peeling wallpaper-line at about head-height down the hallway. I lead us down the corridor, stopping to light the candles set into the wall-mounts every few feet, and it didn’t take Ellis long to start questioning me like a little shit.

“Not that the light isn’t, um, nice, but should we really be leaving candles lit?”

“We certainly shouldn’t be blowing them out,” I told him. There are steps that need to be followed, here. “The house won’t burn.”

I chanced a look back in time to catch him looking pointedly at a

hanging strip of wallpaper, and sure, yeah, it wasn't like he didn't have a point, so I specified. "Yeah, technically it could catch, but it won't. Where there's a will there's a won't, or whatever." He should have been paying more attention to his own body than to the house's, but I knew that once he did notice, there wouldn't be any hearing the end of it. I found myself half-hoping he'd keep fretting about the candle-flames.

The thing about the light, though, is that it works for everyone, and behind Ellis, I could see Carey noticing the spores as they started to take hold. I thought about putting a finger to my lips, but there was no way Ellis would have missed that. Instead, I widened my eyes at her and hoped for the best. Her eyes widened back, but I was uncomfortably aware that that could have been nothing but her own fear making itself known.

While I was trying to figure out whether Carey and I could manage an unspoken ex-change, Ellis had started to sway a bit on his feet. "I feel strange," he said which meant that we didn't have much time, so I turned around and started leading us down the hall again. I wasn't looking back, so I missed the moment, but he must have lifted a hand up to his head, and he must have noticed what was growing there, because a few breaths later, as I turned us down a corridor, pointedly not slowing down beside any of the inviting, open, guest-bedroom doors, I heard Ellis yelp. "What the fuck? What is this place, Katie?"

"Obviously it's cursed, Gerald," Carey snapped at Ellis, surprising me. She's soft, Carey, but that doesn't mean she isn't sharp, too. She sees plenty, even if she does let herself get bogged down in feeling sentimental about it.

Ellis is a scientist, though, or a would-be scientist. He thinks he's smarter than curses, and he laughed a little, like he didn't have all the evidence he needed coming up between the strands of his hair.

Most mushrooms aren't poisonous, only about one percent of them, but it's important to keep your definitions straight. Poisonous things will hurt you if you bite into them. Venomous things hurt you when they bite into you. The spores coming to life between Gerald Ellis's hair follicles were a delicate, unlikely pale orange, and none of us were reaching out like we wanted to take a taste.

"What do you know about curses?" I asked Carey, looking behind me past where Ellis was swaying on his feet.

"Not much," she said, and in my peripheral vision he staggered, catching himself with his hand against the wall. "Enough to know that stumbling in unaware like this means there's a chance one of us will be the one to break it. Enough to know my chances are better if I'm not trying to find a solution."

I nodded, and then, because there wasn't much to add to that that wouldn't undermine it, I turned back around, turned my back to the place where the drawn lines of Ellis's face and the faded pattern on the wallpaper were starting to blend and shift in the flickering candlelight. "Come on, then. We're almost at the stairs."



I left the matches on the landing before making my way up to the third floor. Either we wouldn't need them, or we wouldn't want to draw attention to ourselves by bringing light into it. I was right, too; we didn't need it. When I reached the third floor, the moonlight was falling through the window onto the floorboards, but when Carey stepped up into the room behind me, the moonlight started to stretch from the natural angle where it fell from the place where the moon was in the sky onto the floor, and started to stretch itself towards Carey.

"Katie?" she asked me, and her voice was a little shaky, but she didn't sound afraid. Good.

"This way," I told her, like I couldn't see where this was going. I held out my hand for her to walk beside me across the room to the final staircase, and she took it. Step. The light stretched just a bit closer, and step, there it was, at Carey's feet and then, step, it climbed up her calves and step, not only had it reached her abdomen, but it had also started to gleam out from her again, like a reflection, and then step, step, there we were in the middle of the room and Carey was radiating moonlight back at me.

I couldn't feel it; I looked down at the place where our hands were joined and it was shining, too, but coolly, without warmth. Without warmth and then, step, without matter, either. I lifted the hand that had held hers, and the moonbeam rose, too, but I couldn't feel it. Then I dropped my own hand to my side again, but the hand of light stayed risen, rose higher. So that was that, for then— Carey wasn't Carey anymore, she was refracted light through the window into the middle of the room, she was the sound of the wind on the windowpanes, and god knows that can be all-absorbing. I took another-corner-of-my-eye look at her where she hung now, not suspended so much as refracted, nothing about that room was about me anymore, so I took it as my cue to keep walking.

From the third floor, I found the ladder up to the cupola, and climbed into the nest under the eaves, curled up and arranged the ragged-edged vines where they were still clinging to my legs, mostly around my ankles but reaching all the way up to my thighs, until they started to weave their

way back into the nest, reinforcing it. “I’m home, auntie,” I told her, and the house folded closed around me in reply.



When I got back to the car in the morning, they were all there already, waiting for me—what did you think was going to happen to them? None of them were the right one, of course, *I* could have told you that, but auntie always needs to try for herself. They’re like that, aren’t they, aunties? Yes, they *trust* you, but even if you tell them a hundred times that you’ve already looked for something that’s lost under the bed, they’re not going to believe you until they’ve checked for themselves.

“Come on, we’re going to be late, my seminar starts at three,” Ellis said, like the delay wasn’t his fault to begin with.

Cass looked about as different from the way she did when I saw her last as she possibly could; it wasn’t just the glow from under her skin that was gone, it was all the panicked energy from her jaunt through the house, all the fear and uncertainty, and even all the giggling warmth from the concert two days before. In its place, she looked as serene as the weather in the cloud-less sky overhead. It’s not how I think I would have responded to being tested and found wanting, but you never know until you know, do you?

Anyway, I’ve been dating long enough that I guess I can see auntie’s point; I can be sure as anything that someone isn’t the right one, but you never know until you try, right? Everyone is going to be the wrong one, right up until the very last one.

The Shifting Space Between Dreams and Waking

Brittany Warman

Brittany Warman is a faerie folklorist, a sorceress scholar, and a writing witch. She earned her PhD in English and Folklore from The Ohio State University and currently runs and teaches through The Carterhaugh School of Folklore and the Fantastic. Find her on the web at www.brittanywarman.com and www.carterhaughschool.com.

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“The Shifting Space Between Dreams and Waking” © 2012, 2021 by Brittany Warman.

What I want, more than anything, is to tell you a story. I wonder if you can somehow find a way to listen to it. I am not privy to the world inside your head, whatever you may think. My part of the story is over now, I know, but you are still here, still waiting, and I am waiting too... for what I am not sure. A shadow hides in the vines that surround us and it too is waiting.

One hundred years is a long time, longer than I first imagined, but I’m not mad anymore and I want you to know it. I’m sure that’s not what you want to hear, not what you’re waiting for, but it helps me to come here and say it to you. You, little dreamer, you have your entire life ahead of you. I am nearing the end of mine; the shadow is patient while age climbs all over me like an eager child. And you, silent and still beautiful, are just a child too. Even if you don’t want to be, even if you hate me, you always will be a part of me. I suppose there is some happiness to be found in that.



As I sleep, the faerie spins her story. My story.

In this darkness where I wander now, I can see her faintly on the edges of my dreamscape. She is a solitary shape in the distance, sad and searching. She reaches out to me and I want to call out to her, to tell her I'm here and that I understand, but my mouth does not move and my tears do not fall.



Do you know that they call you the sleeping beauty in the tower? No, I suppose you couldn't know that, though I sometimes like to imagine your disembodied spirit floating over the world like a ghost. I picture you listening at doors to stories made up about you. No one has the true story, of course, but what can ever be called a true story anyway? These kinds of stories always become half-truths mixed with outright fantasy. I used to believe in forcing the issue, in finding the truth beneath the layers, but that's all nonsense. I am too old and hardened to believe I will ever be anything more than a villain in this particular tale.



I can only hear the story you tell. You can tell me any story you want to and I promise I will believe it. I have always known who you are. You have been here before, many times, silent as I am silent. Why have you been so unwilling to speak? You are the only one here, the only one left to me. My parents didn't stay; they locked me up and left me to whatever Fate had in store for me. I, the child they wished for more than anything, abandoned with no one but sleeping servants and the bones caught outside in the vines. There was a country to run. But then... then you came. You are the shadow. Sometimes I imagine you can faintly hear the screams inside me, that they draw you to me. I don't know how I could endure this without you.

I know the facts; I don't know the story. Tell me our story.



Have you eaten the red-ripe pomegranate seeds, sleeper? Will you ever really come back to this world? Sometimes I find it hard to believe that my sister, my little sister, really did have the power to change my curse. I was very powerful once, you know. I was never beautiful, not like you, but I was smart, skilled. It gained me little. It is lonely to be so powerful. Where

simple-minded sisters were gladly invited, I was shunned, feared. Surely there is some part of you that can understand my anger, my frustration. What good is ability if it is never wanted, never used? Your arrogant parents, so quick to judge what is good and what is evil... at the time I felt they deserved their punishment. I would show them evil.

I admit, I did not think of you.

When my sister changed the spell I did not even mind. The punishment was essentially the same. They would lose you. Sixteen years I waited, twisted by my self-righteous anger. I laughed as the spinning wheels were burned, laughed when I heard the time had finally come despite their pointless precautions. Still I did not think of you. Your parents moved to a new castle and my sister shut you up in this tower behind twisting rose vines and ordered your servants to join you in sleep. They had no say in the matter, but then, neither did you. For a long time I confess I gloried in my triumph. I had won.



I do not remember my parents very well. Like everything of life they have faded into blurred memories. When I think of them, I think of golden crowns and soft hands. Though you say this sleep is their fault and yours, it is mine as well. I was not as ignorant as they wanted to believe I was. I knew there was a secret; I saw how everyone looked through me, pity in their eyes. I had heard murmurs of fairies and curses. I should have been careful, wary of the unknown. When I saw the strange machine, I should have run but I didn't. It called to me, pulsed in my veins like a heartbeat, cried out to be touched.

At first there was nothing. When I woke, or seemed to wake, it was to this unnatural enchantment where I cannot move or speak though I am aware, I am more aware than I ever was before. The breathing of the servants, the sobs of the boys doomed in the vines for coming to my rescue at the wrong time, you... I am aware of everything around me. Time means nothing. Every moment that passes soon feels like a dream I can barely remember.



Someday, soon it must be, the kiss will come and all this will be over. You will be free of your rose-covered prison and I won't come to see you anymore. That is why I must say this now, why I give my story and my apology to your closed eyes. You may never hear them otherwise, if you

even hear them now. I am so sorry for what I have done to you. I still do not think your parents right, am still hurt and alone, but anger no longer suits me as well as forgiveness. I wish I could know you but my power is nearly gone and I imagine, as you must imagine, the distant sounds of hoof beats as your true prince makes his way to you, ever closer. Eventually evil must lose.



Don't say this, don't leave me. Stay with me, comfort me. Hold me—even if it's only in this shifting space between dreams and waking. Your story is my story. Let me be your spinning wheel, your daughter, your beloved curse. What am I do to with a prince who kisses me?

I don't even remember what it's like to be alive.

Perhaps even now I am only dreaming.

So You Want to Fly

Lynne Sargent

Lynne Sargent is a writer, aerialist, and philosophy Ph.D student currently studying at the University of Waterloo. Their work has appeared in venues such as *Augur Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Plenitude*, and more. It has also been nominated for Rhysling and Aurora Awards. Their first collection, *A Refuge of Tales*, is out now from Renaissance Press. To find out more, reach out to them on Twitter @SamLynneS or for a complete bibliography visit them at scribbledshadows.wordpress.com.

“So You Want to Fly” © 2021 by Lynne Sargent.

The first step to flying is
shaking off the belief
that it cannot be done,

or at least,
that it can't be done
by you.

You must already want the rush
the breeze across the starved expanse
of your skin, the question mark
in your stomach.

The second step is of course, the leap
of faith, of faith that must be
placed not in physics,
nor even in the wind itself

but in your bones—

not in the hope that they will be hollow

and so you will be light enough

but rather in the fact
that they have been strong enough
to hold you up your whole life
and that they will not fail you
now.

Reflections on a Loaf of Rye

Shelly Jones

Shelly Jones is an Associate Professor of English at a small college in the Catskills, where she teaches classes on mythology, folklore, and writing. Her speculative work can be found in *Podcastle*, *The Future Fire*, and elsewhere.

“Reflections on a Loaf of Rye” © 2021 by Shelly Jones.

I sing to the children across a field of lacy white flowers, harvesting caraway in my apron: “Pockets full of caraway, ovens full of rye. Knead and eat your cares away, until it’s time to die.”

They look at me disdainfully, sluggishly yank a handful of weeds, hold them out to me. “That’s not caraway,” I say, inspecting the half-dead stalks. The girl shrugs, drops them to the ground while the boy watches, a finger picking at his ear. “Don’t you want to help me make bread when we get home?” I ask, hoping the promise of a crisp loaf will tantalize their taste buds, tame their tempers.

“We don’t like bread,” comes a defiant voice. “We like sweets!” They flee over the hill, leaving me to finish the harvesting alone. They do like their sweets, I think, remembering how many times I have pulled them from the bakery window in town, their hot breath fogging up the glass, obscuring the treasures within: confections, doughs, icings, delights their mother knew how to bake. I follow their lilting laughter through the fields until we reach home.



“Mother always baked us sweets,” the girl bemoans, looking at the dark oats on the table.

“You’ll have to teach me how,” I say, pulling out a wooden bowl.

“That’s not how it works,” the boy pipes up. “You’re supposed to teach

us!” He swipes an errant finger through the flour, shoves it in his mouth, and coughs a dry puff into the air.

“Well no one ever taught me how to make sweets. All I can bake is bread. Wouldn’t you like a nice rye loaf?” They roll their eyes and rush out of the hut, leaving a trail of dusty footprints across my clean floor. I knead the dough, the heel of my hand stretching and pressing into the sticky paste until it smoothes into a silky ball. Satisfied, I let it rise, knowing the wait is worth the promise of the dough.



She comes to me in a dream, a crown of spun sugar, a milky gauze covering her face. She casts her hands over the children, asleep on the floor in the straw. It is then I see the glint of metal on her finger, a ring more precious than the tin that pinches me. She smells of yeast, of dead leaves, of chocolate, and of blood.

“Mine,” a voice whispers in my head, claggy and deep. “Let them come to me.”



The children balk at my bread. They stare at the thin slices on their plates, a sliver of butter smeared across. They poke at it, as if testing the prove, examining my work. “It smells funny,” says the girl, nose crinkling.

“That’s the caraway,” I reply, chewing my own slice carefully, hoping they will mime me. “Remember when we picked those flowers in the field near the crossroads? I used them to spice the bread.”

“We’re eating flowers?” the boy asks, disgust coating his tongue.

“Mama used to make us flowers from marzipan. Do you know what that is?” The girl asks, staring at me.

I swallow and shake my head. The rye loaf squats on the table between us, sad and misshapen. Their father says nothing.

“It’s delicious. It’s made of almonds.”

“And sugar,” her brother offers.

“And she’d carve the most lovely shapes for us - flowers and vines and cherries that we’d wear tucked behind our ears like jewelry.” She smoothes her hair, primps and preens.

“You can do that with real cherries too. We’ll pick some next summer. Maybe you can help me make jam.”

The girl slumps back in her chair, legs swinging beneath the table. “It’s not the same.”

It is only then I realize how much she reminds me of my sister. I imagine her foot trampling on the loaf as if it were a stepping stone in a river - the loaf crumpling, crumbling beneath the weight of her. I cannot bear it. I remove the rye from the table, wrap it carefully in a tea cloth. Outside, they cannot see my tears as I unpin the laundry, fold it until it is too dark to see what I am doing. When I come back, the children are asleep and I am grateful for the silence.



“I could take a position in town,” I whisper to him. “I can mend or clean. Perhaps the bakery needs a good bread maker.”

“The town is too far to go to each day and return each night,” he rationalizes. It is a long way - too far to walk, and he needs the horse to carry wood from the forest. “We could sell the children. The boy would make a good sweep or stableboy; the girl could learn to cook.”

“Sell the children?” I ask, a knot swelling in my stomach. I glance at their sleeping forms, tawny hair askew. “They are your children, but to sell them...” I think back to the dream, the metal ring that matches his. “She wants them,” I manage.

“Who?” he asks with a yawn.

“Your wife. She came to me in a dream. She wants the children to come live with her.”

“My wife is dead.”

“She came to me, spoke to me. She is in the forest. We’ll send the children to her. If she is not there, if it’s all a lie, they’ll return to us - and we’ll start anew.”

He is silent for so long, I fear he has fallen asleep before hearing my plan. I am about to give up, to roll over, when I hear him sigh. “I’ll take them to the forest in the morning.”

The knot unravels. I sleep dreamlessly, wake rested.



In the morning, I pin mint to their coats for warmth, tuck a sprig of rosemary in their pockets for protection. Wrapping a fresh loaf in a cloth, I hand it to the girl, who accepts it begrudgingly. For a long time I watch them from the doorway, the boy trailing behind her as they wind their way towards the woods.

Crystal Hearts and Compasses

Andy K. Tytler

Originally from New York, Andy K. Tytler has visited, lived, or worked on every continent except Antarctica, including serving two years in the Peace Corps. Tytler writes primarily speculative fiction but has also assisted the research on documentaries and presented papers on multimodality in education, incorporating creativity into STEM classrooms, and writing and coding hypertext poetry. Most recently, Tytler completed a doctorate in creative writing at the University of Glasgow. Not to be confused with the Victorian aeronaut of the same name, you can read more about Tytler's exploits at @NotTheAeronaut.

“Crystal Hearts and Compasses” © 2021 by Andy K. Tytler.

The needle of the compass swung round to point at the hands of Vinon's pocket watch, which wound methodically backwards. She hadn't expected to find the Fate's bridge so soon. Or at all.

She slipped both watch and compass into the inside pocket of her wool-lined leather jacket and peered through the mist at the small arch of stone bridging the cold midnight stream.

Bright orange lilies glimmered in the full light of the blue moon, and a scarlet pennant, affixed to the stone parapet, twitched in the breeze. At the highest point of the arch, an old woman sat fishing in the stream. She was dressed in layers of dark blue, her eyes each a bright white lamp shining out into the darkness.

Stepping out onto the paving stones, Vinon walked to the middle and sat down beside the woman, the red flag rolling over lazily behind her. Her own scarlet hair, long and tied back from her face, whispered across the back of her neck. Vinon shivered. What she had thought was a fishing pole was actually a long silver needle, its pale, translucent thread trailing in the swift current of the stream, glittering along its length like a spider's gossamer soaked with dew. It touched the water at the edge of the moon's reflection. Mists crept along the banks of the creek, obscuring the far side.

Without turning her pearlescent eyes on Vinon, the old woman spoke.

“It’s a bold creature that seeks out my bridge, sits down beside me, and asks a favour.”

Vinon untied the small leather pouch at her waist and set it on the stones beside the woman. She hadn’t wanted to sacrifice something so precious, but if she and her comrades were going to get Rithif free of her crystal prison, drastic measures needed to be taken.

“Lightning dust,” Vinon said.

The old woman, still holding the long silver needle in her left hand, reached across herself to pick up the pouch with her right. She gave it a shake, producing pale blue sparks and a few crackles from within. She nodded, and tucked it into a fold of fabric.

“What if I wanted a soul?” the old woman mused.

“Which soul do you want?”

“What if I wanted your soul?”

“When do you want it?”

The old woman turned then, the light in her eyes hinting at her amusement. She turned back to her stream.

“I do not want your soul. I would take a sacrificial lamb, if you have one.”

“So long as you mean the type with four legs.”

The old woman chuckled. “Clever, clever. I’ll take the four-legged type, yes.”

Vinon took out the cloth-wrapped slices of roast lamb, cold now, and placed these next to the woman. They also disappeared into the folds of her clothes.

“You are both bold and well prepared.”

“I do not visit your bridge lightly,” Vinon said. “Will you grant my favour?”

For answer, the old woman took the thread of her needle in hand and wound it around the long metal dart, drawing with it the reflection of the moon from the water. When the orb was hanging suspended just below the lip of the bridge, Vinon stood and bowed, thanking the old woman. She kept her face expressionless, so as not to show her relief, or her fear. Her pulse pounded in her throat, making the blood rush in her ears.

“You have until the moon wanes.” The old woman chuckled again. “Thank you for the lamb.”

Vinon bowed again and left, hunching her shoulders into the warmth of her jacket. When she glanced back, the old woman had dissolved into a confetti of dark blue paper, which swirled away on the wind.



“You succeeded, I see,” Oinopon said, indicating the night sky with her chin.

Oinopon and Vinon were of a height, both tall, but while Oinopon had the corded muscles of a lifelong fighter, Vinon was athletic in a lanky way. Vinon’s other comrade, Aminif, was only of middling height and had the broad shoulders and back of one trained in archery, although she preferred her rifle when she could get bullets, preferably crystal. Given the last decade’s scarcity of both lead and cordite, and the shutdown in trade with the Crystalfolk, Aminif’s rifle passed most of its time wrapped up in her bedroll. Their first paid job had been to accompany the delivery of linotype slugs to a printer’s office, and Aminif had made the small lead ingot they’d been paid with last for two years.

“Was the lightning dust enough?” Aminif asked.

Vinon shook her head. “She wanted the lamb.”

Vinon’s comrades shivered, and Aminif stamped her feet into the cold, muddy earth, staring at her boots as a way to hide the fear in her expression. Oinopon stared up at the moonless sky, concerned. Vinon motioned them back through the brush and onto the road.

“We can talk just as easily while we walk.”

Where the moon had shone was now a black shadow, dark red spots of light arcing around its rim and crackling across its surface. The reason the Fate of the Stone Bridge had agreed to even think about accepting Vinon’s offerings in exchange for hiding the moon was because she and her friends were attempting to return the heart stolen from the Stone Bridge’s older sister. Vinon had taken the job three years ago and felt its weight ever since, taking other jobs in the meantime, searching all the while for the Fate’s heart, first stolen several centuries before. Vinon never expected that finally finding it would send out a wave of magic so powerful it would summon the Crystalfolk to investigate. It was her fault they’d taken Rithif.

“How long do we have?” Oinopon asked, glancing over her shoulder at the black circle.

“Until the end of the full moon.”

“Six days,” Aminif said. “That’s not so long as it seems.”

Aminif’s short, tight curls of dark purple hair blended in with the shadows of night, but Oinopon’s were shoulder length and bright white, so that when she took off the black scarf she wrapped around her head and shoulders to cover it, the glossy strands stood out on the road even with the magic-blackened moon. Vinon knew it meant Oinopon was nervous. She always fussed with her scarf when she was nervous.

Oinopon rewrapped it with a practised ease, speaking through the

opaque fabric.

“Are we staying the night, or are we marching?”

“Marching,” Vinon said, and Aminif rolled her eyes. Aminif was always telling Vinon she was far too serious for her own good. Vinon was always responding that Aminif doled out advice too readily.

Oinopon settled her scarf and sighed, taking out a crust of bread and a hunk of soft yellow cheese.

“Warmer than sleeping in the hedgerow, I suppose.”

Vinon and her two friends emerged from the thinning edges of the forest into a crescent-moon orchard, each tree’s sickle-shaped fruit dripping phosphorescent golden juice, attracting a host of winking fireflies eager to feast on the sugars.

They walked without speaking for several hours, each woman preparing herself for the trip through the Forbidden Gate to the Crystalfolk’s realm. Of the three of them, only Vinon had been through the gate before, and her left eye was still a brilliant, translucent blue from the experience. It drew more stares than Oinopon’s white hair, even in the larger cities where others might carry some crystal artefact of their time beyond the Forbidden Gate.

Vinon used it now, scanning across the landscape for the swirls and disturbances that marked a creature using magic, but the land was quiet. They continued south through another orchard and down a long, gentle slope into the river valley beyond.

Following the river southeast all day, allowing breaks only for brief meals, Vinon and her companions travelled downstream, the plains billowing out around them. They walked down into the marshy fens where the river spilled into a broad, shallow lake, which faded into the soil only to reappear as a thin stream hooking west to meet the great River Seronid.

A plank road divided the tall, slender yellow grasses, a sharp, crooked path which took advantage of the more solid foundation above the roots of the isolated gobusu trees. Short, gnarled things with trunks as dark as twice-brewed coffee, this late in the season their crimson leaves floated on the waters or stuck to the prickly ends of marshreeds, blanketing the place like plucked feathers.

They moved quickly through the open terrain, checking their surroundings before turning left into the thickets instead of right towards the next town. Night fell, and the cracked-rock moon rose black and foreboding, the arcs of red light round its edges like the swollen lines of infection racing out from a wound. The Crystalfolk drew their power from the lights of the sky, sun and moon, and Vinon knew they had only one chance to free Rithif and bring her home. If she was already dead, than

Vinon would carry back Rithif's body herself. She put the thought out of her mind how they would move quickly hauling that much crystal. Her first and most pressing concern was getting through the gate itself.



“Four days to find her and get back to the gate,” Aminif said, her rifle loaded and in her hands. “Plenty of time.”

Vinon frowned, but Aminif only gazed back, a smile hidden in the corner of her mouth. Vinon knew her too well, and knew that Aminif was only trying to rile her up, because Aminif liked nothing better than picking fights when she was nervous. Vinon didn't bother telling the woman she had no reason to be. Vinon herself was terrified.

She stood before the massive stone structure, arced into a point at the top, carved with miniature cities in relief around its columns, the buildings gilt in copper. The only thing protecting the precious metal from thieves was the Crystalfolk's reputation, Vinon knew, standing there with the crystal key in her hand. When she looked at it with her left eye, she could see the language of the Crystalfolk floating around it in pale blue spirals, the spell embedded into the material. Around the gate itself more spells spun, and across the top the declaration that the gate had been closed, all contact with the Crystalfolk henceforth ceased, and anyone caught trespassing would be taken.

Oinopon was bent over a small iron pot of cold water, a stack of large, dark leaves in her left hand. One by one, she put the leaves in the pot, pressing them to the bottom until they stuck, adding layer after layer of leaf until the last one glowed silver and floated to the top.

“Here you go,” Oinopon said, passing the leaf dripping wet to Vinon, who wrapped it round the handle of the key. She needed to disguise who had opened the gate.

She waited for Oinopon to clean out her spellpot and stow it in her bag so she could draw her sword and come to stand at Vinon's left. Aminif was behind her to the right, her rifle trained on the gate.

“Ready,” Aminif said.

“Ready,” Oinopon said.

Vinon lifted the key, speaking a simple spell of opening. A beam of bluish-white light shot from the end of the key to the keystone of the arch, the spells locked around its threshold opening to admit them. Vinon tucked away the key, checked that her companions were ready, and strode through the portal to the other side of the world.

Here the sun still shone, and Oinopon asked the question Vinon hadn't

thought of until just that moment:

“Have we gained half a day or lost it?”

Aminif answered without looking, as intent as she was on scanning the horizon.

“Assume we’ve lost it.”

Vinon nodded. “We’re out in the open. Let’s go.”

They fled to the cover of a copse of thin, drooping trees whose white leaves rustled in the breeze. Vinon saw great plumes of magic rising to the west, where their capital city was. Other trails marked smaller cities further off, or else towns very close. She didn’t know the rest of the countryside, only the capital, and of that only the main road through to the northern edge where the punishment fields lay. If Rithif was anywhere, it would be there.

There was no way to blend in with the local people, living beings of translucent blue crystal as they were, and so Vinon, Aminif, and Oinopon waited until the cover of night to travel. Another reason Vinon had risked the meeting with the Fate of the Stone Bridge: a mole could see further than the Crystalfolk at night. They stayed in their homes except during the full moon, and that was only to travel in large groups with a full retinue of their crystal torches so they could drink in the moonlight’s power without bleeding their own out into the darkness. Vinon planned to use their fear of the lightless night to her advantage. No one would even see them, and if some Crystalfolk somewhere happened to hear a sharp noise in the darkness, they would hurry to their lamp room and huddle in the bright-white aura of their torches.

When the pale light of dawn washed over the land, Vinon heard the capital’s bells ringing from each of the ten towers, signalling to the Crystalfolk that they had survived another night. Unlike the bells of Vinon’s home—large, ponderous things with a solemnity forged into their brass—the Crystalfolk’s bells were numerous, high-pitched, tinkling things which sounded less like music and more like breaking glass.

Day passed slowly, broken up only by three meagre meals of stale bread, cheese, and pickled cabbage, but none of the three women found it difficult to eat. They had worked jobs far more tense—and far more violent—than this one, and they knew skipping a meal from nerves was a good way to get oneself killed in the fight that followed.

Vinon counted the degrees of the sun’s path to while away the time, measuring with her hand how much longer they had to wait until nightfall. At sunset, the bells rang, and Vinon sprang into action.

She took the middle section of the punishment fields, glancing up into face after face suspended from the wooden structures, but saw no one

resembling Rithif. The vast majority of prisoners were Crystalfolk, although some of Vinon's people were scattered in, most of these nearly fully crystal themselves. Based on how much of their bodies had already transformed, Vinon could gauge the length of time they'd been out here. She could also tell the difference between the unconscious Crystalfolk and one of her own people turned to crystal statue. It was in the eyes.

She heard a low whistle to her right. Vinon sprinted after it, meeting Aminif, who was gazing up and out towards the city. Oinopon joined them a moment later. Aminif pointed. Oinopon cursed.

On a wooden structure built up on top of the nearest tower of the lower curtain wall was a person lit by a ring of crystal torches, and even at this distance Vinon knew it was her friend. Rithif's long black hair draped down over her face, and Vinon recognised the dark brown stains on her clothes as dried blood.

"Come on."

Neither of her companions spoke. They followed at a run, crossing the fields in a matter of minutes. They ducked down behind a slight rise to survey the wall and tower.

Vinon spoke without moving her eyes from the display.

"Aminif—"

"I'll set myself up here, of course," she said. "You'll have cover the whole way."

Already she was making her preparations, setting out crystal ammunition, the spells worked into each bullet a tight spiral of light in the periphery of Vinon's vision, and Oinopon had already pulled out her rope and grapple.

"Oinopon—"

"I'll make the first ascent and cut a path for you if necessary," Oinopon said. "Come now. This isn't our first job."

"This part isn't a job," Vinon snapped.

Her friends were silent at that, their expressions grave. Oinopon nodded.

"Of course. Ready."

"Ready," Aminif said, already laid out on the ground with the butt of her rifle nestled against her shoulder.

Rather than speak, Vinon moved forward, carefully, using the shrubs and other cover to make a slow but steady line to the wall. Oinopon winged the grappling hook up over the parapet, catching it on the first try. The metal scraped against the stone with a sharp enough cry that it sent a shiver of fear down Vinon's back.

They waited, but there was no alarm. Nothing moved.

At the top of the wall, it was just as silent and dark as it had been below. Oinopon drew her sword, and Vinon tensed for a fight, but they reached the tower without incident. The guard room was empty, even. They climbed up onto the platform, crouching down in the shadows of the crenellations.

Vinon whispered to Oinopon the details of the spells on the torches, which Oinopon countered with a spoken word, and they went dark. Then Vinon drew her knife, cutting the cords binding Rithif, and she and Oinopon slowly lifted her off the structure and onto the stones below.

She was alive but unconscious, her entire right arm turned to crystal. Oinopon took out a sprig of healing mint, dropped it into her canteen, and shook the water until it frothed. This she poured down Rithif's throat, Vinon supporting her to prevent her choking, and Rithif's eyes fluttered open.

At first they were filled with fear, but Vinon smiled.

"We've come to rescue you."

Rithif managed a shaky grin. "I thought you might." She looked down at her right arm. "I always was jealous of that eye of yours."

"Always trying to outdo me, even in this."

"You should take more healing mint, if you can," Oinopon said. "We'll need to climb off the wall."

Rithif nodded, sucked down the rest of the canteen with an eagerness that told Vinon her friend's time with the Crystalfolk had been much like her own, then allowed Vinon to help her to her feet. Already, life was returning to her eyes, and she shook out all but her crystal limb.

"I can walk. Let's go."

They crept back to the wall, climbed down, and met Aminif at the rise. Aminif and Rithif embraced, but no one spoke until they were across the punishment fields and safely hidden in the trees. Then Oinopon hugged her so tight that she lifted Rithif clear off the ground and spun her around, both of them laughing.

"You'd think I'd been gone years from the way you're carrying on," Rithif said, putting her hand to Oinopon's cheek. She used her thumb to rub away one of Oinopon's tears. "What's that for? Now you're just being ridiculous."

"We're glad you're safe," Vinon said, clearing her throat.

Maybe Aminif was right. Maybe she was too serious for her own good. Still, her own life's experiences had given her reason to be.

"How's your arm?" Aminif asked.

Rithif rotated it, clenching the fingers into a fist and releasing them. She looked up and shrugged.

“It feels fine, same as Old Hickory over there says about her eye.”

No one spoke then, not wanting to ask, but Rithif laughed.

“Of course I have it, you gawkers. I’d rather be a statue than give it up to that lot.”

She turned her wrist in the practiced motion of an expert in hiding magic, but nothing happened. Rithif frowned, repeating the motion. Vinon’s heart dropped.

Rithif had hidden the Fate of the Stone Door's heart to keep it safe until they could return it. Vinon never expected that her crystal arm would block her magic.

“We need to leave,” Aminif said, watching the city from the trees.

Vinon turned and saw it: the parade of waving torches, the flickering lights dancing through the living crystal forms. Aminif had already raised her rifle, sighted, and taken out the lead runner.

Rithif grimaced. “I guess I’ve still got a light shining on me.”

Not that Vinon could see, but the Crystalfolk were more adept at sensing magic. They would be just as eager to keep the Fate's heart as the Fate was to get it back. Vinon felt a flutter of panic, the thought of being captured again by the Crystalfolk too horrible to contemplate.

“Vinon?” Oinopon asked, her voice low and soft.

Vinon frowned, angry at her own reaction. She didn’t have time for fears or reveries. She had got her friends into this mess, and she was determined to get them out of it.

“Let’s go.”

Aminif sighted, shot again, and felled another. She pumped the lever to load the next cartridge, sighted, fired. Vinon and the others had already retreated through the trees and back towards the gate, Aminif’s shots ringing through the night. While they ran, Rithif tried again and again to cast her magic of hiding, even switching to her left hand, but Vinon was too concerned with getting out of the Crystalfolk’s country alive to worry about the Stone Fates’ ire if the heart were lost forever. She swore that she would never let anyone treat her that way again, and she meant to keep that promise. All other promises were secondary.

On the tenth shot, the forest went silent, and Vinon glanced back for flows of magic. The city produced too much to see any detail. Was Aminif reloading, or was she retreating? Regardless, she couldn’t stop an entire army, and Vinon hoped she gave ground and fled to catch up with them. If the Crystalfolk had left the city with the moon as it was, that meant they knew the value of what Rithif had just as much as Vinon did, and a few measly gun spells wouldn’t stop them.

They ran for all their worth, and Oinopon took out her spellpot and

borrowed Vinon's canteen to cast the silverleaf spell again. Vinon watched and listened for Aminif's approach, and Rithif continued, in vain, to summon up the heart from the pocket of magic she'd hidden it in.

Just as the leaf turned silver and Oinopon handed it up to Vinon to wrap the handle of the key, Vinon heard the low whistle signal and whistled in response. Aminif appeared out of the darkness, a slice across her cheek bleeding down over her jaw.

"Are you—"

"Just a graze from an arrow," Aminif said, waving off Oinopon's concern. "I thought they wouldn't be able to place me with their night-blindness."

"The spells on the bullets," Vinon said.

Aminif nodded. "A thoughtless mistake. They are better shots than I thought."

Vinon didn't comment. Aminif scoffed at the marking skills of any who used a bow by choice instead of necessity. So far as Vinon was concerned, dead was dead. Still, she allowed Aminif her condescension and focused on opening the gate. They stepped through, Vinon tucked the key back into her pocket, and they ran the rest of the night and all the next day following, avoiding using any and all magic and passing through the great market of Woensed to obscure their trail in the general effluvia of its nastier magical products.



The cut on Aminif's cheek scarred within hours of receiving it, a thin crystal line the same translucent blue as Vinon's eye or Rithif's arm. Only Oinopon emerged unscathed. Vinon noticed Aminif had already developed the habit of running her left index finger along the line when she was thinking. She complained of strange dreams, the same as Rithif, even though Vinon had tried to explain to them that it was a symptom of the crystal's integration. They would fade after a few months, she knew.

They huddled in a camp in a small bowl in the land, without a fire and without the aid of magic, still cautious lest Vinon see the tell-tale tumult of crystal-based spells rising in the air. The only allowance she made was for Rithif, who was casting every spell of uncovering and finding she knew in an attempt to recall the heart from the small space only she could reach. Her right arm was impervious to weapons, but it seemed it was also impervious to magic. It was Oinopon who said what they were all thinking, speaking between spoonsful of cold lentils.

"Why not try your left hand again?"

“I’m right-handed,” Rithif said, her voice flat.

“And you speak as though we were strangers. You know the motions well enough. Modify them for your left hand.”

“I did,” Rithif snapped. “You were just as present as I was when it didn’t work.”

“So try again,” Oinopon said with a shrug, already focused back on her meal.

“I have tried one-thousand-fold times, and I do not see how the recalling spell will suddenly decide to work when it has not yet. Tell me, my dearest friends, how to either modify it for an anti-clockwise motion or balance the clockwise motion transposed to the left hand, and I will happily take your advice. Barring that, I’d appreciate you trusting me to cast my own magic.”

“Suit yourself,” Oinopon said.

Rithif glared at her, but said nothing. The waning moon would rise that night, and Vinon wasn’t sure what she would do if the Fate of the Stone Bridge came calling —let alone the Fate of the Stone Door.

It took five more tense and silent hours of practice before Rithif turned her left wrist in the smooth, gliding curves of a reversed hidden magic spell, and the dark blue orb appeared in her hand. Aminif hissed, grabbing her cheek, but Vinon felt the magic chill the crystal of her eye without reacting. She’d had years longer to get used to it.

Rithif hadn’t expected it, either, and she dropped the Fate’s heart to clutch her right arm.

“What is that?”

Vinon jumped up and scooped the heart off the ground, hoping the Fate hadn’t felt it.

“Magic this close always vibrates the crystal. You feel it as cold, although it isn’t truly so.”

“Why do all my friends speak as though they were strangers?” Oinopon muttered, ripping off a hunk of bread to dip in her lentils.

“Because two of your friends have proven to be poor listeners over the years,” Vinon said, giving Oinopon a pointed glance.

Oinopon only shrugged again. “We tuned out your complaints even before you got that crystal eye of yours. Is the heart intact?”

Vinon examined it with her left eye, although even she couldn’t see the full depth of the Fate’s magic.

“It seems so. We’ll just have to give it back and see. Set up the travelling spell.”

Oinopon finished her supper and arranged the same set of ingredients she had before, to lead Vinon to the stone bridge, although the layout was

different. Vinon took out her watch and compass, her nerves buzzing in fits and starts, waiting for Oinopon to complete the complex and costly spell. The compass and watch hands both swung round to point to the right, and Vinon told her companions she'd see them soon, the heart tucked safely away in her jacket pocket.

She followed the spell's guidance, walking up out of the depression and through the trees, winding this way and that according to the whims of the compass needle and the watch hands, until once again she reached the spot where the compass pointed towards the watch, and the watch wound backwards.

She looked up only to curse under her breath. It wasn't the stone doorway she was facing, as she had stumbled across three years ago, wandering barefoot with the blood still drying on her wounds, the key to the Forbidden Gate clutched in her hand.

A breeze stirred, and the mists rose from the ground. The scarlet pennant flapped in the wind. The Fate of the Stone Bridge sat with her needle unwinding the thread, lowering the moon's reflection back into the water.

Vinon strode up to the stream's bank but didn't step onto the bridge.

"I meant to find your sister's door. We have her heart."

The old woman was silent. Gently, she slid the moon back into the rippling currents of the stream and wound her thread back onto her needle. She stayed planted on its stones, and Vinon stayed planted on the earth, shivering in her leather jacket. She could feel the heart pulsing in her pocket. The Fate was silent for several moments, then spoke.

"I know you do."

The magic of the Fates vastly outclassed Vinon's crystal eye, and so to her scrutiny the old woman was just that: an old woman. She knew better, and her blood fizzed in her veins.

"I mean to give it back to her."

"I know you do."

"She hired me to retrieve it, three years ago in my reckoning."

"Hired? What payment did she offer?"

"She saw me safe to a farmstead, where they took me in and cared for me during my recovery."

"The tale I heard told was that you offered yourself for hire, mortal. Or rather, you begged."

The old woman turned, staring straight into her soul.

"Many beg at the threshold of my sister's door. Few are turned away. Fewer still return of their own choosing."

Vinon didn't speak, and was careful not to ask a question, aware that

just asking might hold a price. The old woman chuckled and turned back to her stream, the mists parting. On the far side of the stream stood the stone doorway, a simple, unadorned grey thing, weatherworn and ugly compared to the splendour of the Crystalfolk's Forbidden Gate. Vinon shuddered to think what the crystal people might have done with the magical power contained in the pocket of her coat.

"You mean to extract payment for my crossing," Vinon said.

The woman kept her gaze trained on the moon's reflection. "What if I told you that the Crystalfolk still hunt you?"

Vinon pointed to her left eye. "I would tell you that the Crystalfolk hold no power over my courage."

The Fate sighed, settling into her folds of blue fabric the way a crow settles into its feathers. "The Crystalfolk do not pursue you. Still, you would be wise to discard that key and not return to their realm."

Vinon's ears perked up. "Perhaps I will discard the key, in that case." With a deep breath to steel her nerves, she took one step onto the stones, then another, then came to sit beside the Fate. "What if I told you I have a key to the realm who sought your sister's heart for their own designs?"

"I might trade passage for this key."

"I might trade this key for passage."

Vinon took the key from her pocket and placed it on the stones beside the woman. The woman unwound the thread from her needle, tying the end to the crystal key and casting it into the water. It splashed into the reflection of the moon, and the white light took on a pale blue cast.

"Pass then, and send my sister my best wishes for a swift recovery," the old woman said. She chuckled. "Too few of these crystal people respect the stone bridge and the doorway beyond, if they think to banish the night from their realm with my sister's heart."

Vinon walked down the other side of the bridge, the wind tugging at her dark red hair.

"It seems your dealings with these crystal people are not my business."

She stepped off but didn't turn, knowing the Fate would already be gone. Instead, she approached the door and bent down beside the figure huddled on the threshold. She took out the dark blue orb of a heart and presented it to the old woman, who seemed more a sack of old cloth than a living thing.

The woman's eyes opened, white orbs dimmer than her younger sister's.

Vinon presented the heart. "I have brought you what you asked."

The Fate of the Stone Door reached out and took it, pressing the light to her chest. She took a long, deep breath then exhaled, muttering too

quietly for Vinon to hear. When she stood, she was several inches taller than Vinon, and loomed over her. Vinon felt a dash of fear clench her stomach, as she had when she'd first found herself at the doorway's threshold, the space beyond empty and grey.

The Fate laughed, louder and fuller than the low chuckle of her sister.

“What use have I for you on the other side of my door?”

Vinon knew better than to answer.

The Fate pointed to Vinon's face. “I could restore your eye, if you wish it.”

Vinon shook her head, wary of any more deals.

“I am glad we were able to help each other, but I should be getting back. My friends will be eager to see my return.”

“And I eagerly await yours.”

The Fate's laughter followed Vinon long after she'd disappeared.

Divinity Expansive

Magi Sumpter

Magi Sumpter is a nineteen-year-old paralegal based in West Monroe, Louisiana. She drafts divorce papers by day and spoils her cat way too much by night. You can find her on Twitter @MagiSumpter for musings about certain people and things.

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I.

Before the void took root,
They slept in the empty synapses
between the stars.

From the tip of Their thumb
dug into a sentient piece of sky,
They found resistance,
a particle to fight back against an open universe,
and that is where They laid the galaxy.

The recesses of the mind rolled,
a marathon from thought to thought.
They bowed down to the void when Their
first Creation sprang to existence.

A sphere of clay and matter.

II.

They poured out their blood blue,
rivers flowed.

From Their spirit came the first Life,
Neillon. The everpresent.

A young girl naked atop her head,
blue in skin and face, with
vitality for blood and patience for breath.

With her assistance, They crafted treescapes,
mountains, dirt beneath Their feet.
Neillon clutched the material realm,
Imbibing consciousness into the still.

After a week of this, Neillon sat
under a tree and sketched legs and arms and horns
into dirt.
The second Life, a tawny deer with eyes bright in
anticipation.

III.

Neillon cared for her Creations
as she thought them into existence.
She heard their needs and answered
with a bright smile across her face.

One day they laid branches at her feet under the same tree
and asked for the power to Create. Neillon
wept for them.

Balance,
she discovered, kept the damp earth spinning clockwise.

She came to Them and cried solemnly,
“Creator, architect, pioneer of worlds,
my children wish to Create, just as we have.
“I cannot deny their wish.
Yet I cannot deny your same sovereignty.
To Create, they must give up the ends of the universe.”

They held Neillon close as she wept
and replied, “So it shall be done, my Divine.”

Thus came the end of immortality.
Neillon shed tears as new life graced the earth,
and kept a strong facade as the old life began to fade.

IV.

They conjured another to console Neillon,
a Divine all the same,
pale in face and feminine in nurture.
They called him Sahviel. The marrow.

“From the death of Creation,
we can heal the world infinite.
Their bodies shall be a vessel
for the nourishment of the earth and its descendants.
Do not cry, Neillon.”

And she did not cry.
Sahviel ventured across the earth to find the tawny deer,
Neillon’s first Creation,
and lay him to an eternal sleep.
His antlers and eyes yellowed with age.
Sahviel laid his hand over the creature’s eyes,

and with a blink, it was gone.

V.

Seeing Neillon’s discomfort, They created
Vaergo. Another Divine. The wanderlust.
Same in countenance as Sahviel, but with a maturity
of higher age, he
grasped the soul of the deer as it slept.

“To another world,” Vaergo said.
He led the creature underground to a new world,
one where pain is moot,
to the last of the Divine, Aldonea.
The hereafter.

Aldonea laid her hand against the deer’s skull
and wiped away a solitary tear.
The memory, then, of winters scrounging for food,
of humans on the prowl for dinner meat,
washed to the ground below.

“Welcome home, first of the dead.
How I missed you coming home.”
And above, They reveled at Their own Creations.

VI.

“My children, gather around.”
They sat together with the Divine
cross-legged on a soft patch of grass
beneath the now-hanging Moon.
Neillon gazed up at it as if it were hers alone.

“Yes, our Love?”

“Together we have created a Universe
expansive. We hung the sky, we
blew the wind down the riverbanks,
we stepped on the earth until mountains formed.

“But the greatest Creation on this earth
is you, my Divine. I wish for you to Create more
of yourself, in your Own image,
until the planet strains under the weight
of your beauty.”

Aldonea smiled, for she could see
the history of the Universe from beginning to end.
She nodded to Vaergo, Sahviel, Neillon,
and lastly to Them, saying softly,
“So it shall be done, our Love.”

Beloved Love

R. Ruvinsky

R. Ruvinsky is a student, poet, and emerging writer in Orlando, Florida. She has kept a streak of writing a poem every day since 2016, with work published or forthcoming in *Prospectus*, *Underland Arcana*, and *Poetry on the Move*. She loves baking cookies, watching rocket launches, and listening to music too loud. She can be found at @writeruvinsky.

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CW: Self-harm.

I knew that love would kill me—it said it right there, in tiny print, so small that you had to squint with your reading glasses on, just like Momma did when they gave her my birth certificate. Her face was still sweaty and red from popping me out minutes ago, but she grabbed her glasses from the little table and leaned in real good so she could make out the predicted cause of death: Love. Most people didn’t trust that old folktale magic that could predict such things, but she did—and that’s when she hardened her heart and forgot how to smile, because before, she was a cheery gal with a laugh that could light up the room. But she stopped all of that for my sake, because she loved me so much that she decided the best thing to do was stop loving me. And so that was that.

That’s the way my Daddy told me the story, at least, when I asked why Momma glared instead of grinned, and scowled instead of smiled.

My Daddy, he loved me too, but it was in a quiet way so I never had to worry about him killing me. It was in the slight smiles when I walked in the door, or vague nods when I showed him something I had made. Sometimes, he even let me curl up in his lap and rest my head on his shoulder and he would tell me about life and love and all the lovely little moments the world contained—and I would fall asleep to the sound of his low voice, rumbling against me as I pressed my ear to his chest and listened to his heartbeat and wondered if that was love, and if this, maybe, would kill me. If I was to die, I would think as I slipped into sleep, then

this was a good way. But I would always wake up again, in my bed instead of my Daddy's arms, that link to love just a hazy memory.

That was when I was little, though, and could still fit in his lap. He never had enough time for stories when I was big—was always out somewhere else, with someone else. Momma didn't talk much, but she was always able to dig out her voice whenever it was to complain about Daddy, recycling the same bitter words again and again. I think she lost all her other words, the happy ones, threw them into the trash, because I never heard her say them. Never heard anything about love from her, and little enough about life.

But life was just there, just outside the door, and eventually I said my goodbye to Momma, though she had lost the word for “goodbye” long ago. I rapped on the doorframe for good luck as I went, that I remember, and it left my knuckles a little red, which I liked, and whenever I needed luck, I would rap my knuckles and remember that red and I knew that red meant luck.

Life wasn't so lucky, but it was good enough. The world was much larger than a little house, and I loved it for that, though not so much that it could kill me, because the world wasn't worth dying for, not until I had lived in it a bit. So I did my best to live in it—I learned a lot, got a tiny room for myself, got a hectic job that wasn't that great, but that was okay anyway, because I wasn't expecting greatness. I wanted to live, even if I was just living like everyone else.

“Is red your favorite color?” a man asked me once as I stood in line at a coffeeshop. He was right behind me, casual in his jeans and tee when I was put-together in my bright red dress.

“How did you know?” I said, flashing him a lipstick-red smile. “It's my birthday, and I'm going to see some friends, so I got all dressed up. Do I look nice?”

He smiled at me, too. “You do. Can I buy the birthday girl a coffee?” And I gave him a nail-polish-red thumbs-up, and he bought me a coffee and he asked the barista if she could make it red. She was confused, but it made me throw back my head and laugh, and that brought back his brilliant smile, so I was glad he had asked.

And even if the coffee wasn't red and actually didn't even taste that good, our talk was sweet and smooth and rich, better than the best coffee. I got him to smile a lot, too, that lovely smile, and the time flew by until I realized that I had missed my bus, but that didn't even matter because he offered to drive me, and then I invited him to hang out with my friends. We piled into his car and drove with the windows down, my hair flying and dancing in the wind, both of us singing along to some song neither of us

knew.

It was only when we reached my friends that I realized I didn't know his name, and he didn't know mine, which made us both laugh. I stuck out my hand to him, looking into his eyes, wondering what this could be. "Esme Jacobs."

"Robert Love," he replied, shaking my hand, and then I was laughing again, laughing because his name was Love and of course it was and I loved that about him. And he might be the death of me, but he might be the life of me, and if this was Love and love and death, then I wanted to try.

That afternoon was the first of many, until I was no longer Esme and he was no longer Robert, but we were Esmeandrobot, always holding hands and always smiling. I looked in the mirror sometimes and saw my face, so like my mother's but completely different, all because of my smile, a smile I never saw from her. And then Robert would join me in the mirror, wrapping his arms around my waist and calling me "Beloved," and I was not alone and not my mother at all.

My ring was gold with a red, red ruby, diamonds twinkling at its four corners, and it fit on my finger like it knew it was mine. When I kissed him, I got my red lipstick smeared on his mouth. When I threw my bouquet, it was with red roses fluttering in the air, suspended for a moment, petals flying everywhere, all of this red luck and joy showering us and our friends and my mother, who still didn't smile, not even sadly, though she did look sad.

We took one of the roses back home and dried it out inside a heavy book. When it was flat and crinkly and felt like the paper pages of the book, we put it in a frame and hung it on our wall.

Red: that was our life, luck and Love mingling. And love, Love was my name now, Beloved Love, that was me. I felt so alive, how could I ever die?

We had a daughter, a beautiful one, and we named her love in another language, because love was life, and look at the love we had given life to, look at what our love had given life to. At night, when I would see her curled up in Robert's lap or being carried by him to bed, I would smile as wide as I ever could.

Life was full of love, but I didn't die of it. I didn't fear it, either. Looking at the two, my daughter and my husband, my love and my Love, I remembered those hazy dreams of being in my Daddy's lap. He would talk to me, tell me about his life and his loves and the world, and now I knew that the world was worth dying for, because I had lived in it.

Robert always tucked our daughter into bed and came back out to pull me close to him, and one night as I smiled at him, he sat me down and took my hand. He told me about his son. He told me he was so, so tiny, that he

hid away in her momma's belly, still growing to be big and beautiful. But he told me he loved him. He told me he loved that boy's momma. I pressed a hand to my belly. There was no baby there, tiny or big.

And suddenly he looked like Daddy and I looked like Momma and I could feel myself losing my smile and I was young again, hearing that I would die from love, from Love. He was staring at me, not smiling but still holding my hand and our daughter was sleeping in the next room and I couldn't shout at him because I didn't want to wake her up, because I still loved him, because this was not my life—

I stood up. I walked away from him. I went to the mirror. It was not me, it was my Momma. I could see my mother's face in the mirror, looking so sad. And when Robert joined me in the mirror, he was my Daddy, not my Love, looking so worn and distant, his mind already somewhere else. His body was not here, either, because his arms weren't wrapping around my waist, his lips were not on mine.

He was still Love, but I would no longer be.

I walked to our daughter's room, rested my hand on the doorknob. I didn't turn it. I saw possibilities in the room behind the door, in the darkness in-between. I could hear him moving, hear him following, sense him standing behind me.

Lifting my hand from the doorknob, I rapped my knuckles on the doorframe. It hurt a little, but not near enough. I rapped again, harder, again, harder, again—until my knuckles were raw and red, and those were tears rolling down my cheeks—

The door opened, my daughter sleepily staring up at me, a confused smile on her face.

“Momma?”

My daughter, looking up at me. What sort of mother would she be growing up with, with what heartbreak carried through her life?

I was not beholden to Love. He was a person I chose, a love I gave life to, but my daughter, she was my love given life.

Love and death.

I could make my own life. I could stand against all the magics of the past world, every prediction, and say that I loved someone more than my own life, and for that, I would live it.

I was stronger than the quiet death of a loving soul.

I folded her into my arms. When I leaned back, I kissed her on the cheek, leaving a lipstick-red smudge.

Damn the rest—I would live.