



# From the Farther Trees

Issue 5

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# From the Farther Trees

A Magazine of Fantasy

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# A Guide to Ghost Relations

Michelle Enehiwealu Iruobe

Michelle Enehiwealu Iruobe lives a double life. When she's not being a sterling Law student at a Nigerian university, she writes stories reflecting her imaginary identity as a feisty heroine with special abilities. She was a semi-finalist for the 2020 Cast of Wonders Flash Fiction Contest. She is on Twitter @IruobeM.

“A Guide to Ghost Relations” © 2021 by Michelle Enehiwealu Iruobe.

Content warning: gore, murder.

I decide that the kitchen would be my war-zone. There are more weapons there than any other place in my house combined. Not that this fact matters when none of these weapons would have absolutely no effect on my non-living adversary.

I wait, shivering nervously until Daddy's Mercedes disappears through the gates; Nene's instructions floating around my head and thanking my lucky stars that my parents are off to an Evensong before executing my carefully thought-out plan.

There's just one little problem though, I think, as I turn on the showers in the bathroom downstairs to drown the noises that might alert the neighbours later. My brother Kom-Kom is upstairs, sick with impromptu malaria. And it would be very risky for him to remain in the house tonight. Conscious of speeding time, I temporarily store away that thought for future rumination and focus on remembering all of my grandmother's words even with the heavy pounding of my heart as I get to work. I turn over the basket of knives on the kitchen counter and select the sharpest. Then I take the stairs to my room three at a time and quickly take out the bucket of Nene's exorcism juju elixir, pungent and ready under my bed. I dip the knife—blade and handle—into the bucket and stare at the clock on my wall, ticking ominously. My hands start to tremble. 7:35, tick, tick, tick. 7:36.

On my way back to the kitchen, I check up on Kom-Kom, still asleep in his room. He is sweaty and boiling hot and he wheezes as he breathes but getting worse is the least of all the terrible things that could happen to him tonight. Not wanting to take any chances, I cover my brother from head to toe with a thick blanket, hoping to God that he doesn't suffocate to death.

I crouch in attack position behind the Kitchen counter —now a bed of weapons, grasping the knife dripping green with exorcism juju. Then I wait.



*I don't think I can do this, Irese.*

*You can. Your Grandmother is a powerful Azen. She couldn't have given you juju that's impotent.*



The wind starts to make eerie swooshy sounds against the kitchen glass window. It's like the air mourning. I can hear my heart beat like a talking drum in my chest.

BAANG!

The door downstairs, where Mummy and Daddy went through minutes ago bursts open in what neighbours could mistake for an explosion. The talking drums in my chest stop abruptly.



*He'll come again this evening. I'm sure of it.*

*Then get everything ready. You don't want to be caught unawares. Remember what happened the last time.*



There's a scraping sound like something heavy being dragged across the floor. I hold the hilt of my knife tighter and suck in a deep, here-it-goes breath.

BAANG!!

The kitchen door bursts open and the knives on the counter vibrate. I see nothing at first. Then, in he comes through the doorway, huge bloody holes in his sockets where his eyes ought to be. His skin is deathly pale—almost translucent. His shirt is stained with streaks of blood and an even

bloodier knife is tucked in his clenched fist.

He comes as his worst memory today.

There's a sudden surge of bravery within me on seeing him, like a supernatural force zapping through my body, a bravery that makes me believe that perhaps, just perhaps, I might not die today.



I was six years old when I saw a ghost for the first time. It was raining in bucket fills. Mummy and I stood by the bus stop under an umbrella, waiting for an Oshiomhole comrade bus. People without umbrellas were running, rushing to seek shelter. I looked up at the deserted wooden shacks by the express way, where women sold fresh tomatoes and pepper and that was when I saw her.

She was wearing a very filthy dress and her face and hair were brown with grime.

"Mummy, look at that girl. She's not wet" I said. She looked up to where I pointed.

"Who?"

"That girl. See... in the dirty dress. She's standing by the road."

I made to move forward but Mummy locked her hand around my wrist. Her face was horror-stricken as she glared at me. An Oshiomhole bus finally arrived, splashing water from the roadside on us. Mummy began pulling me towards the bus.

"Mummy..."

"Vhare! Come!" she snapped.

The girl moved to the heap of filth, squatted and buried her head in a small patch of the rubbish. I watched her, a sickening feeling blossoming in my gut until Mummy succeeded in dragging me onto the bus.

When she hoisted me on her laps, she whispered firmly in my ears: "You didn't see anything."



No one in my family in a long time had been called a seer. The last one was my maternal grandfather. He got into a lot of trouble with ghosts. Once, Baba went to one of his school teacher's house to steal mangoes and had got the beating of his life by the old gateman's ghost. The gate man had died in his sleep that morning; but his ghost, not realising this, had awoken to the rustle of leaves and the sight of someone scaling the low fence securing the teacher's house and gave my thieving grandfather a thrashing.

Baba told my brother and me this story a long time ago, shortly before his passing. I imagined then, the gateman's ghost stomping triumphantly to the teacher's house to report the petty crime and stopping dead on realising that his words were of no effect to the teacher. Of course Baba told us as "just a story" and when neither mummy nor daddy were around. Perhaps my parents were afraid that if people found out that some members of our family were "peculiar," we would be hunted down and probably burnt alive on stakes like they did to the witches in horror movies; but they didn't fancy the idea of ghost stories and definitely not a daughter who saw them. And that was why Mummy had said that on the bus. That day's experience stayed between the both of us.

But I saw more ghosts. After that first one in the rain, I met ghosts everywhere I went and interacted with a few. You would be surprised by how many ghosts there are roaming about, and in the most bizarre places, waiting for the time they could finally cross to the world beyond. There was a ghost living in our family's dog kennel who was constantly on his hands and knees in the small space and who refused to come out till he left. There was one who was always around where three city streets met to watch traditional worshippers offer animal sacrifices to their gods at night. He would stay there until the pots full of chicken and eggs and red-oil began to rot and smell. Then, there was one my brother and I passed on my way to school every morning, bathing in a huge pile of domestic waste like the girl I saw when I was six.

I got admitted to an all-girls boarding school when I was eleven. I wasn't popular with the girls in the school so I lived mostly in solitude. But I made good friends with the resident ghost at Annex hall. Her name was Aimua. She wore an old-looking school uniform smeared with blood and had a deep wound in her head. So while the other girls cautiously moved around Annex hall at night and traumatized first year students with scary ghost stories of the Ghost of Annex hall, I snuck out when it was safe to visit and chat with Aimua. Sometimes she was moody and miserable, fending off invisible "vermin" and clawing ferociously at me when I got too close. During these moments, I wondered a lot what killed her. None of the ghosts I interviewed ever told me how they died (either they truly had forgotten as they usually said, or they just wanted to spare me the gory details). However, when Aimua was in good spirits, we teased the other girls and drafted pranks which we never got to execute. My parents must have heard something from somewhere about me befriending ghosts in school because I was withdrawn from the boarding school before the term ended and squeezed into a day-school, where they could keep an eagle's eye on me.

One day, in the last term of my first year, I met another ghost in my new school. It was break, and my bladder was about to burst. The toilets were too filthy to bear so I packaged my shame in my bag and went behind the Physics laboratory. Fortunately, there was a thick bush of overgrowth to hide me. I had already finished urinating when I heard someone quietly say from behind me: “Eww.”

I almost jumped out of my skin on turning and seeing a boy leaning against the walls, arms folded across his chest and eyeing me with disgust. I knew he was a ghost at once, but that wasn't what I had a problem with.

“How dare you spy on someone urinating?!” I channelled my anger into a harsh whisper.

The boy's eyes widened with shock. “You can see me?”

“Why were you spying?” I fumbled with smoothening down my skirt.

The boy snorted. “You were the one who invaded my living space. All of you do that all the time. The toilet is there for a reason”

“The toilet is in terrible shape” I snapped and walked briskly and angrily away from him.

Aghedo never apologized for watching me urinate. Instead, the next time I met him, he introduced me to two more school ghosts. There was Precious, a sober ghost-girl who'd lived the longest of the three as a ghost and who never came down from the roof of the administrative building. Then there was Ogechi, a playful, mischievous ghost, who loved playing pranks. And since her actions had no effect on the students, I was her usual target.

The four of us became very close friends. We colonised the school's Out-House, an abandoned building that was once a classroom block during long school breaks to meet and greet. Since I had non-existent human friends, I visited the Out-House frequently and strengthened our agreeably unusual friendship. It was during this time that I explored some of the variables involved in being a seer.



First, I found out that a seer shouldn't and mustn't make hand to hand contact with a ghost. If they did, they had a glimpse of their strongest, happiest or most painful memories. I discovered this during one of Ogechi's prank episodes. I was walking to the school library when she snuck up behind me and pushed me. I tripped; and as Ogechi was invisible to the other students, they thought I had been clumsy and laughed at me. So, I gave Ogechi a chase (the other students thought I was running away in shame), caught her, and smacked her repeatedly on the buttocks. While

I did that, I must have grazed her hand because everything around me suddenly disappeared and I was transported to a white-walled room. In seconds, I recognised this place as a hospital. Someone screamed sharply and I turned. On the bed in front of me was Ogechi, sickly-thin and crying, held firmly to the bed by two doctors. A third doctor was moving closer to her face with a long tube. Ogechi began to howl loudly and struggle with the other doctors. The doctor with the tube plunged the tube into her nose and began to push deeper and deeper and deeper into her stomach while she screamed and screamed and screamed...

The doctors and Ogechi and the tube swirled before my eyes until they vanished, taking me back mentally to my school. I never told Ogechi what I saw, even when she battered me with questions immediately I returned saying that I'd looked like a corpse for a brief moment. I bottled up my few-seconds experience in Ogechi's memories and tossed it.



The second variable I learnt was that not all ghosts were friendly, especially to a seer. This is a variable I am only starting to appreciate, as one who until recently, had always been around generally harmless ghosts.

"You shouldn't associate with all ghosts, Etin," my grandmother said once. "Your ghost friends in school may be good to you but there're other kinds of ghosts in this world. There're ghosts who died with vengeance in their hearts. There're ghosts who were evil people or did evil things in their time alive. Your grandfather met some in his wide travels, and I don't want you to meet them. They could go around wreaking havoc for no reason. They're not very good for a seer's mental health."

"Your Nene's right," Precious said, looking down from her usual spot on the roof, when I told my school ghost-friends about Nene's advice. "There was a girl who terrorised all the old ghosts here a long time ago. Chased them around, screaming and spitting. Terrible girl, she was."

"Your Nene knows that you have no real human friends and only have ghost friends," Ogechi said, tugging at the end of my cornrow. "She just wants you to be careful. All ghosts aren't like us. Sometimes, it's good to just pretend you're not a seer."

"My Nene told me before to talk to more humans instead of ghosts and be 'safe,'" I said with an annoyed sneer.

"Well, it is weird for a girl's only friends to be ghosts," Ogechi shrugged. I slapped her hand away and huffed. "Human friends are over-rated. Sometimes, Nene's just like my mummy and daddy."



Then there was the third variable.

I started to ponder this with the knowledge that Ogechi's pranks didn't work on the other students but worked fine on me. Why did that happen? Why was I able to feel physical pain when Aimua fought with me at Annex hall during her "moments"? Why did the things ghosts did affect me like they were real, living people?

I wondered for a long time, until one day I asked Nene. She wasn't sure herself—it was only a theory; but she thought that it was only natural that ghosts were as real as humans to peculiar people like us, since we could already see them.

"If it isn't something new..." Precious responded to that with a bored expression on her face. "Ghosts are real to seers."

"So, that's why you're able to feel this?" Ogechi happily pinched my cheeks hard.

"Ouch!" I moved away from her, clutching the skin on my face.

"So, a ghost can terribly hurt you if he or she wants, even though they can't hurt others?" Aghedo asked from the wall. His expression was grim.

"Yeah," I shrugged nonchalantly.

"Then, just pray you don't meet a psycho ghost that likes to drink the blood of seer children," Precious said.

I stuck out my tongue at her.

"What're you doing?"

I froze.

The ghosts went silent.

A girl from my class stood in front of me, eye-brows raised. She was bright-eyed and tall and wearing well-ironed school uniform. In her hand was what looked like a novel. How'd she entered the Out-House without a sound?

I didn't know what came over me then when I answered: "I'm talking to my friends."

Aghedo, Ogechi and Precious gasped, finally remembering that their making a noise wouldn't make any difference to a non-seer human.

"Friends?"

"Yeah. They're the school ghosts."



"You said you're a seer?"

"Yeah. You're the only other person other than my family who knows

this.”

“And I’m supposed to feel honoured?”

I shrugged. “You’re my friend now. My Nene told me to make friends in school” I looked at her up and down. “I think you will do.”

“I will do!” The girl sounded scandalized. “I meet you here talking to yourself and you say you see ghosts and I’m automatically your friend?”

“That’s not how it works, Etin,” Ogechi murmured close to my ear.

“Do you even know my name?” the girl asked. I shook my head.

“It’s Irese,” she snapped.

“My name is...”

“I know...” She waved her hand impatiently, and I could see the book she was holding. It was William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. “Etin. I’ve heard your name in class before. And I’ve been observing you.”

I arched my brow. “You’ve been...”

“I’m just saying... if you want me to be your friend, you should ask.”

“Psst!” Precious called from the roof but I ignored her. Ogechi whispered something like “ask politely.” I huffed inwardly.

“Will you be my friend?” I asked.

Irese paused, and then shrugged. “Okay. What’re their names? The ghosts?” She plopped down on a chair with a broken leg.

My brow went higher and I glanced at the ghosts. “So, you believe that I see ghosts?”

“Of course,” she said easily. “I come from a family of seers.”



Our next-door neighbours were a married couple with no children—Mr. and Mrs. Ohaimu. Mummy and Mrs. Ohaimu, who we called Aunty Bridget, were close. They met in church and were both active members of the Catholic Women Organisation. Aunty Bridget was a plump, lively woman—someone my grandmother probably would have resembled as a young woman. She had an unmistakable high-pitched voice that bounced off walls and announced her arrival in our home on the days she visited, a large bounteous bundle of broad-leaved pumpkin tucked under her arm.

“Mama Etin! Is Mama Etin no longer in this house?” she would shout in greeting from the front gate each time she visited us. I or Kom-Kom or Mummy would rush out to receive her and her vegetable gift.

Aunty Bridget’s vegetable garden—a network of healthy water-leaf, bitter-leaf, garden egg, okro and pumpkin and the envy of other women—did very well, much more than Mummy’s sickly-looking ones at the backyard.

I didn't know Aunty Bridget's husband very much. I only knew he was an engineer at Shell who made loads of money and was hardly ever home. Perhaps that was why I didn't recognise him at first when he came to tell Daddy one evening that Aunty Bridget was missing.

She had gone to the market early the previous morning and hadn't returned since then.

"Have you called any of her relatives?" Mummy asked him. He nodded. "None of them has made any contact with her."

Daddy suggested that the police be alerted. "It's almost forty-eight hours already. You said she didn't sleep in the house yesterday?"

By late evening, the police had been informed and investigations commenced. The Divisional Police Officer (DPO) who was my paternal uncle, Uncle Gabriel led the investigations and we all expected to get speedy results as to the whereabouts of our missing neighbour.

But that wasn't to be.

Aunty Bridget remained missing for a long time.



As soon as the school bell signifying the start of the long break went off, Irese and I snuck out of the company of the other students eating their lunches in peace, playing games in the open field, or merely being idle, to our usual meeting place with the ghosts at the Out-house. It was Precious' send-off party. There were a lot of ghosts present, many I'd never seen before. The ghosts that resided at the back of the gateman's posts, on the Cashew tree in the middle of the school, and at the school's trophy room were the only ones I knew. The unknown ghosts were probably the ones that lived in well-hidden places in the school. These ghosts turned to stare at us in wonder as we walked in, obviously not used to having a human who could see them and another who couldn't see them but knew they were present.

"Come, Ogechi and Aghedo are that way," I said to Irese with a nod in their direction. I squeezed through the gaping crowd with Irese following closely and blindly behind me. I wondered if it was weird for her, seeing me twist and turn and take cautious steps as though I was passing through a tiny space meanwhile the room was eerily empty to her.

"Etin, you came," Precious said drily when I spotted her close to Ogechi and Ade. "Tell Irese that I'm saying welcome."

It was the first time I saw her not on the administrative block roof she was attached to. A sudden feeling of sadness descended on me as I realised that I wouldn't see her after that day. After so long living on the roof, she

was finally going to the world beyond and leaving the rest of us behind.

“I’ll miss you,” I said.

“Well, I won’t. You weren’t much fun,” she said, and then turned away so I wouldn’t see the droplets in her eyes.

“Let’s get this over with,” Aghedo said.

I suddenly noticed that all the ghosts present were holding different objects. There were knives, smooth pearly stones, old batteries, palm-nuts, eggs and even odd pairs of shoes. All of them were items with considerable weight. I’d just begun to wonder what purpose these items could possibly serve at a ghost send-off party when I got my answer. The knives, kernel and smooth stones went flying across the room to where Precious stood accompanied by shouts of glee from the ghosts. They landed like heavy rain showers on her and she just stood still, her expression blank.

“What’s happening? Is it over yet?” Irese spoke beside me.

“I think this is the highlight of the ceremony.”

“What’re they doing?”

I shrugged. “Nothing much. It’s like a food fight but they’re throwing other stuffs at each other.”

“Other stuffs?”

“Yeah. Like knives and batteries...”

“Knives!” She sounded alarmed.

“I think they’re happy though.”

Indeed they did look like they were. The ghosts made excited noises, the way it went at a food fight, as they continued to throw the objects and Precious continued to get hit, until there were spots of blood on her white dress and a knife blade had stuck into one of her breasts. Then they all closed in on her to smother her with hugs. I saw Ogechi yank the knife out of Precious’ breast and cast it aside before giving the celebrant a stifling hug of her own.

“What happened to your arm?” asked Irese after a while, giving me a strange look. I glanced at my arm. There was a light, fresh bloody scratch.

“One of the stones must have hit me,” I said, rubbing it.

Irese looked at me in awe. Even though she was from a seer family background and understood most things about us and ghosts, she still found it fascinating—the fact that we could be so adversely affected by the actions of ghosts while non-seers like her felt nothing.

“I think the party’s over” I announced, watching the ghosts disappear one by one through the windows and doors. As if on cue, the school bell rang again, signifying the end of the long break.

“Your neighbour’s wife... has she been found?” Irese asked as we made our way to the classroom after the party.

I shook my head. “No.”

It was already a week, and no one had seen Aunty Bridget since she disappeared.



Yet, she was the first person I saw when I got home that day.

She was standing in front of the gate of her house looking over the low fence.

“Aunty Bridget!” I exclaimed happily.

Aunty Bridget turned and what I saw made me stumble backward in shock and fear. Aunty Bridget’s head was bashed in in many places; as though it’d been handled by a panel beater. Her face was grotesquely swollen and her arms and legs carried prominent bruises. It was her head that let me know; the unnatural way it sat on her head, how impossible it was for someone carrying that kind of head to still be alive.

I cupped my mouth with my palm to prevent myself from screaming.

“Aunty...”

“Etin, you can see me?” she asked.

I nodded. “How did you die, Aunty Bridget? Who killed you?”



Dinner that evening was Yam and garden egg stew—delicious, as all things made by Mummy were but the soft white yam and spicy, scented stew tasted like candle wax on my tongue. My brother, Kom-Kom was showing off his head boy prefect badge over his already empty plate of food and Mummy and Daddy were congratulating and showering him with praises over and over but all I could do was pick at my food with a shaky hand and try to forget that I saw Aunty Bridget and that I know how she died. Of course it was impossible to do so. I was thinking hard. I didn’t know what to do, what should be done. Was I supposed to say it? Tell my parents that I saw Aunty Bridget’s ghost? That she was dead?

And was I also supposed to tell them the most important information: Who killed her?

I was still deep in thought the next morning, then the morning after that, and a few other mornings after that. I watched the investigations into Aunty Bridget’s disappearance go on without a significant hint of progress in silence. I didn’t tell Irese. I didn’t even tell Ade and Ogechi. I avoided the streets as much as possible in case I ran into Aunty Bridget’s ghost again. Day in day out I prayed that Uncle Gabriel and his team would figure

everything out, find Aunty Bridget's body, apprehend the killer and I wouldn't have to say a word. But as time passed, I knew they wouldn't find anything.

And then one day, Uncle Gabriel came marching into our house with the news that a reliable source had confirmed that Aunty Bridget had been seen in the area the evening of her disappearance, obviously on her way back from the market.

"But her husband said that she hadn't come home," Daddy said pointedly.

"Did he now?" Uncle Gabriel's lips were curled. It was obvious he didn't believe this. "If that was true then something must have happened to her on the way to the house. God knows we have the entire street covered. We would've discovered even a strand of hair belonging to the woman by now."

The two brothers went silent.

"You don't suspect..." Daddy started.

"It's him" I blurted out. "Aunty Bridget's husband. He killed her."

Daddy and Uncle Gabriel froze and their eyes locked on me.

"Ehn? How can you say that?" Daddy whispered sharply.

I had surprised myself by speaking. Now, I faltered. "It's... She said..."

"Etin!"

"Let her talk."

I cast a grateful look at my uncle and was suddenly filled with strength. I told them everything. I told them about seeing Aunty Bridget's ghost. I told them of how she'd looked, even in death. I told them that I'd done something I shouldn't have and that I had seen it all, had access to Aunty Bridget's most gruesome memories—that she'd indeed as Uncle Gabriel suspected, come home that night, and that she had had an argument with her husband which had escalated into a physical brawl. I told them how he'd crushed her skull by plunging her head repeatedly into the wall and left her afterwards, to die, and that he didn't have to wait long. He'd dug a grave at the back of the house where he'd buried her mangled body. The grave was underneath Aunty Bridget's pumpkin.

I'd been talking for such a long time that I didn't know that Mummy had appeared from the kitchen mid-story. She was gaping at me open-mouthed, disbelief in her glassy, teary eyes. Daddy and Uncle Gabriel had similar expressions on their faces after my narration. Daddy was the first to have his tongue untangled.

"My daughter will not be involved in this," he said firmly, directing his words to Uncle Gabriel who still sat stunned. "If anything slips about ghosts..."

Uncle Gabriel looked wounded. “I don’t want her to get involved as much as you don’t, Augustine. She is my niece, in case you’ve forgotten.”

Mummy began to cry softly, crumpled up in a corner of the living room. It was apparently a blow to her finding out that I was still in correspondence with ghosts.

“So, Aunty Bridget’s husband...” Daddy started.

“Leave it to me. I’ll handle it,” said Uncle Gabriel.



That evening, Uncle Gabriel and his team met Aunty Bridget’s husband’s body dangling lifelessly from the ceiling of his living room, his gouged-out eyes lying in a bloody mess on the tiled floor.



I met his vengeful ghost for the first time four years later, a few weeks to my sixteenth birthday. I was at the mini-market two streets away from my house haggling with a fresh fish seller when I glanced up and saw him standing some yards away, his sockets bloody hollow pits and staring unmistakably, certainly at me. I froze, and so did my surrounding air.

“Oh girl, if you nor wan buy fish tell me. Which one you dey price beta scubian like say na cray-fish?” The fish-seller in the market spoke harshly, but I heard her voice as though from far away. The ghost was still looking at me. In a flash, I was running wildly, pushing people out of the way as I did so and receiving insults as a result but I didn’t mind. I ran away from the market as fast as I could until I got to the Suya spot near my house.

I looked back and he wasn’t there.

Mummy cooked her Ogbolo soup without fresh fish that evening.



The next time I met the ghost, I ended up with an almost-twisted neck. It was late evening. I was in my bedroom, leaning against an open window and listening to music when strong hands suddenly connected with my neck through the iron bar protectors. They pressed so hard that I couldn’t even choke out my shock. I flailed my hands and legs feebly, removing the earphones I had in my ears in the process until I could make contact with the hands around my throat. I pinched and scratched and tried to move away from the window until finally the hands released me and I stumbled to the ground out of breath and coughing intermittently.

The ghost was still standing by the window, his empty sockets wide and

dripping blood, and saliva pooling out of his open mouth. He seemed to be grinning—a horrid, macabre grin. I scuttled backwards across the floor, any scream of terror that could've come out of my mouth already wrung out by the ghost's hands. The ghost stood grinning at the window, hands gripping the iron protectors.

“Etin?”

I started, twirling sharply to face my brother standing by the door. He had a puzzled look on his face. I could only stare at him, still stunned by what had just happened.

He held up his toothbrush. “Can I borrow your toothpaste? Mine's finished.”

I managed a limp nod, unable to speak. Kom-Kom leisurely strode to my bathroom. I turned to the window again. The ghost was gone.



Did Aunty Bridget's husband's ghost turn into one of those ghosts Nene had warned me about? Was he an evil being, spurred on even after death by the crime he committed while alive? Was he offended with my involvement in uncovering the truth behind Aunty Bridget's disappearance?

I would never really know the answers.

But I knew one thing.

Aunty Bridget's husband's ghost wanted me dead.



Irese was very alarmed when I told her about the ghost. Her eyes went wide with horror and her mouth slackened after listening to how I was almost strangulated the previous night.

“Etin! You have to do something about this! He would keep coming back! What if something terrible happens?”

Aghedo and Ogechi were equally ruffled by the news. They all suggested that I see my grandmother. “She is an Azen, isn't she?” Aghedo asked. “She'll be able to tell you what to do.”

“Yes. Your Nene is a powerful witch. And her husband was a Seer. She must know something,” Irese said.

I shrugged their advice off, determined to appear unaffected and convincing myself that it would all end by itself, that the ghost wouldn't try to harm me again, even though my heart seemed to be racing at several miles per minute.

I became extremely self-conscious, glancing furtively around everywhere I went, to avoid unpleasant surprises like that night by my window. I never stayed by myself in my room, and Irese walked me and Kom-Kom to my house's gate after school even though she wasn't living close to the area at all. Still, I lied to myself and to my friends that I was no longer seeing him, that I hadn't caught him every day with my peripheral vision, watching me going and coming, that he wasn't lurking in the trees and under the tangle of climbing plants at the back of my house, that he hadn't tried to kill me again.



And then something strange happened.

"Etin! How many hours are you going to spend in there?" Kom-Kom yelled one early morning, his voice strained. He must've been holding his urine for an unbearably long time.

"I'm coming!"

Kom-Kom continued moaning in frustration outside.

"If you didn't drink too much coke last night..." I sneered.

"Mummy! Etin's giving birth in the toilet!"

"Etiiiiin! Let me and your father have peace in this house!"

I snapped the toilet lid shut just as Kom-Kom gave a horrible shriek. I dashed out of the bathroom, startled by his tone.

"Etiiiiin, what have you done to your brother? Why's he shouting?"

"Mummy, it's not..." I stopped dead on seeing Kom-Kom's expression. His wide eyes were fixed on the flower and vegetable garden just outside the corridors. He looked like... he'd just seen a ghost.

"Kom, what happened?" I whispered close to his ears. It didn't seem like he heard me. "Kom-Kom, what did you see?"

Kom-Kom slowly un-froze and blinked rapidly. Then he pointed towards the garden.

"A man... there was a man there. His face... his neck... no eyes."

I ran to the corridors at once, heart pounding in my chest, just in time to see the outline of the demented ghost fizzle out like smoke through the bushes.



"Kom-Kom saw him, Nene. Kom-Kom *saw* him!" I said, pacing around Nene's living room, my hands shaking and my teeth chattering.

"I heard you very well the first twenty times" Nene snapped from where

she observed a small clay pot blackened with soot and emitting white smoke. Then she turned and glared disapprovingly at Irese who was looking around the room at the impressive collection of animal skulls, large elephant tusks and jars of what looked like medicine all covered in soot. The jars held her interest the most, a few of them shaking violently, threatening to explode.

“Are you sure this one’s supposed to be here?” Nene spoke in Esan, as though Irese couldn’t understand the language. Irese was still carefully inspecting the unique jars.

“She’s fine,” I replied curtly. When Nene’s eyebrow didn’t come down, I added impatiently: “One of her cousins is a seer. It runs in their family too.” I winced as I noticed that I’d described what I was as “It.” Nene didn’t seem to notice though, her eyes had lightened a lot and her lips moulded into a smile as she looked at Irese as if she was just seeing her for the first time.

“Is that so?”

“Can you tell me now what is going on? Why Kom-Kom saw that ghost?”

Nene walked across the room to where some dry plant roots lay on a table. “Why else? You are a seer, and he’s your brother isn’t he? Seers’ powers vary even within the same family circle. He may not have seen other ghosts because his sight had been too weak. The ghost he saw must have had powerful energy.”

“But...but...” I stuttered, and then an explanation suddenly came to me. “Desperation. You said once that desperation could open doors where there was none before. What if Kom-Kom had been so pressed that...”

But Nene was already shaking her head. “No. Kom-Kom can see ghosts alright. Though I’m sure not half as often as you. He may never know what it is he is seeing. You don’t have to worry much.”

I stared at Nene, astonished.

Irese was horror-struck. “Etin, that means that he *can* hurt him as well!” she shrieked. “If your brother can see that ghost, it would be real to him. And I’m sure that he has already realised this.”

“Etin... what is it that you’re not telling me? What did you do?”

I had to tell Nene everything then. I couldn’t ignore the ghost anymore. It wasn’t just me who could be hurt now. My brother’s life was currently at stake.

Nene’s reaction to my narration of Auntie Bridget’s ghost was placid. She absorbed it all without any flicker of expression—no frowns, or gasps, or bursts of anger. When I was done, she sighed and got up from her creaky wooden stool.

“You’ll need to exorcise him. Quickly.”

Nene walked briskly to an old cupboard already falling apart into dust courtesy of wood ants and started to rummage for God-Knew-What.

“Exorcism?” Irese asked tentatively, brows furrowed.

“Nene, what does that mean?” I asked, stretching my neck to look over Nene’s shoulders at what was in the cupboard.

Nene didn’t look back at us as she spoke. “This is a vengeful ghost. You’ll need to redeem his sins, send him away to be judged. If not, he’ll never stop until he kills you.”

I shivered.

Nene soon gathered various items from around the house and laid it out before us. There were plant roots, snail shells, dirty-brown cowries, bloody animal entrails, fresh scented leaves, alligator pepper, Kola-nuts, a half horn-full of stale Palm-wine, ash and a few jars containing red, viscous bubbly liquid. There was a pungent smell in the air.

“We will prepare a strong juju potion with these items. We are missing a few but thankfully those aren’t essentials...”

“Potion?” Irese asked.

Nene waved the question off and began to load the dry roots, fresh leaves and pepper into a small woven basket. “It will be ready in three days. Come back here then and take it. You should know by now when he comes... to try to kill you.” Nene gave me a nasty look. I avoided Irese’s eyes. She was unaware that the ghost came to the house unfailingly every evening now. It was like Hamlet’s father’s ghost, appearing once the moon was out.

“When it’s almost time, get a potent knife and immerse it in the potion for about five minutes. You MUST use this knife to stab him. Anywhere on his body is fine, provided it’s deep enough to draw blood. He should be properly exorcised then and he would go to the world beyond.”

“Be strong. Your name is not Etin—strength, for nothing,” she continued, giving me a warm hug.

“I have to kill him, again,” I whispered.

Nene nodded, her head bobbing on my shoulder. “You most certainly have to. Unless...”

I closed my eyes, knowing the answer...



...then, he pounces.

The sudden movement is so unnerving that I zap away from my safe haven behind the counter and the exorcism knife falls out of my hand,

kissing the tiles with a loud clink. My scream is caught by something in my throat as he throws himself on the bed of knives on the counter, making some skitter to the ground. He lunges for me again and grips me by the ankle with his hand free of his knife.

And I am in someone's living room.

The room is dark, and only a single orange-yellow light from the corridors cast a faint glow in the darkness. A human figure moves slowly. A hand moves upwards, and there is a glimmer of what looks too much like the blade of a sharp knife. Then, the knife sinks into something soft and mushy, and there is a squelchy sound. And then a throat-ripping cry of intense pain. The blade clatters to the floor and the figure crouches down, his hand gripping the place the knife has made contact with earlier.

With throaty grunts and whimpers, he is standing up again. I can make out an outline of a four-legged stool under his frame. Seconds pass, and then the stool falls to one side with a dull clunk. There's the sound of someone gagging, choking, gasping for breath. And then stillness.

I shake my legs ferociously at the same moment hot tears run down my cheeks. An incredible urge to sever the hand that has shown me such a gruesome memory fills any emptiness that might have been present in my body and I struggle to get to the side of the counter, where the exorcism knife lay.

I feel a stab of fire-hot pain in one of my legs and I know that I've been cut by the demon-ghost's knife. Letting off a loud cry, I dive towards the knife, his hands still clasping my ankle. Kitchen utensils are falling like rain all around me—a rolling pin, silver spoons, knives. Something falls and shatters ear-splittingly. I grab an impotent knife and slash fiercely at the ghost's arm until his grip lessens and I slither quickly away like a snake crawling on my belly. I can feel life rushing out of my leg. The knife must have cut deep.

What broke into a million ceramic pieces was one of Mummy's prized china. Not taking a second to register this, to even be certain that I am brandishing the right knife, I dive towards him again and inflict a few deep cuts wherever the knife makes contact while he tries to fight me off with his own knife. The cuts on his hands are deep, perhaps deeper than the one he gave me on my leg, which is now hurting like hell. But I don't have any time to properly feel the pain, feel anything. I think vaguely of my brother, lying sick and clueless some rooms above the raucous and reach for the right knife this time-- coated in green from the exorcism elixir and with a war-cry so loud that I'm sure it would wake up the rotting inhabitants of the nearest graveyard, I charge towards the demon-ghost, and drive the knife deep into wherever it hit on his body.

There's a burst of bright white light, followed by a wail that ends just as sharply as it had come. Then there is peace.

I am alone in the kitchen—my war-zone now, with bloody knives, china ware and glass broken into large splinters and granule-like crystals, overturned chairs, and tiled floor dampened with stamps of blood. I can hear the shower still running.

It's over. The vengeful ghost has been exorcised.

I stand in the middle of the chaos; life rushing in rivulets out of my body but I know I wouldn't die. Leaning against the counter, my lips curve slowly into a triumphant smile.

# The Prince's Curse

Annie Percik

Annie Percik lives in London with her husband, Dave, where she writes novels and short stories, whilst working as a University Complaints Officer. She writes a blog about writing and posts short fiction on her website ([www.alobear.co.uk](http://www.alobear.co.uk)), which is where all her current publications are listed, including her debut fantasy novel, *The Defiant Spark* (<http://getbook.at/DefiantSpark>). She also makes a media review podcast with her husband (<https://stillloveit.libsyn.com/>) and publishes a photo-story blog, recording the adventures of her teddy bear (<https://aloysius-bear.dreamwidth.org/>). He is much more popular online than she is.

“The Prince’s Curse” © 2021 by Annie Percik.

The rain trailed gleaming paths down the windows of the ballroom, obscuring the view of the palace grounds in the deepening twilight. Crown Prince Konrad stood with his back to the room, listening to the excited murmur of voices behind him and wishing he could escape into the darkness beyond the glass. This celebration on the eve of his seventeenth birthday was the event of the decade and he was its main attraction.

Gathering his courage, Konrad arranged his features into a welcoming expression and turned to face his guests. Candles along the walls created spotlights of brightness that caught the jewels flashing at throats and wrists. Konrad straightened his cuffs and walked to the dais at the far end of the hall, where his parents waited. Men and women cleared a path before him, bowing and curtsying as he passed.

To the left of the dais, skirts rustling and ringlets bobbing, stood the young beauties gathered from the surrounding territories to vie for Konrad’s hand in marriage. The prince might be the guest of honour but he felt more like a performing monkey, to be returned to an even sturdier cage once his duty for the evening was complete.

The six young women had all been chosen by the king and his advisors for political reasons, but the final choice would be made by the prince at

the end of the evening. The five who were unsuccessful today would be appeased with trade agreements, territory exchange, lesser marriage contracts, or other negotiated terms. The one who was chosen would be rewarded by becoming Konrad's Consort.

When his father died, the crown would pass to Konrad, and his wife would fill only an honorary place on the council. But Konrad knew how court machinations worked, and a clever woman might easily find powerful allies to act on her behalf. He did not relish the idea of having to wage a war of wills and wits throughout his rule, and he did not feel so tied to his duty that he was willing to give up everything to serve the kingdom.

He had tried to resign himself to the idea of marrying one of these women, but had found it impossible. None could compare with his true love. Wanting a distraction from the anxiety of what lay ahead, Konrad reviewed the official candidates one by one, though his thoughts traveled well-worn paths in his mind.

Linetta, close to his own age, seemed personable enough. She liked hunting and dancing and would probably be happy to stay out of state affairs. She didn't set his heart alight, but that wasn't important; Linetta was unlikely to be troublesome. If his affections were not engaged elsewhere, and he could choose Linetta without the danger of unfavourable political consequences, Konrad might not have been so determined to find a way out of this situation.

Astrid and Hesta, on the other hand, both filled him with dread. Astrid had a reputation for pursuing and discarding courtiers regularly, which could cause problems if she continued her habits at court. Konrad knew enough about such things to be wary of her and to wonder what her attitude to a young and inexperienced groom might be. Hesta was the oldest of the group, which wouldn't normally bother him, but she was rumored to be ruthless and calculating. She would likely try to manipulate Konrad to gain power, which was just as bad as Astrid's predilections, in Konrad's view. A king was meant to be strong and in command of his realm. It wouldn't look good for him to be under the thumb of a controlling wife.

Brindisa was a homely sort, not the brightest spark by all accounts, but dependable. A safe choice had Konrad been planning to choose.

Tiffanette, by contrast, was flashy and vain, with expensive tastes in clothes and wine. If she were his wife, Konrad would need to pay close attention to the treasury.

And then there was Petronelle. With her dark eyes that hinted at deep amusement whenever he saw her, Konrad did not know what to make of her. Everything he had learned suggested an intelligent, self-possessed

young lady. Nobody had a bad word to say about Petronelle, but their praises did not suggest exaggeration or sycophancy, either. She hailed from a small but strategically important country to the south, and Konrad admitted she intrigued him. He had only viewed her from a distance, but something about her defied easy comprehension.

He climbed onto the platform to stand next to his younger brother, Maxim. At thirteen, Maxim was just starting to take an interest in court events and the workings of the kingdom. But he was still enough of a child to be prey to flights of fancy.

“There’s still time for the curse to take effect,” Maxim said, elbowing Konrad in the side.

“Don’t be silly,” the queen hissed. “That’s just an old folk tale.”

It was why they were all here on this particular day, though, superstition or not. Legend had it that an evil spirit had once cursed the royal family and threatened to kidnap the crown prince as he turned seventeen if he was not already betrothed. So, by tradition, royal engagements were always secured the day before a prince’s seventeenth birthday, just in case. It was ridiculous and meant Konrad’s youth and freedom would be curtailed years before it was necessary.

A sudden fanfare interrupted Konrad’s reflections. The other guests were all gathered, the musicians were in place and the ball was about to begin. He would dance with each young woman in turn, and was expected to make his choice once they had all had their chance. It would have made more sense if he could have had the opportunity to speak to them all properly, in a quieter setting, with fewer eyes and less pressure. But the spectacle was part of the performance, so dancing it would be.

Konrad hated being on display. Before official planning began, he had argued passionately against the ball to his father. He had even appealed to the council, an unheard-of step. But his words were dismissed as those of an untried boy, lacking in dedication to the realm.

Had he felt more respected, Konrad might have been more willing to take up his role as betrothed Crown Prince. His immediate future had flashed before his eyes as he stood before the council. Regardless of which candidate he chose, his own council of advisors would marginalise him to undermine his power for many years to come. He didn’t want to be merely a figurehead, brought out to wave and smile at festivals, waiting for the inevitable death of his father, utterly unprepared for the burden of actual rule. If he was going to inherit the crown, he wanted to be able to wield its authority with confidence. Since that did not seem to be a possibility, he had sought another solution in the esoteric knowledge hidden deep in the castle’s library.

A murmur from the ballroom floor made Konrad look up. The courtiers had drawn themselves up into formation for the first dance, and Linetta was presenting herself as his partner. There was a commotion as the arranged couples were pushed out of the way by something unseen. A shape began to appear and gradually resolved into a shadowy, robed figure. Konrad's heart started beating faster as the figure glided through the crowd.

The newcomer came to a halt before the royal dais, towering over those around it. The king rose from his seat beside the queen and held his arms aloft. Gradually, the whispers and speculations amongst the crowd subsided, until quiet reigned over the ballroom.

"What is the meaning of this?" the king demanded. "Reveal and explain yourself."

The unknown figure threw back its hood. A gasp flew around the room. It was a woman; tall and powerfully built. Where her hair should have been, red and yellow flames covered her scalp past her shoulders. She looked like the pictures in Konrad's childhood storybook of myths and legends. The woman raised one hand over her head and flame erupted from her fist, shooting in a column into the air. Konrad gasped. Not even he could have predicted the impact of this apparition.

"I am the Spirit of Ancient Times," the woman announced. Her voice was deep and commanding, amplified so all could hear. "I have come to claim your prince as legend demands!"

Konrad felt his legs tremble as he took his cue, walking to the edge of the platform. As if in a dream, he stepped down from the dais and moved slowly to stand at the figure's side, looking back over his shoulder to where his family stood, dumbfounded. He wanted to say something, call out to them, but his throat closed around the words.

"But..." the king spluttered. "How can you...?"

The woman did not speak. Instead, she flung out a hand and the glass doors along the wall flew open, letting in a gust of wind and rain from outside. The people nearest the opening staggered backwards away from the onslaught of the weather, opening a path of escape. The woman offered her other hand to Konrad and turned to lead him from the room. Konrad took in a sharp breath as the woman's flaming hair flickered an inch away from his face, but there was no heat.

"This is outrageous!" a voice cried out. Konrad looked over to see Hesta striding forwards, her expression enraged. "The prince must choose a bride. This interloper has no right to interfere!"

The outburst revived the king from his trance.

"Guards!" he cried. "Stop them! But do not harm the prince!"

A handful of guardsmen moved from the edges of the room to block the woman's progress. They had their arms out, but their movements were slow and hesitant. Their nervousness proved well-founded as the woman gestured with her hand again and the guards fell back as if struck down. Konrad clutched tight to the woman's sleeve, hoping there would be no further opposition.

The woman pulled Konrad behind her, quickening her pace and stepping outside into the storm. She whistled and a pale horse emerged from the trees, trotting to a halt in front of them. The woman leapt up into the saddle and hoisted Konrad up behind her. With a kick to the horse's sides, they sped away into the darkness. The shouts and commotion from the ballroom faded behind them.

Exhilarated, Konrad felt the power of the horse's muscles as it pounded through the forest, taking him away from everything he had ever known and into an uncertain future. But, numbed by the rhythm of hooves and the blur of the branches going by, he felt the minutes pass in a haze. There was only the ride, with no sense of where it might end. Months of planning had built up to this moment, and now he found it hard to process what he had accomplished.

Eventually, the horse faltered, and the woman slowed it down to a walk, loosening her hold on the reins. She reached for a leather thong around her neck and pulled it free, dropping a carved amulet into the folds of her cloak. As the leather left her neck, a transformation took place. Tight dark curls replaced the flickering flames, and the woman's skin darkened several shades. She shrank several inches and her body, encircled by Konrad's arms, grew narrower and more slender. Before Konrad's eyes, The Spirit of Ancient Times was replaced by Jeffon, a palace stablehand who had stolen Konrad's heart long ago. He grinned over his shoulder at the prince, his cheeks flushed and his eyes bright.

"It worked!" he said, breathlessly.

Konrad squeezed him, relieved to feel the familiar contours of Jeffon's body in his embrace. He wanted to rejoice with Jeffon, but he was still too anxious.

"We're not safe yet," Konrad said, glancing over his shoulder. "We're still quite a ways from the border, and even crossing that won't mean we're completely free."

Jeffon took hold of one of Konrad's hands and pulled it up to his face to kiss it.

"I know," he said, "but I still can't believe it actually worked!"

Konrad couldn't help but smile. The plan had been complex, requiring careful study and many attempts to get the magic right. So many aspects

could have gone wrong; he couldn't blame Jeffon for his exuberance.

"You were amazing," he said, nuzzling Jeffon's neck. "I almost believed you were the Spirit of Ancient Times, come to take me."

"No regrets?" Jeffon asked.

Konrad thought back to the scene they had fled. He felt a tiny pang at the thought his father would never understand what had happened or why. He thought of the line of young women he could never love. Had he stayed to marry one of them, he would have lived in luxury in the palace. Unknown dangers and hardships lay ahead on the path he had chosen instead. He hugged Jeffon more tightly.

"No regrets," he said.

# Vine

Ankita Sharma

A writer, artist and a book lover, Ankita Sharma resides in India. She has authored four titles. Her poems and stories have been published in various anthologies and lit mags including the *BRAG Magazine* (UK), *Versification Zine*, *Melbourne Culture Corner*, *Unique Poetry Journal* and others. Her artworks have appeared on the cover pages of a few Indian and international books. Her latest novel *The Linear Tide* is on Amazon.

She stays active on Instagram (ankita.s.26) and Twitter (AnkitaSharma\_26).

“Vine” © 2021 by Ankita Sharma.

Like Zeus turned into a pretty dove for Hera,  
Love, in my dream, I saw you turn into a vine  
Verdant, laden with bright crimson flowers  
Like a pomegranate tree in full bloom  
You climbed up to my high window  
Making your way through peering eyes  
Probing words and unfeeling hearts  
All over the hard cold stone walls  
Erected in artless old-fashioned style  
Like threads knitted with fond affection  
You intertwined your gentle tendrils  
With my sleepy fingers painted bright

The next morning I am wide awake  
Chuckling over this silly dream of mine  
Till I see dew-fresh crimson petals  
Strewn all about as stars in dark sky  
And a soft tendril coiled on my ring finger  
A dove flutters past my window!

# an acupuncture session transports me to another realm

Praise Osawaru

Praise Osawaru (he/him) is a writer of Bini descent. A Best of the Net nominee, his work appears or is forthcoming in *FIYAH*, *The Hellebore*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Rigorous Magazine*, *Lit Quarterly*, and *Roadrunner Review*, among others. An NF2W Poetry scholar, he's the second place winner of the Nigerian NewsDirect Poetry Prize 2020 and a finalist for the 2021 Stephen A. DiBiase Poetry Contest & the 2020 Akuko Magazine Literary Contest. He's a reader for *Barren Magazine* and *Chestnut Review*. Find him on Instagram & Twitter:

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“an acupuncture session transports me to another realm”

© 2021 by Praise Osawaru.

& I find myself on an island shore, the water, wanting to fondle my feet.  
the sun is half-eaten by the stretch of blue & the pervading sky is bereft of  
birds;

only the water unloading its roars into the air, like a lover who caught  
their other  
with another. someone brushes my back, walks past me, his feet  
imprinting on the

sand. I trail behind slowly, then sit on the sand, legs extended as this  
person.  
an outlandish blurriness distends across his face, yet I'm unbothered.  
somewhere

in me, a fire arouses, tender & unwavering. & an unexplainable feeling of  
familiarity  
sails the entirety of my body; like we both had occupancy in my mother's  
chamber.

except, I exited into a world where everything is gray & we light candles  
amply in  
our hearts, to scare away the dark. but another exit seconded—in a hurry—  
his exit.

I channel every warmth in my body & ignite a conversation, “brother—

# Clawed Creatures

Stephanie Parent

Stephanie Parent is a graduate of the Master of Professional Writing program at USC and a lifelong lover of fairy tales. Her poetry has been nominated for a Rhysling Award and Best of the Net. She is currently working toward her own happily ever after as a writer of magical fiction.

“Clawed Creatures” © 2021 by Stephanie Parent.

She entered the woods in autumn  
The leaves dangled from the trees  
Red as pomegranate seeds, orange as pumpkins  
They clattered to the earth and the wind stirred them  
With a hollow song  
Like the whisper of old bones

The leaves parted before her feet as she walked  
Till her boots grew thin and muddy  
And the mud froze along with the leather beneath it  
Stiff and cracked  
Cold air seeping through  
To tickle her toes

Winter came while she was still walking  
Snow snuck in, white blossoms blooming in an indigo sky  
Silencing the song of the leaves  
Coating the bare bones of the trees  
The world still and expectant as a held breath

Last spring, her father had arrived home  
Holding a red rose  
That never withered  
Though the frost still crunched beneath his boots

The half-frozen gate still creaked on its hinges  
As he stepped back into his bedraggled garden  
Telling tales of a monster  
That no one quite believed

But when spring sprung into summer  
The sun merciless, the grass bleached dry  
And still that rose pulsed red as a beating heart  
His words didn't seem quite so strange

And when autumn arrived  
And her father's cough grew into something  
Monstrous,  
Phlegm and snot and a sound like a broken rattle  
Beauty knew she would have to find this monster  
With his bewitched garden  
And ask his forgiveness

(As she treks through the snow  
Seeing the spires of the Beast's castle rise  
In the distance, she wonders:  
Is she really trying to save her father?  
Is she really so selfless?  
Or is she the one who is  
Fleeing  
Hoping for something more colorful  
Blooming  
Unlike the world she left behind?)

In the Beast's castle, it is always winter  
Snow swirls round the red roses in a frenzy  
A whirling dervish  
Inside, everything is quiet and still  
It's hard to tell whether she's been here a day or a year  
It's not what she expected

She sees the Beast only by the light of candelabras  
Dripping red wax  
She sees him on the other side of a long table  
The curls and whorls of his dark fur

The claws wrapping round the stem of a wineglass  
Tapping a tattoo on the crimson tablecloth

She smells him  
Musky and dangerous  
The scent creeps into her dreams  
She doesn't run from it

In the short daylight hours, she wanders  
The gardens  
Watches the woods from the corner of her eye  
She wonders if the Beast is inside them  
Hunting  
And whether he moves on two feet or four

One afternoon, when the sun is slanting low  
And the cold wind sneaks up her cloak  
Under her skirts and between her legs  
She hears a rustle in the trees  
A clatter of claws  
But when the Beast parts the branches, he is on two feet  
Dressed in his overcoat  
Only a few drops of blood  
Staining his silk collar

He holds a dead rabbit  
Limp and pathetic, it should wring Beauty's heart dry  
With pity  
But instead her heart beats stronger  
The slow, steady thud of a predator

The Beast enters the garden  
Lays the rabbit at Beauty's feet  
Looks up at her with eyes blue and human  
As a summer sky

"Spring is coming," he says in a voice  
That sounds like icicles falling to the earth  
Shattering into shards  
And melting as the ground finally  
Thaws

# Homecoming

LJ Wetherby

LJ Wetherby (they/them) is a non-binary writer living in Cambridgeshire, UK. Their work has previously appeared in the zine *This Is Not Where I Belong*.

“Homecoming” © 2021 by LJ Wetherby.

I was working in the greenhouse when a shade materialised at the door. I beckoned it in. They look strangely solid in the greenhouse; the mists clad them, give them more form than mere shadows. It was only when I took my fingers out of the soil and looked up that I realised this was no ordinary shade.

“So she returns,” I said, before the shade had a chance to speak.

It nodded gratefully. It takes immense effort for a shade to speak; they are happy more often than not to let a person to do most of the talking.

“How long?” I asked.

“A few hours yet,” the shade croaked.

“You have waited many years to serve,” I told it solemnly. “I will release you from your bond now, if you wish.”

The shade nodded again, no less grateful. I traced the glyph for freeing a shade in the air before me, and the shade burned hot and white for a moment before disintegrating, leaving this plane with the gasping noise that the fragments of a soul make when they go back to wherever it is that soul fragments reside when they are no longer bound by a powerful sorcerer.

A few hours yet. I had time. Time enough to continue my day’s work, to complete it, even, but the news had made me restless. Part of me had never expected to see that shade again, had forgotten that we’d ever created it together. Another part of me had never for a moment let the knowledge that it still existed slip away.

I paced in the kitchen, tidying a little as I went. I set out two cups and saucers, two small plates, and took the teapot down from its shelf. I thought back to the day early last winter when I’d made more plum jam than I believed was truly sensible, the only thing I could think to do with

the autumn's windfall. I'd been embarrassed then, but I was glad now. She'd always loved my plum jam.

I put the plates, cups and saucers away. It seemed too obvious. She'd know I'd know she was coming, wouldn't she? If she remembered the shade, if she remembered us making one for each other just in case. I took the cups and plates out again and put them on the sideboard as a compromise. I brought up a jar of plum jam from the cellar, an old one, dark and rich and sticky, just the way she liked it.

I went back to the greenhouse but couldn't concentrate on my work. Picking over the already-tidy house for more things to put away, just to make myself feel better, I began to wish I hadn't released the shade so soon. Maybe it could have told me how close she was. How long I had left. I realised I was looking around the place as though I were leaving, even though I had no intention of going anywhere. It was my jam in the cellar, my work in the greenhouse and the library, my bedsheets, my books. Those things had stopped being ours a long time ago.

I could not stand on the jetty waiting for her. I could not go back to the greenhouse and pretend to work. Neither could I sit in comfort and read a book, my whole body strung with the tension of waiting for her, compounded by the pretense I felt compelled to perpetuate that I was neither tense nor waiting for her. I sat in a hard chair in the corner of the kitchen, near enough to the door that I could spring up at a moment's notice, and stared at the backs of my hands.

I did not need a shade to tell me when she arrived; her familiar magic drew nearer to my own, each great in scale, impinging upon one another as her small boat approached the house. She drew up, gliding, standing just as straight and upright as I remembered. The boat came to a gentle halt at the jetty.

She wore a long grey cloak, a tight-fitting tweed jacket with green leather ridges at the shoulders and a pair of equally tight-fitting trousers. Her hair fell just past her shoulders, the same blend of iron grey and brass blonde that I remembered, only with more grey in the mix and less blonde. It was not for me to judge, having been almost entirely grey myself since the age of forty.

She stepped off the boat.

"I wasn't sure I'd ever see you again," I said, before her feet hit the jetty.

Immediately I cursed myself for the tone I'd taken, the words I'd chosen, for having spoken at all. She used to say, sometimes playfully, other times in anger, that I always needed to have the first and the last word in everything. And she was right, and I hadn't changed.

"I wasn't sure I'd ever come back here," she said.

Hearing her voice again gave me shivers, even as I stood stoic and sure-footed on the patch of grass next to the jetty that had grown over since she left. We used to come and go so often that our footsteps wore a path into the lawn between the house and the lake, the grass reduced to bare, compacted earth. After she left, it was hard to find reasons to come and go, so mostly I stayed.

“Do you know how long you’re planning on stopping by for?” I asked. “I made up a room for you.”

I could have kicked myself again. She’d just arrived and already I was talking about her leaving. We no longer held shared assumptions about where she would be sleeping; I’d had to make assumptions of my own.

She looked away from me for a moment, staring across the lake towards the distant mountains. I watched as the breeze rustled through her hair, as her cloak billowed around her slender ankles. The small part of me that was still twenty-two and very much in love willed me to fling myself at her, to envelop her body in mine, to kiss and to weep and to make up, our spit and tears mingling, our joy and our sorrow combined. But we were both too old, too rigid and stubborn, so we stood where we were, looking anywhere except at one another.

Eventually I asked if she wanted to come in. She said nothing, but she crossed the jetty and followed me up to the house when I began to head back that way. She walked slowly, turning her head and pausing often to look at something more closely, things remembered or altered since she’d last been here.

She jumped and recoiled when a pair of spectral hands emerged from the wall near the coat rack, waiting to take her cloak as she removed it. I gave her a look, trying to fathom her.

“It’s been a long time since I last saw a shade,” she said curtly.

I wanted to continue staring at her, to see if I could uncover the truth beneath her guarded outer layer, as I’d been able to in years gone by, but we were too old and too hardened to read one another easily by now. The glances we exchanged had a chill to them; her face rock, impassive, as it met my flinty eye. This was not how I wanted our reunion to go, but I felt powerless to stop being myself, even with so much at stake.

I felt her magic butt up against mine. It was laced with a sensation I’d perceived the edges of briefly in the past, when we’d worked together in the company of someone whose approach she disliked, but never something I’d felt her direct at me before: disapproval.

“Would you like anything to eat?” I asked, after a long, awkward silence. “A cup of tea perhaps?”

She agreed to the cup of tea. We went into the kitchen, where she

seemed relieved to see my flesh-and-blood hands taking charge of the tea-making, and not another spectral pair. I thought I caught her staring longingly for a moment at the jar of dark plum jam that still sat on the sideboard, but it could have been the absent kind of staring; maybe I'd lost the gift of reading her after all these years. It seemed arrogant, presumptuous, to assume I'd retained it.

The hot tea warmed the chill in her a little. She seemed to be softening, as we slowly drained the pot and spoke tentatively, in abstractions and generalities, about the time that had passed since we'd last sat together in this kitchen. I allowed myself to relax so much that I forgot about the moment in the front hallway; I raised a hand without thinking, and in the air before me I sketched out the glyph for a shade to begin running the hot water and washing up the tea things. Another pair of spectral hands came out of the wall over by the sink.

She recoiled again. This time her eyes widened.

"Would you mind not doing that?" she asked, her voice hard and stunned. "For my sake, if that still means anything to you."

I un-summoned the shade as quickly as I'd summoned it in the first place. I stared at the floor, wishing I could rearrange the matter in my body and slide through it, frictionless, into the cellar below. I did not know what to say. I was both glad and afraid when she carried on talking.

"Seventeen years with the Order of the Dead has a certain effect on a person," she said.

"You didn't used to feel that way," I replied, having instantly forgotten about the floor and the cellar and my awful habit of opening my mouth before thinking.

"That's true," she said. "But I was wrong. And that was before I spent nearly two decades trying to make amends."

All my preconceptions were crumbling around me. She was right that they were seventeen years out of date. When she'd first told me she was leaving to join the Order—and it hadn't been a choice at that time so much as something she'd been strongly encouraged to do, lest she face more severe charges—I'd assumed she'd go with her tongue firmly in her cheek. That she'd serve out a year, maybe two, and come home unchanged. That we would laugh together after she came back about their piousness, their moral absolutes. But she hadn't come back until now, though I'd waited for her year after year.

There was another long, awkward silence before she spoke again.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked.

I didn't know what to say. I shrugged, and waited for her to elaborate.

"Every shade in this house was a person once," she began.

“Part of a person,” I corrected.

“You never could let me finish,” she continued. “A whole person, part of a person. The Order doesn’t differentiate. The latter is just as much a crime, just as much a moral affront as the former.”

“You know we were careful when we chose them,” I shot back.

She was right; I never could let her finish.

“We were careful, by our own standards back then,” she said, implying that they had not been standards at all. “I know what you’re about to say—that we only chose the worst for the work we were doing, criminals, lowlifes, people who wouldn’t hesitate to do terrible things themselves. At least, that’s what we thought we were choosing. Did we ever do the extraction ourselves?”

It was a perfectly-placed rhetorical question, targeted at the core of shame that she must have known still lay within me, even if I had lost sight of it myself. I felt my face burn red.

“We bought them,” she said. “All of them. I won’t insult your intellect by pretending that the people we bought them from were even remotely salubrious. We took them at their word because we didn’t have anything else to go on.”

“You used to believe that we only dealt with fragments that deserved what we did to them,” I said.

“I no longer believe that anyone deserves what we did to those soul fragments,” she replied. “I don’t believe there are any crimes profound enough to condemn even part of a person to servitude after their span of years has ended.”

I thought of the shade I had released just a few hours before, the gasp of relief it had given when I’d traced the glyph that finally ended its service. I thought of it flying to wherever it is that souls fly to, seeking out the other parts of itself to be reunited with at last (if such a thing were even possible), and I began to feel sick.

It had been easy to maintain the fiction that there was no harm in what we’d done; it had been a foundational narrative of our previous relationship, and I’d clung to its certainty long after she’d gone. She’d left to plumb the depths of our moral ambiguity while I had stayed at home, using our work every day without even thinking, certain that nothing we’d done had ever been ambiguous.

I looked at her, truly looked at her for the first time since her return, the first time I’d allowed myself to do more than merely snatching a glance at her out of the corner of my eye. I’d kept my gaze fixed ahead thus far, in the hope that if I did not look at her, she might not be able to wound me. But she had managed to anyway.

“Would it be any better if I were to do away with them?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“It would be a start.”

I thought of all the years of service our shades had given me, labour I had extracted from them by force, even if it hadn't felt violent or exploitative until now. I couldn't imagine learning how to wash dishes to my own satisfaction all over again, but neither could I imagine letting her leave the house and walk away from me a second time.

I was never one for grand, bold gestures, but if there was ever a time in my life to make one, it was now.

I stood and walked over to the sink, tracing the glyph for freeing a shade over and over with my right hand, maintaining the motion in a continuous loop so that I did not have to make the choice to start it over again every time I stopped. The spectral hands that had washed my dishes every day burnt with white light for a second before disintegrating. It was a smaller fragment than the one I'd released in the greenhouse earlier; this one gave more of a withering sigh than a gasp.

I moved out into the hallway, my hand tracing wildly, as though possessed by its own shade. The hands that had tried to take her cloak blistered with light and left with a slow exhalation. She followed me as I went, having caught the thread of what I was attempting to do. She did not join me in my work, but she chanted the rites of the Order of the Dead in a low, steady voice behind me as I went.

For the next hour the house was a writhing, rustling, illuminated place. I wondered how all of this looked from across the water, whether the bursts of light as each shade sought its final rest would be reflected on the surface of the lake. I wondered if others might see those reflections and bear witness alongside us. I hoped so.

I saved one shade for last, the one that had been born out of our love for one another, our fear of losing one another. We'd been playing with dangerous magic in those days, our fears at least somewhat justified. She'd asked one night as we lay in bed together what she would do if she ever lost me. We'd agreed to make a shade for one another, one that would alert us – or anyone else living in the house, for that matter – if it sensed the other close by after a long absence.

I'd already freed the shade she'd made for me, which had waited seventeen years to serve its purpose. With one final motion before my hand fell still again, I let the shade that I had made for her leave this plane. It made the loudest sound of any of them as it left, closer to a shriek than a sigh. It burned the brightest of them all before it disappeared.

Afterwards we sat outside on the bench tucked up against the front wall

of the house, looking out over the lake. The gently-rippling surface of the water was streaked with pink and orange, reflecting the sunset above. We both jumped, startled, when a flock of winter geese shot out from behind the house, flying in formation towards the distant mountains. To the west, the lights of the only nearby town flickered across the water.

My hand found hers somehow, or perhaps hers found mine, and when we inched a little closer to one another, we found that neither of us pulled away.

# When I Tell God I Miss the Winter in Heaven

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*.

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“When I Tell God I Miss the Winter in Heaven” © 2021 by Timi Sanni.

He knows what I really mean is, I died once  
and the fire within me melted a mountain of ice

—an avalanche. I died too soon but the angels  
being kind enough, stuffed my yellow soul

back into my body, hurriedly, like He —God,  
wasn't looking and they were saving humanity,

the humanity, the humanity within the body  
of a nine year old black boy on the road to

luminous dreams. But this is it: no body, ever  
warms to anything after hugging the cold wind

of Eden. Even my mother stopped hugging me,  
because it took what was left of her warmth

and my father, my father, he never knew how  
to open his body. Sometimes, I imagine teaching him

to open his hands and pull me close to the blood  
in his tender heart, but what does this body —

this frozen wasteland — know now,  
of warmth. It's Winter and I can feel

the icy hands of heaven's chill from Eden, beckoning,  
reaching out to me through open wounds in the sky.

*Confession: God, I once escaped your calling.*

*But here I am again like a prodigal son, welcome this body back home.*

# Vanish the moon, expand her in your mouth

Hester J. Rook

Hester J. Rook is an Australian Shadows Award-winning and Rhysling Award-shortlisted poet, fiction writer and co-editor of *Twisted Moon Magazine*. They are often found salt-scrunched on beaches, reading arcane tales and losing the moon in mugs of tea. Find Hester on Twitter @hesterjrook and read more poems and fiction at <https://hesterjrook.com>.

“Vanish the moon, expand her in your mouth” © 2021 by Hester J. Rook.

Admit it  
when the moon rises you feel your fingers fill  
and tremble against the gold-dusk breeze.  
You splay your tongue against the wind and the cresting  
    night,  
scents rising from the earth and the blooming lilly pillly.  
You catch the trees,  
branches squiggled against the sky,  
in your teeth.  
There is nothing of you in you – or perhaps you  
    encompass  
everything, feeling the worms squirm through the dirt  
    under your toes  
as though they are part of you, parting  
your lips and swallowing  
the storm crisping over the horizon, feeling  
the rumble of air within your lungs.  
There is magic to you  
when you open yourself to the night  
the stars blossoming across the ink-streaked sky.  
Can you hear the cicadas threaded through your hair -

the sigh of wet mulch -  
the crunch of sand between your teeth?  
You could summon forest spirits, or fire, or fairytales, transform  
into darkling creatures or the wind, taste  
spells in the humid air and lick  
up the rain dripping  
down your chin, chew on the clouds  
between you and the universe.  
Or pause, and stretch, and wait  
do what you always do in moonfilled times and  
test the world against your skin  
new and drenched and  
unfurling.

# The Mural

M. Douglas White

M. Douglas White is a former journalist and magazine editor, and a current marketing professional. But he's always preferred getting lost in tales of fantasy and science fiction to any regular job. An avid outdoors enthusiast, he lives in Southern California with his wife, two daughters, and dog. Find him online at [www.mdouglaswhite.com](http://www.mdouglaswhite.com), or on Twitter at [@mdouglaswhite](https://twitter.com/mdouglaswhite).

“The Mural” © 2021 by M. Douglas White.

Content warning: blood, accidental self-harm.

**M**y arms and shoulders ached from the weight of the iron manacles around my wrists, and my mind was weary after a night chasing sleep on the cold soil of the dungeon floor. I stood silently in front of the king—who sat atop his throne choking down the remaining bites of his meal—and stared into the alcove behind him. Inside was the finest collection of paintings, sculptures, and other craftwork that I had ever seen. The wavy, pale orange striations of the sandstone mountain—into which the royal palace itself had been carved—wrapped around them all like the arms of an ancient and doting parent.

It was not a vast collection, nor did it contain any exceptionally large pieces. I noticed with a slight pang in my chest that the wooden chair with its exquisite joinery took up the largest footprint of anything within the space. It also seemed as if the majority of pieces had been conspicuously pushed to the sides of the alcove, cleared away from the rectangle of fresh plaster the color of bleached bone that had been smeared along the wall and which stretched from floor to ceiling.

King Vilmar belched loudly enough to draw my attention back to his frail, wizened form. He dabbed at his craggy face with a golden cloth while servants removed the wooden table supporting the assortment of plates and bowls, most of which were still piled with delectable fare that would no doubt end up in the bellies of the royal hounds. Then the king glared at

me through crystal blue eyes with the vigor and shrewdness of a much younger man.

“Yes, my dear girl,” Vilmar said, his gravelly voice echoing throughout the great hall.

He paused briefly and lifted a bony finger towards the plaster within the alcove.

“That space is reserved for the mural you will create,” he continued. “No one matches your skills at reflecting nature’s divine beauty. At least, that is what my advisors have led me to believe, based on your works spread across the walls of my city. Men of my age simply aren’t predisposed to wandering the capital streets, though, eh? So I must take them at their word.”

Vilmar waited for me to respond, but I kept my posture stiff and my mouth shut. I knew what the king wanted of me. I had ignored his numerous summons delivered by palace messengers over the previous days, and the city guards who had roused me from my bed the previous evening had informed me as much.

“Now, Carina,” Vilmar finally spoke again, this time in a sing-song tone. “Paint for me, will you? And then you may return to, well, whatever it is that you choose to do with your days.”

I clenched my jaw and remained silent, noting the expressions of the dozens of court attendees watching our exchange with scandalized interest.

*Curious, I thought. Will none of you speak up in support of a young woman brought before the king in chains?*

As I stared into each of their faces--and as each looked away sharply in response—I began rubbing my hands over one another. A nervous habit whenever I was anxious, one I’d never been able to break. Instead of the usual bare skin, however, my palm found the iron manacle encasing its opposite wrist.

I willed my anger into it, trying to prevent my tongue from lashing out with the harsh words that would surely result in another long night counting the rats inside the dungeon. I began sensing the various orange and copper hues quivering as the trace amounts of rust expanded across the metal’s surface with unnatural pace. Mother would have disapproved of letting my emotion affect the material—in a public venue, no less. But no one in the hall seemed to have noticed.

King Vilmar, still awaiting a response, made a tsk tsk sound.

“So irreverent,” he said, seemingly to himself. “I often wonder if other rulers must contend with such insolence on a regular basis. Very well. I’m well versed in persuading your ilk.”

He raised an arm toward the back of the hall and curled a finger. A young, skinny guard stepped forward, his arms straining under the weight of a wooden chest. He placed it at my feet, unclasped its delicate latch, and pulled back the lid.

Inside were dozens of paintbrushes in myriad lengths and thicknesses, and composed of countless species of wood. Each was topped with a pristine patch of bristles, most of which I recognized—horse hair, boar whiskers, kallana tail strands—but many unknown to me. Next to the brushes stood an array of small glass vials, each containing finely ground, shimmering pigments of various colors.

“You will have access to all of the supplies you could possibly need,” Vilmar said. “The finest brushes prepared by the most skilled woodworkers, and the rarest of exotic pigments from the very ends of the known world.”

I shifted my body weight in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent the king from seeing the longing in my face.

*So many colors...*

“Ah, yes, my dear girl,” Vilmar continued. “All will be yours. But do not forget, I shall only have your best work. And *only I* shall have it. When you are complete, you will not pick up a brush ever again. But as it is customary for all of my artists, you will be in the most prestigious company.”

I knew this, of course, his demand and disregard for those who created for him. The capital was always rife with gossip about our finicky ruler’s rotation of artwork. It was said that less than an hour after his mother had passed away and the crown placed upon his adolescent head, Vilmar had ordered the alcove stripped of the rusted weapons that the deceased queen brought home from the hands of fallen enemy soldiers, as well as a horrific menagerie of hunting trophies that were so prized by the late warmonger.

But Vilmar’s words still sent a cold jolt into my bones. What choice did I have? Refuse and remain locked inside the bowels of his palace? Or, more likely, live out the rest of my days branded as a pariah by the monarch?

I sighed, my pride yielding to preservation, as visions of sneaking through alleys in the dead of night flashed in my mind.

*Perhaps I could still... maybe.*

I opened my mouth, ready to accept the king’s commission. But Vilmar continued speaking.

“And if there is anything that you require which you are not given, simply ask, and it shall be yours.”

The flicker of an idea formed in my mind. I inhaled sharply, allowing my breath to stoke the creative spark into a flame.

“Yes,” I said softly.

Vilmar's eyes grew wide as he leaned forward on his throne.

"What did you say, girl?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes, Our Revered. I will paint for you."

Vilmar's thin lips curled in delight.

"Excellent!" he cackled. "Now, all that remains—"

"On one condition," I interrupted.

Vilmar's face contorted in fury, but then immediately gave way to derisive amusement.

"Already making demands! But, of course, my dear girl. Name your condition."

I took a deep breath and struggled to quell the trembling iron underneath my palm.

"My work must remain hidden until it is complete. I shall not have you look early upon what would amount to an unrealized masterpiece."

Vilmar's yellow teeth emerged from beneath a crooked smile.

"But, of course, sweet girl. Bring nature's beauty into my hall however you see fit."

He flicked his hand, and a pair of guards escorted me out through the great hall's doors. We emerged into the late morning light bathing the royal plaza, the mountain's summit looming just above. As we made our way towards the grand staircase that led to the other palace wings further down the slope, I glanced over a low wall at the bustling capital below. The townspeople scurried about like ants, parading across a tapestry that must have once appeared as a vibrant patchwork of colors from this height, but was now muted by the oppressive gaze of an ever-present sun.

As the guards prodded me forward, I glanced down at my hand, the one that had called forth the rust from the manacle. A smear of tarnished orange slithered back and forth across my palm, its vulgar form realized by raw emotion rather than focus, and without the aid of proper implements. The surrounding skin had gone slightly pale in response.

*Yes, Mother would have certainly been annoyed,* I mused.

As I began descending the staircase, I recalled the movements of her long, delicate fingers, and of Father's strong, confident hands, as they worked. I breathed deeply, willing my anger to fade away. Our connection broken, and with no tangible substance in which to reside, the orange smear snapped into dust, vanishing back into whatever realm it had come from.

I would need a clear mind, I knew, to accomplish the feat I'd set for myself. The king was prepared to give me everything I needed to create something grand and beautiful. Perhaps even a means of retribution.

•

*You're holding an entire world in the palm of your hand, Carina. One of limitless potential that's capable of reflecting all of the splendor and unpleasantness of our own.*

Mother always grew philosophical whenever she mixed her colors. Her words had been echoing in my mind for many days, ever since I accepted the king's commission.

*Patience, dear. The finest artists can create a masterpiece from swill. But imagine what true talent can achieve with the finest ingredients.*

I rolled a silver heron egg between my fingers, the rarest—and finest—known source of tempera. It was slightly larger than a chicken's, with a speckled grey surface that gleamed under the afternoon light streaming into the courtyard. I cracked it in half, then carefully tipped the yolk from one piece of the shell into the other, back and forth, discarding the clear, viscous fluid into a bowl underneath. Then I slid the remaining yolk into my left palm and tossed away the shell, preparing for the most delicate step.

I tilted my palm so that the yolk slid slowly into my right hand, then wiped the residue from my left onto a damp cloth. I repeated the tedious movement, as if rocking the yolk to sleep like an infant, each time cleaning the moisture from my hands until all that remained in them was a tiny, dry, golden orb. I pierced the yolk's membrane with a small knife and watched the liquid stream into a cup I had ready. I added a few drops of water collected from the Mirna River by the king's chief huntsman, then swirled the concoction together with a wooden spoon, yielding a frothy yellow emulsion.

*Every pigment has its own personality, its own way of telling its story, from how it responds to the light of day to how it chooses to behave with an artist's will and other instruments.*

I unstopped a glass vial and poured a trace amount of powdered lapis into one of the shallow bowls that rested on the table in front of me. Then I tipped a few drops of the emulsion onto the tiny pile of the deep blue dust and began stirring it together with my finger while willing a calm energy into it, intending to bring out the color's true complexity. The jellied mass's hue began to shift softly until it resembled a winter night's sky and radiated a subtle, silver sheen. Satisfied that it would make a lovely base for several blue shades, I transferred a dollop to a large slab of plaster—the very same type awaiting me in the royal alcove—that I'd been slashing with a rainbow of paint samples.

Although all were fully dried, several of my colors glistened brightly,

while others conspicuously did not. I traced my fingers over some while dreaming of faraway places, and though fully dried, their surfaces began waving rhythmically, commanded by an unseen tide or gale. Others appeared chipped or hewed, as if eroded by centuries of elemental forces. Some were so unnaturally opaque that if I stared at them for too long, I could feel their edges reaching out and lulling me into their void.

*Always be mindful of your colors, Carina. Most are harmless. But others, well, this is why we test them so rigorously.*

Combining colors—and always seeking new amalgamations of wood, bristle, yolk, and pigment—was my mother’s obsession. She aimed to discover whatever she could to amplify her gift. And mine, as well.

The courtyard’s lone door banged open. I hastily covered the paint-stained slab with a sheet of black cotton.

Paloma entered, carrying a tray of glass vials filled with varying shades of yellow and red pigments. The king’s advisor for all things pertaining to art and scholarly work, Paloma was thin and only a few years shy of being considered elderly. Their jacket and trousers were sewn together from complex shapes of airy, grey fabric, though markedly plain compared to the ostentatiousness of other court attire I had seen around the palace. Paloma had dyed their short hair a pale blue, however, and their face was streaked with thin lines of gold makeup—a simple yet striking means of entertaining court fashion.

“Will you be requiring anything else?” Paloma asked as they placed the tray onto the table.

Paloma was my sole contact besides the servants who brought me my food and the guards who maintained my confinement. Though Paloma’s attentiveness was earnest, I suspected that sequestering artists for the king’s merriment was a routine task for them.

“No, that will be all for today,” I replied.

“Very well,” Paloma said, forcing a slight bow. They started to turn away and then paused.

“Yes?” I asked. “You appear to have something more to say.”

“It’s simply that, well, in all the years I have been assisting artists in their commissions for the king, I have never engaged with one quite as—” Paloma rotated a hand in the air. “—*fastidious* as yourself, Carina. When do you expect to actually start *painting*?”

“My brushes will soon be complete,” I replied, gesturing to the dozen already laid out on a table. They were far from the finest wooden implements I’d ever turned, nearly all of them misshapen. I had never used wood from the uabrocon tree, but Mother always spoke highly of its characteristics. And I hadn’t used a lathe in years—not since Father had

passed.

“And I’ve begun validating the shades of various pigments, as well,” I continued. “Once all of my supplies are in order, then I will commence painting the king’s mural.”

Paloma gave a short bow while subtly rolling their eyes, then turned on a heel to leave. The wooden door slammed behind them, and from beyond it came the scraping of iron as the guards slid the lock into place.

I glanced up at the patch of sky encircled by the high sandstone walls and decided I’d take a reprieve from mixing paint. The courtyard’s opening above was only wide enough—and such was the courtyard’s proximity on the mountain slope—that it allowed sufficient light for evaluating colors to bathe over the space for only a short portion of the day.

While my latest batch of samples cured, I decided to add a finishing touch to several brush handles. Using a small knife, I began etching a tiny symbol into each of them. Three curved lines slashed across a diamond. My father’s mark. The person who had taught me how to carve, turn, and care for my very own set of brushes, so that I would leave Mother’s alone. Even after the pox took her, I still preferred the precision of my own set, which Father had crafted for my stubbier fingers. I could have asked for my brushes to be brought to me, but they were of walnut, and wouldn’t suffice my needs for the king’s mural.

Father’s face flashed before me. Streaks of grey had long taken over his wiry black beard, and his eyes betrayed a constant weariness at the prospect of another long shift hacking away inside a cavern teeming with gold. The mine claimed him, eventually, as it did so many others.

The knife slipped and blood dripped from my hand, the sharp pain wrenching my concentration back into the confines of the courtyard. Annoyed with my carelessness, I wrapped a scrap of white cloth around it, then marveled at the rich hue of red that blossomed. A soft breeze drifted down from the sky and rustled the black cotton sheet that concealed my paint samples, exposing the deep blue lapis that I had mixed just before Paloma arrived. It was still wet, as was a dollop of white paint next to it, yearning to be transformed.

I dipped one of my brushes into the colors, then traced the paint along the cloth bandage, carefully avoiding the blood stain. I cast my thoughts into the sea, which I had always yearned to gaze upon in person, and which Mother so prominently featured in many of her paintings. I recalled the fierce gaze she saved only for her canvases, as well as the sweat dripping from Father’s brow as he carved his intricate designs. Their boundless energy was like surging water.

Curvy streaks of blue began splashing beneath my brush and across my

palm. Foaming waves the size of pebbles crested over the divots of my knuckles and lapped at the pads of my fingers. I continued adding more paint to the scene until not a single thread of cloth was untouched by either dynamic ocean currents or my own cooling blood. I tipped my palm over and a stream of water cascaded to the floor. The scent of brine wafted up and across my nose before disappearing into the open sky above.

When the paint eventually seeped into the area of cloth stained with blood, the colors immediately grew still, frozen in time and space as their essences became contaminated. The skin along my fingers and near my wrist had grown pale. But not from the loss of blood.

*Never allow yourself to be fooled by illusions, Mother warned. Our gift does not allow us to create life with our brushes. We can borrow it for a time, however, from someplace else. But there is always a cost.*



On the evening of the unveiling, the alcove was hidden behind a heavy, white velvet curtain, just as it had been for the many days during which I'd been painting behind it, my labor and its fruit always sequestered from the eyes of dutiful guards.

To his credit, King Vilmar showed astonishing patience for a man with so little time left in his prolonged life, abstaining from stolen glances at my progress during court proceedings. Now, he watched his guests mingle while sitting atop his throne, which had been moved to the side of the hall so that nothing would block anyone's view of the unveiling.

I sat next to him, taking the position of honor at the king's right hand. When the hall had nearly filled to capacity, Vilmar leaned over to whisper into my ear.

"I cannot describe how much anticipation I have felt for this day," he said wistfully. "I have held firm in my faith that your work may end up being one of the jewels in my collection."

Vilmar then turned towards me with a jarring twist of his neck, malice in his crystal blue eyes. "I do certainly hope that, for your sake, my dear, your work is at the very least worthy to hold a place amongst my treasures."

"I assure you, Our Revered, that you will have never experienced anything like it."

He smiled. But only his mouth contorted into something resembling amiability. Vilmar then signaled to Paloma, who stood several paces away, and the advisor ordered a cadre of musicians to begin the festivities. The sounds of a steady drum and a lively mandolin echoed through the hall, silencing each of the tiny conversations in the hall, like a hawk plucking

sparrows from the air.

“My friends!” Vilmar called, clapping his hands together. “Thank you for joining me on this wonderful occasion. As you know, I have been gifted with a long and fruitful life. And I will be celebrating yet another new year in only a few weeks’ time.”

Polite applause erupted across the hall. Vilmar raised a hand for silence.

“Thank you,” he said. “As a precursor to what I anticipate will be a memorable affair, I am pleased to share with you all tonight a new artist of whom I have had the pleasure of discovering. Lady Carina!”

The crowd applauded again, although less enthusiastically. As instructed that morning by Paloma, I rose from my chair, bowed, and stepped to the opposite side of the alcove.

“And now, let us all gaze upon Carina’s work,” Vilmar announced. He then motioned to two servants positioned at either end of the curtain. They yanked hard on a pair of ropes, and the bulky curtain crumpled to the floor.

Everyone in the crowd gasped, because it was expected of them. Many of the exclamations, however, were feigned and, to my ear, sounded vaguely disappointed. Modesty aside, I knew, as did they, that the mural before them was the result of a highly skilled artist. The details were sublime and the landscape lush. It appeared as if someone had transplanted a slice of true life onto the wall, such was the intricacy of my brushwork.

But it was a simple, pastoral scene. For a crowd who had grown accustomed to feeling shocked and challenged by the strange and abstract that so typically dominated Vilmar’s predilections in recent years, the unveiling of a scene that mirrored what one could see while strolling through the countryside must have been disheartening. Everyone turned towards the king, expecting to see their despondency reflected back at them.

But King Vilmar grinned like a child as he stared at my mural inside the alcove.

A rolling meadow of tall grass dominated the foreground, where a massive black aurochs stood hitched to a weathered, wooden cart. Beyond, a row of cottages with thatched roofs squatted amidst soft afternoon sunlight and beneath a cloudless, blue sky. A range of jagged mountain peaks slumbered in the background, their caps of white snow glistening.

“Marvelous,” Vilmar whispered, lifting his hand slightly as if to reach out and stroke the hide of the aurochs.

“The sunlight spread across the grass,” he continued, more audibly. “The softness of the snow, so stubbornly stuck upon those sharp cliffs.

Extraordinary detail. This mural pleases me to no end.”

I smiled politely and bowed again, my heart thundering in my chest as I prepared for the final act of the ceremony.

When the crowd had grown noticeably discomfited by Vilmar’s long silence, Paloma leaned forward and coughed loudly. Vilmar’s body shook, and he blinked hard to wrest his glazed eyes away from the alcove.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “And now, I would like to offer my customary gift to all of you, the opportunity to behold the final stroke of my artist’s touch. Carina, please complete your work.”

I had prepared a small number of paints just before the gala began, and had placed them, along with my set of uabroccon brushes, in a pail on a small wooden table within the alcove. I had also collected all of the alcove’s canvas paintings, sculptures, vases, and even the elegant wooden chair, and propped them together against the sandstone wall on one side of the mural. No one had thus far seemed to notice.

I picked up a brush, dabbed it in a shade of green, and then began accentuating a patch of tall grass. I thought of my mother and father, and concentrated only on our happiest times together. I focused on the grain of wood beneath my fingertips, the suppleness of the bristles gliding over the plaster surface, and the essence of the egg that bound together the million tiny particles of color along the alcove wall. I willed as much of myself into the scene as I could—all of my recent anger, pain, and regret — and reached out to the universe to deliver life into my work from some unseen plane of existence.

The scene sparked into motion.

The edges around it glowed softly, as the sunlight that bathed the green field flowed past me and into the palace’s great hall. A soft breeze rustled the grass, which the guests in the hall then felt caress their cheeks. The pale smoke that had hung motionless in the air above the chimneys of the village began to billow upwards, disappearing out of view above the top edge of the mural. The aurochs snorted and shuffled its hooves, and its ears twitched against the annoyances of flies that even my skillful hand had not fully realized.

*Egg of the silver heron, Mother had told me. Tarpan bristles. Uabroccon wood. I stumbled upon this combination quite by accident. If your father hadn’t been so curious to try his hand at a new species of wood... Well, regardless, it is the finest union I have ever experienced. If you can find them, Carina, they will amplify your gift like nothing else. And you’ll be able to call forth far more beautiful worlds than I ever could.*

I glanced across the hall, and saw that all eyes were locked onto the scene. So no one noticed that all of the color had drained from my face,

hair, hands, and, indeed, my entire body. Nearly fainting from the sudden exhaustion, I grabbed the pail filled with my brushes and tossed it into the mural where it landed silently on the soft grass. I then reached for the various paintings and other pieces of Vilmar's collection and quickly began throwing each one into the mural, as well.

My strength began failing me as I grabbed hold of the final piece in the alcove—the wooden chair. Finally, someone yelled from inside the great hall, drowning out the screeching of the chair's feet sliding across the stone floor.

“Seize her!”

I collapsed into the chair, unable to stand and my breath struggling as if I'd sprinted across a field chasing an errant foal. I swept my gaze across the great hall, noting the guards immobilized by shock—and, yes, fear—unsure of whether or not to approach me. Then I looked at the king.

Perhaps I should have absconded with his collection beforehand, during the dozens of hours I had been working, hidden behind the curtain.

But *that look* on his face.

This was the moment when he realized that his entire collection—his life's obsession—was taken from him. When the only things that he ever truly cared for were ripped away. Just as he had done to so many others whose skills he'd hoarded rather than allow to create for others. Others who were forced to find work elsewhere, as meat for the king's army or as excavators for his mines. Father's face flashed before me, but I shoved it aside—I couldn't afford to be distracted by grief.

The guards had come to their senses, and they were charging towards me, pikes and sabres in hand. I reached into my pocket and ran my finger along the edge of the turning knife tucked inside. Summoning all of my remaining energy, I kicked against the floor as hard as I could, sending the chair—and me along with it—falling backwards through the mural.

I threw my hand out in front of me. Grey drops of blood flew from my finger and splashed onto the scene of a raging, despondent king in front of his scandalized court, contaminating it.

The sandstone hall vanished. The connection I had forged between realms was severed, and all that remained in my view was empty air and a range of jagged mountains in the distance. I hit the ground hard, slamming against the sharp angles of the sturdy chair. Thankfully, the thick grass cushioned my head.

I lay unmoving for a long while, exhausted, and wondered whether or not Mother would have approved of my actions. I knew that she would have loved to have seen this creation, though. Father would have, too. I also spared a brief thought for those in the court who would no doubt

receive Vilmar's wrath over the loss of his collection.

The sun stood only a handspan over the horizon when I finally had the strength to stand. The color had started to return to my limbs, and I felt a newfound warmth swimming under the skin of my face. The dried blood along my finger remained grey, but the wound itself was slowly shifting to a delicate shade of pink. I turned to look towards the village filled with thatched-roof cottages, and hoped that it would be home to a healer. I tore a length of fabric from the hem of my skirt and wrapped it over my wound.

Then I walked over to the aurochs that had been standing idly across the field and politely guided it, along with the weathered cart it pulled, to the spot where King Vilmar's collection lay in a heap. I picked up all of the objects that didn't appear damaged and placed them into the cart, though I didn't yet know if they would be of any value in this place.

One thing I did know, however, was that the chair—the piece of woodcraft that had long held a place in Vilmar's collection—had its maker's mark hidden underneath the lip of the front rail. I carefully rotated the chair, and there it was. Three curved lines slashed across a diamond.

I loaded my father's chair into the wagon, situating it next to the other pieces, before encouraging the aurochs to begin walking. I strolled beside it towards the village, eager to discover where my parents' tutelage had taken me.

# The Nomad

Aron Brown

Aron Brown is a non-binary bisexual Angeleno who learned to read at a very early age by imitating their parents, holding the book upside down, and making up most of the words. This put them on the road to composing stories for the rest of their life. Many years later, they graduated from Wellesley College with a major in Cinema and Media Studies. They are obsessed with history, literature (especially Shakespeare), comics, and tabletop RPGs. Aron also spent many years writing fanfiction, but don't look it up.

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Content warning: animal death, gore.

Once upon a time, a nomad was lost, alone, in a forest that was rumored to be filled with wolves.

He was the youngest son of his family. They had traveled with the caravan for many generations. He was dull compared to his brilliant older brother, who entertained farmers in their taverns, and his talented father, who could smith delicate flowers from silver and hone a dull blade until the edge could pass through wood like water. The nomad's one gift was his understanding of animals. He cared for the band's herds as they traveled, calling to them in his soft lilting voice. He was not able to carry a tune in a pail, but the cattle would follow his song happily. Farmers would venture to the edge of their towns to speak to him when their cows lost weight and wouldn't give milk, or their sheep had blue tongues and bleeding gums. The nomad was always glad to help the farmers. He sometimes even refused payment, which angered his father. His band thought he was too trusting, perhaps a little stupid. Naive in a world that punished innocence.

It had been while he was away, helping a farmer with a tricky calving, that the villagers attacked the caravan's encampment. The farmer's son ran in, sobbing. Even as he pointed to the edge of the woods, the nomad

could see smoke rising to mingle with the winter clouds. He left, ignoring the farmer's protests, eyes fixed on that point in the sky, the scent of dewy grass and morning mist transforming to charcoal and searing meat as he ran to his family.

The wagons were aflame. Two of the horses lay on their sides, their blood turning the dirt to mud beneath them. The nomad knelt and picked up a hand axe he recognized. His father had crafted it himself, creating the pattern on the handle with silver.

The wagons lit bodies, blackened beyond recognition.

The farmers were still there.

They attacked him with axes, with shovels, with knives. In the firelight, he thought he recognized their faces, but they were transformed, warped and horrible in their bloodlust. He ran, fleeing into the shadows of the forest, rushing through brush that tore at his clothes, feet pounding the dirt floor, crushing leaves—until he twisted his ankle, fell, and slammed his head against a tree root.

When the nomad awoke, he realized he was truly alone. He had only the axe and the clothes on his back. Even if he did not return to the village that tried to kill him, he would almost certainly die. He lay on the forest floor staring up at the thick canopy of leaves blocking out the sky. If he chose not to move, he could close his eyes. He could fall asleep and let the winter cold take him.

His family might be alive. He did not know for certain that they were dead. Those bodies could be other members of the caravan. He tried not to think of faces, names, laughter and singing disappearing into fire.

If his family was alive, he could not wander through the world without trying to find them. A nomad on his own was a calf without a herd. The bonds of their band kept them safe.

The nomad pushed himself to his feet, wobbling on his swollen, throbbing ankle. There was no place of safety behind him; he must move forward. The cold lay on his skin, numbing him until he hardly remembered what warmth felt like. The only way to mark of the passage of time was the ache in his feet and the intensifying pain in his ankle, which had stopped whispering its agony and had begun screaming with every limping step. It was said that wolves ate those who stepped off the path, but he had no sense of where the king's road cut through the bracken and growing snow drifts.

Then the nomad stumbled forward and found himself bathed in light, dazed and half-delirious with hunger. The world had opened, the trees parting before him to reveal a dingy hamlet. There were not more than ten stone buildings. Their thatch was dirty and damp with snow, and the sour

smell of mildewing rushes mixed with the resin of the trees. He wondered why the dirt footpath that cut between the buildings was so narrow; there wasn't nearly enough room for carts, or animals.

Then he realized there were no traces of animal life. No stinking cow pats mixed with the mud, no clucking and squawking of fowl, no steam or sweat rising from horses, no smell of dog fur. There wasn't even bird song.

His head swam as his nose caught the scent of food—roasting meat and spices, fresh bread straight from an oven, broth. Slipping and lurching forward on his blistered feet, he followed the aroma to the one building that was moderately larger and better maintained. It appeared to be an inn. There was a wooden sign hanging above the threshold, but the painted inscription had faded beyond recognition. The nomad scabbled at the heavy wooden doors with fingers that were raw from the cold.

The three people inside looked up when he entered: an innkeeper wearing an apron and a suspicious look; a dour woman with stringy hair attending a pot on the fire; and a bright-eyed girl sweeping dust from the corners of the empty room.

The nomad asked, through chapped lips, for food. The innkeeper retorted, "A man cannot pay for food with beggary. This is a house of trade, not a charity."

The nomad offered his services as a singer or a storyteller, and wracked his brains for the tales his clever brother used to tell. The innkeeper laughed. "You're too hoarse to speak, much less sing."

The nomad offered to sweep and scrub the inn for his lodging. "And keep my daughter from her work?" the innkeeper said. "Be off with you."

In desperation, the nomad looked about the inn and his eyes fell on the mantelpiece. A large wolf's head—larger than any wolf he had seen before—snarled above the fire, lit from below like a demon in the pits of Hell. "Your forest is troubled by wolves," he said. The innkeeper and the woman at the fire exchanged looks. The nomad hefted his father's axe from his belt, trying not to betray the weakness in his arms. "When I am a man with a full belly, I am as strong a hunter as anyone in your village," he lied. "I will kill a wolf for every week you give me lodging."

The innkeeper laughed, but his stern expression broke. He waved to the woman by the fire, and she brought the nomad a bowl of stew from the pot. "I will give you food and lodging for one night, if you agree to accompany my daughter through the woods to her grandmother's house. And if you manage to kill one of the beasts, you may stay for an entire week."

The nomad hesitated. He probably would not be a very good hunter, or protector. But what choice did he have? He shook the innkeeper's hand. The vegetables in the stew were skinny, and the meat had a coarse, ropy

texture. The nomad forced it down and did not make eye contact with his benefactors.

“The livestock were not eaten,” the innkeeper said. “They died slowly. When that wolf pack roams through the forest, they carry diseases on their vermin-riddled bodies. They spread their plague to our sheep, our dogs and cows.” His gaze was prickling the nomad’s scalp and neck. He kept his face turned to his bowl, scarfing his food.

“But we fear worse: that the predators will make off with our children.” The woman set a stein of dark amber ale in front of the nomad, startling him. He almost glanced up but caught himself. “They’re nothing more than beasts, but they’re clever. And charming, too, if you believe the stories.”

The nomad gave his thanks for the stew and the ale, which had left a metallic aftertaste. The girl tugged at his sleeve and led him to the loft of the empty stable. It was haunting, lying in a building that should have been filled with snorting, huffing beasts, but the hay was warm. He gave sincere thanks to the innkeeper’s daughter—and fell asleep the moment he closed his eyes.

Just as the morning chill began to seep into the stable, the girl opened the door. She was now wearing a bright red cloak, and she stared at the nomad in frank appraisal. She told him she had been sent to fetch him for the journey to her grandmother’s.

Before they set off on the path, the innkeeper handed his daughter a woven basket with a red cloth covering and gave the nomad a bag of dried meat. “Remember not to stray from the path, or dawdle on your way,” he said. “There are dangerous creatures in the woods.” The nomad looked down at his boots. They were thin at the heels. The girl’s shoes were sturdy, well-made, and luxurious, like her beautiful red cloak. The girl promised to be careful, and she and the nomad began their journey.

The nomad walked in silence, listening for the sound of birds or rabbits. All he could hear was the crunch of his companion’s footsteps in the snow, her happy humming, and the swish of her basket against her cloak. He realized how long it had been since he walked next to someone, and was struck by the memory of many footsteps, many voices, the sounds and warmth of many people, and of his family beside him. He began to cry silently, rubbing away tears before the girl could notice.

Sunlight broke through a gap in the trees, and the girl gave a small gasp. A glade lay by the side of the path, covered in snow. Small flowers pushed through the white blanket, their petals bright red droplets. The girl in the red cloak begged him to pause so that she could pick a bouquet for her grandmother.

The nomad reluctantly agreed, unsure why she was so eager to break

her father's one rule so quickly. The sun was overhead, halfway through its path across the sky, and it was dangerous after dark. The girl insisted and ran to begin gathering red flowers.

There was a flash of something between the trunks of the trees—a hint of movement—and the nomad stiffened. Were those eyes? The kind that glowed, the pupils of a predator, glinting with reflected light? His palm slipped on the handle of the hand axe. He had to do something— even if he had lied to the innkeeper, he wasn't going to let the girl die because of his dishonesty. Hardly knowing what to do if he actually had to fight a wolf, the nomad rushed past the girl, telling her to stay hidden in the flowers.

She fell to her knees, scattering the flowers in the snow. He was aware of the roundness of her cheeks and eyes, the youthfulness of her features. She was only a child.

The nomad raced into the forest, trying to keep himself folded over, low to the ground, trying to remember how to run quietly, the way his father hunted. He had never learned how to hunt; the sight of animals in pain was too much for him. Every step he took seemed too loud—the snow and ice crunched and crackled under his feet. He tensed as he entered the woods, expecting hot, rancid breath on his face and sharp claws piercing between his ribs.

Instead, when his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the forest, he saw a thin, wild-eyed wolf cowering against a tree. Its frame was larger than any he had seen, but it was starved, shaking in the cold. He could make out the jut of its bones through bald patches in its fur. One of its paws was black, coated in blood. He could smell the infection from where he stood. It could barely keep itself upright, but attempted to growl.

The nomad felt his heart ache at the sight of the animal. Where was its pack? His eyes filled with tears. He lowered his axe and crouched beside the wolf, reaching into the bag of dried meat. "I must kill you to survive," the nomad said, "but you do not seem like a monster. You are a wolf, and you are hungry and injured. I will tell them you got away from me." He threw the wolf a piece of dried meat.

He turned to leave when he heard a voice behind him. "Hunter, you have shown me compassion I did not expect from humans in these woods." Astonished, the nomad turned to see the wolf bow its head to the ground. "I will save your life.

"There is a hag in this forest who is as old as poison moss and just as deadly—the grandmother of the girl in red. She will ensorcel you to enter her home; she will wheedle and cajole you." The wolf extended its injured paw towards the man. "I am dying, hunter. Kill me and take my paw as a talisman. It will keep you safe. No matter what the hag says, do not enter

the her house. The woods are not as dangerous as this creature.”

The nomad bowed his head, shaken by the wolf's words. He felt in his heart that the wolf was not lying— but the innkeeper had said the wolves were clever and manipulative. “I do not want to believe you.” He knelt beside the injured creature and stroked its fur, which was deep and thick behind its ears. It was matted and foul-smelling, but the wolf leaned into his touch. He could feel the raised scars etched across its neck and head. It had survived much already, but was choosing to die for him. The tears started back into his eyes. “But I will not be ungracious and refuse your sacrifice. Thank you, cousin.”

He stood, raised his father's axe, closed his eyes, and let the blade fall on the creature's neck. There was a horrible howl, and hot liquid splashed across his face. When he opened his eyes, the wolf was dead. The blackened paw soaked in a puddle of blood.

The nomad quickly cut off the paw, tore a strip off of his fraying tunic and wrapped the appendage in the dirty fabric. He slipped it under his clothes, shuddering at the feeling of the cold wet fur on his skin. When he lifted the corpse onto his shoulders, he was surprised by its weight; its skin hung off of its bones, but it weighed as much as a man. He stepped back out into the clearing, splattered with gore, and blinked back the blinding light reflected off of the snow-covered glade.

The girl in the red cloak was stunned to see him. She said she was sure he had been mauled when she heard the howl. She expected the pack to come and tear her to pieces. The nomad told her he had fought the monstrous creature and barely escaped with his life. He tried to make the details elaborate, like one of the stories his brother told in taverns. They struggled. They wrestled on the ground. He cut off the animal's paw in the heat of battle.

When they finally arrived at the end of the path, the sky was growing dark. The sun was crimson, soaking the clouds, which hung heavy and black overhead. The girl noted that the snow would be heavy that night, and that it was good that they were almost at her grandmother's house. The nomad shivered, remembering the wolf's warning.

The cottage was perfect. Unlike the buildings in the town, it was wooden with a shingled roof and a clay chimney. There was a neat garden and a hedge surrounding the plot of land, all buried in snow. The windows were full of warm light, and smoke was pouring from the chimney. But despite this comforting sight, the nomad recoiled from the door. It felt like a smiling mouth, waiting for him to knock so it could snap its jaws around his wrist.

The door opened, and the nomad saw a small, plump woman standing

on the threshold. She greeted them with a bright smile, and the girl in the red cloak ran to her side. They invited the nomad inside, but he, remembering what the wolf had told him, politely declined. “I would not want to track blood into your house, grandmother,” he said.

“That is no matter to us,” the grandmother said, “I am happy to scrub floors.”

“I have no place to put my kill,” the nomad said.

“I’d rather have a stinking dog in my house than have you freeze outside of it.”

The nomad smiled and tried to think like his brother, nimble and clever. “No, grandmother, I should stay out here and keep watch,” he insisted. “The wolves might investigate a house that smells of not just one person, but three.”

He willed himself to be charming, to sound knowledgeable and brave, even as he tried to keep his teeth from chattering. The grandmother eyed him, her smile not shifting from her face, then finally nodded. “Stay within the garden walls,” she said, “so you don’t get buried in the snow.” The girl reluctantly headed inside without him, glancing over her shoulder as she went.

The nomad collapsed onto the ground and pulled the body of the wolf that had died for him close, tucking himself into what remained of its fur. It was so large, and the fur so thick, that he did not feel cold. He pressed his palm to the paw in his tunic, both feeling foolish for laying outside and deeply relieved.

The trip back to the town in the morning was uneventful. Throughout, however, the nomad kept his eyes on the tree line, hoping to see another wolf, to ask it more questions. He did not see a tail or an eye, a tooth or a paw.

When the nomad and the girl returned to the inn, the innkeeper and the cook greeted them with delighted and relieved smiles— though he noted the innkeeper’s surprise when he saw the wolf’s body. The people from the town who had stayed within their homes when the nomad arrived appeared in the tavern to examine the corpse and praise him for his hunting prowess. They toasted him, clapped him on the shoulder, and bought him a feast. He was touched by their pride in him, a nothing scrap of a lad who had held his own against a giant monster. He told them the story about his death-defying battle with the beast.

He drank the ale offered to him by the townsmen, delighting in their goodwill. It was so akin to being among his caravan, trading stories and drinking, that he felt guilty that he had kept anything from them. The nomad pulled out the paw from inside his tunic and showed his new

companions his good luck charm. The girl was taken aback— he had not mentioned this before— but he was happy to find she was not angry with him.

The next day, when the nomad rolled over in the hayloft, he patted himself down and found he had misplaced the paw. Cursing himself, he ran back to the tavern. He looked under every table, in every nook and cranny, but the wolf's paw was gone. In his drunkenness, he must have dropped it. He sat on the stoop of the tavern and put his face in his hands. The wolf had trusted him with his gift. But perhaps the wolf was wrong. What was the paw going to protect him from? The family? The town that had welcomed him with open arms?

During the week, the innkeeper gave the nomad some hand-me-down clothes and shoes that were too small for him. The girl told him that they were curing the hide of the wolf he killed, and that the pelt would possibly pay for a cow or a sheep. Without other animals to butcher, they'd had to cook the wolves for meat. They talked about animal husbandry. The nomad wondered if, perhaps, he could stay in the town and help them raise new livestock. After all, there was no guarantee he would ever find his caravan again.

As the week came to an end, however, the nomad felt uneasy. He had no right to abandon his caravan just because he had stumbled upon some good luck, and he chided himself. He needed to renew the search.

He went to the innkeeper. "I think I must move on soon. I came into the woods trying to find my family— the rest of my caravan. It would be wrong of me to abandon the search."

The innkeeper's eyes reflected the firelight, hiding their expression. "Of course," he finally said. "But, cousin, didn't you get lost in the woods before? You almost died of hunger and cold, trying to make your way through this forest." The nomad conceded this was true. "Well, what would keep this from happening again?"

The nomad considered this. "Cousin," he said, with some hesitation, "could I ask for a favor? Could you find someone to help lead me out of the woods?"

The innkeeper shook his head. "Here, you must earn your favors. I will consider what task you can complete for me to earn a guide." With a chuckle, he added, "I thought you nomads would have a better sense of direction."

The nomad thought he heard a sneer in the other man's voice. The innkeeper had called him "cousin," but perhaps that familiarity only lasted as long as the wolf meat.

Still, he agreed. What choice did he have?

The next morning, the innkeeper came to him with the girl. Before he could help the nomad find someone to lead him through the woods, the nomad would accompany his daughter back to the grandmother's house. "It's nothing strenuous for you, wolf-killer, but it will be worth the favor if you continue to keep our girl safe."

The girl donned her cloak; she was a drop of blood against the snow on the path. The nomad pulled his secondhand clothing tight to his body, belted on his hand axe, and the two of them set out once more.

The quality of light was murky and grey. Fog filtered through the trees, flattening the woods into a wall of grey shadows. The only thing the nomad could make out clearly was the vivid red of the girl's cloak. Then, as they pushed deeper into the forest, the nomad realized they had somehow slipped off the trail.

The nomad caught the girl's shoulder and froze, straining to see where the path could be. The trunks of the trees blended with the shapes of rocks and undergrowth, and there was no opening in the mist. There was a rustle behind them, and the nomad seized his axe. Twisting his head back and forth, he pushed the girl behind him. There was a low growl from somewhere in the fog, a snapping of branches. Then there was a blur of dark fur and a flash of sharp teeth.

The wolf bowled the nomad over, knocking him onto his back—but instead of biting him, it continued to race towards the girl. She screamed and threw her hands up in front of her face. The wolf seized her forearm, its canines sinking into the red fabric of her cloak. The Rom scrambled to his feet, heart pounding and mind frantic as he raised his axe above his head and buried it in the animal's back.

It gave a horrible, almost human wail and released the girl, making a hobbling leap away from the nomad. He saw its eyes rolling wildly in its skull. With a piteous whimper, the wolf dashed into trees. The girl clutched her arm—there was blood seeping between her fingers. The nomad knelt beside her to help bandage the wound, but she pushed him away. "You have to kill it. What if it comes back?" she said, voice trembling.

The nomad took off after the wounded wolf, whipping between black bark trees, branches stinging his face. There was a bloody trail on the forest floor, bright and clear and pointing the way to his quarry.

He came to a parting in the trees and found himself face to face with the limping creature. Gore dripped from its back and its jaws. "I wish I had been able to do more," the wolf said, staring into the nomad's eyes, "so you could go free. But the girl in red is hard to kill."

The nomad was stunned. "You tried to kill her for me? But she's only a child!" He lowered his weapon, heart aching despite himself as the wolf

coughed and dripped bloody foam from its jaws.

“She is not what she seems, hunter. Do not be taken in by their disguises.” The wolf’s eyes widened. “Where is the paw my brother gave you?”

The nomad sucked in a breath. He had almost forgotten about the first wolf’s gift. He said he had lost it, coloring with embarrassment.

The wolf snorted and laid down. “You did not lose it. But there is no time. I am sick, hunter. I am dying with every breath I take. Kill me—and take three of my teeth.” The wolf glared at him. “You will not be able to resist entering grandmother’s house tonight—but you will not eat anything she serves you.”

The nomad was bewildered, but knelt beside the wolf. “Why would you do this for me? When I have hurt you?”

The creature tilted its head. “You are foolish. But you are kind, hunter. You must learn to see what is truly in front of you.”

He stood and looked away, staring at the sky as the blade swung, handle clasped in his hands, with a burning heaviness in his arms. There was a thud, and the wolf was dead.

The nomad blinked back tears and crouched beside the corpse. He opened the mouth and reared back onto his heels, twisting away from the stench of decaying flesh and iron. After a moment, he took a deep breath of clean, cold misty air and leaned closer, stomach churning. The wolf’s mouth was blackened, covered in pustules. He remembered looking into its maw when it leapt at him. It hadn’t been rotten like this. Was the girl’s cloak coated in some kind of poison? Heart sinking, he reached out to take one of the teeth. It came away with a soft slurp; the gums had been blighted, rotted.

The nomad choked back his nausea and worked as quickly as he could to work the wolf’s teeth loose. He dropped them into his new, hand-me-down coin purse. “Do not lose this gift, too,” he told himself. He got unsteadily to his feet and pulled the toothless wolf’s body across his shoulders.

The nomad followed the trail of blood back to the girl, head still hazy with what he had heard and seen. She was sitting in one of the trees, in case the pack returned to attack her. When she hopped off of her perch, the nomad saw that the cut on her arm was barely a scratch. The cloak had two rents where the wolf had torn into it, but the girl was safe.

She smiled at the body on the nomad’s shoulders and reached up to tug on the wolf’s ear. “You should know better than to try and kill me!” the girl whispered. A chill went down the nomad’s spine.

They continued their trek to the grandmother’s house. The fire was

crackling again, and the warm light was pouring from the windows. All the nomad could think was that he felt cold, and exhausted. The door opened and the little old woman stood stoop-backed on the step. The nomad felt the heft of the wolf on his back, the weariness of his muscles, which were starting to cramp. He had been tired last time, he thought, but not like this— like he needed to get inside, next to the fire, before he collapsed.

The nomad stepped through the gate and walked to the front door. The grandmother looked up to meet his eyes, and smiled brightly, wrinkles upon wrinkles folding around her small eyes. She waved him into the house. Like the garden, it was neat and well-ordered, with sheaves of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling. Two doors, each with a painted carving, led farther into the house. One had a bright red flower, the other a golden moon.

The grandmother and the girl led the nomad to the table. He had not broken bread inside a house—inside a tavern, certainly, but never in someone’s home. He settled awkwardly into one of the carved wooden chairs. Hospitality in the caravan felt natural, the easy friendliness of touching someone’s shoulder for reassurance, or grasping their hand to comfort them. As the grandmother set the food in front of him with care, the ritual of the act felt tight and uncomfortable, a costume.

But the girl and the grandmother were not like the other townspeople, he thought. They were like his farmer friend, who had warned him when the others attacked. They were not calling him rats and vermin. Who was he to spit on another’s consideration?

The wolf’s warning whispered in the back of his mind. He took a deep inhale of the soup the grandmother had set before him—and felt his stomach lurch away from the odor. He repressed the urge to gag. Why had he thought the soup smelled inviting before? It was as if he was staring into the mouth of the wolf again, into a rotting maw.

“Are you all right?” the grandmother asked, her voice lacquered with concern. The nomad man thought of the wolf’s teeth in his coin purse.

“I am fine, grandmother,” he said, “but I think I am tired from the fight with the wolf. Perhaps I could sit by the fire instead.”

“The soup will warm you from the inside,” the grandmother said.

“I’m... a little dizzy with fatigue,” the nomad said, “I don’t know if I can keep it down.”

“You will regain your strength faster if you eat,” the grandmother said, small eyes fixed on him.

Unsure what he could say, the nomad took a bite of the soup. It was sour, like spoiled milk and vinegar. He attempted to swallow, but the broth was wriggling on his tongue, bits of it spasming and slithering as he tried

to swallow. He dropped his spoon and barely made it outside before he vomited.

The substance on the ground didn't look like vomit, but like tar, or pine resin: dark and viscous. The girl brought him back inside, making noises of worry, and sat him in front of the fireplace. "I'm sorry, grandmother," he said hoarsely, "I think I must have caught something. I hate to refuse your hospitality."

"Of course," the grandmother said, "you shouldn't try to keep down food that won't stay down." Her voice was gentle, but when she turned away, the nomad saw her face spasm with rage.

They laid him on the hearth and placed a hand-stitched cushion under his head and a quilt as heavy as a leather saddle over his body. He was warm, and could barely shift his limbs under the weight of the blanket, but he couldn't sleep. The pains in his stomach kept him awake.

At one point, he thought he heard footsteps behind him. When he stirred to look over his shoulder, they halted; by the time he turned, there was no one there.

The journey back to the town was uneventful again, although the nomad felt the girl's gaze upon him the whole way back. He wondered what she was looking for.

When they entered the inn, the innkeeper greeted them once more with joyous cries and open arms. This time, however, the nomad could hear the note of falseness in his good cheer, see the frustration and bewilderment in his eyes. When the townspeople came to inspect the second wolf corpse, the nomad drank less and noticed more. The girl went to the innkeeper and confided with him; the nomad saw their eyes dart in his direction.

The townsmen asked what happened to the wolf's mouth—where had the three teeth gone? The nomad made up a story about knocking them out with the butt of his axe, sending them flying, planting them in the forest floor like seedlings. The men laughed, but the nomad saw a knowing look enter the girl's eyes.

The next morning, the pocket that held the wolf's teeth was empty. The nomad knew he had to leave.

He went to the innkeeper and said he wanted, instead of a week of lodging, a week of rations and amenities for his travels. He was leaving as soon as he could. The innkeeper seemed taken aback, but agreed. They would certainly supply him with traveling supplies. And with the good turn that he had done their family by keeping his daughter safe, he would be happy to find a guide for him. The nomad, who now watched every movement carefully, saw the moment the innkeeper's tapping fingers went still on the counter. "Why not have my daughter accompany you? You have

saved her life twice. It's only right that she be the one to return the favor."

The nomad's heart sank. He was not surprised when the innkeeper continued by saying the daughter would accompany him as far as her grandmother's house—it was not far then to the next village.

Still, he agreed. What choice did he have?

The next day, the innkeeper gave the nomad a pack full of supplies. There were vegetables they had scrounged up from the basement of the tavern, salted and dried meat, hard cheese, and very hard bread. There was also a water skin, perfect for traveling. "From when traders used to come to our town," the innkeeper said. "One day, we'll be prosperous again, and I hope you visit us."

The nomad smiled and nodded, hoping the others could not hear his heart, which sounded heavier and faster than galloping hoofbeats. The two of them set off for the third time, into the depths of the woods. The girl was cheerful, pointing out the moss on the trees and other signs of spring thawing the forest, but the nomad could only see the mended tears in her beautiful red cloak. The cloak that had poisoned the last wolf who tried to save him.

When the sun was overhead, the nomad said his legs were getting tired. He was going to look for some berries on the thorn bushes that had started to emerge from the snow. The girl asked him to bring her some.

After he had traveled as far as he could into the woods, the nomad began to sing. He could not carry a tune in a basket, but he knew his voice could draw animals his way. In the tongue of his people, he sang to the forest, calling to the wolves. He told them that his second gift from the wolves had gone missing—that it had been stolen. He would not kill another of their kind ever again, but he needed their help one last time.

He sang tonelessly, repeating his call. Minutes passed. He could not pretend he had been searching for berries for this long. The girl would be suspicious. The nomad closed his eyes tight and sang louder, hands clenched together.

There was a soft snap of twigs beside him. A wolf, fur a pale grey and stained with dried blood, stood watching him. "You are trying to leave the forest?"

"Yes," the nomad said, hope creeping into his voice, "yes, I am, but someone has stolen the paw and the teeth your brothers gave to me. I will have to enter the grandmother's house and eat her food."

The wolf bowed its head in thought, tail swishing slowly back and forth. "I will give you my left ear," it finally said. "If you hold it close to your person, and do not let the hag see it, you will not be taken by surprise. You will hear her wherever she is in the house. You must escape tonight."

The nomad threw his arms around the wolf's neck, so overcome was he. "I must repay my debt," he said. "Is there any way to stop the girl and the grandmother?"

"The hag is only safe within her garden walls," the wolf replied. "If you can find a way to bring her outside, we can defeat her."

The nomad breathed in the musk of the wolf's fur, and squeezed his eyes tight. "Thank you, cousin," he said. Taking the wolf's left ear in one hand and his axe in the other, he cut through the flesh and cartilage as if it were butter. It did not flinch, or whine, but simply huffed through its nose.

Placing the ear into his tunic, the nomad washed his hands and the blade of his axe with the water from his skin, then hastened back to the path. He apologized for his delay—it was still too early for berries. The girl laughed and nudged him back on the path. She was eager to keep moving.

They arrived at the cottage near sundown once more. The nomad was struck by the delicious smell on the air. The home never seemed so cozy, the glow from the windows so much like an embrace. He wanted to go inside and eat dinner with his kindly hostess and the girl in the red cloak, then get a good night's rest.

A voice underneath the hum of pleasant thoughts and anticipation warned him: do not forget what these people can do.

The girl and the grandmother were attentive, smiling as they sat him down to eat a supper of roast herbs and vegetables that tasted delicious. It did not writhe in his mouth or twist in his stomach. Yet again, the nomad wondered if he was wrong to doubt these good people. They had only ever been courteous.

But the voice underneath his delight in eating good food and being warm and comfortable reminded him: do not forget what these people can do.

The nomad went to bed down on the cushions and under the quilt the grandmother laid out for him. The hearthstones were just the right temperature, heating him from below, toasting his cold feet and hands. For a moment, he thought about putting the wolf's ear in his pack; surely he had spent enough time in the grandmother's company to know she was a sweet old woman, not a hag.

But the voice under the hypnotizing crackle of the fire and the weight of the quilt said, firmly: do not forget what these people can do.

As the night lengthened, the nomad began to doze. He would start awake at pops in the fire, creaks of the wood, and the sound of branches scratching at the roof of the cottage. He was beginning to get restless when he heard, as clearly as if they had been speaking right behind him, the girl and grandmother conversing.

“He’s finally gone to sleep,” the girl said, stifling a giggle. “After weeks of waiting, we’ll finally be able to kill him.”

“You’ll have more meat to sell to the town—and we’ll have taken care of another vagrant,” the grandmother said. At least, the nomad thought it might be the grandmother. She sounded more high-pitched and whistling than before, as if she were stretched as long and thin as a reed pipe.

He stifled his panicky breathing. The quilt felt even heavier, and he strained to lift it off of his body. As soon as it was off of his shoulders, he slithered out from under the weight and scurried to his pack. The grandmother spoke in her high, reedy voice, “The time is proper, child. Let us be done with this nuisance.”

The nomad shouldered the pack and ran out the door, heart pounding in his throat. He dashed through the garden, jumping over the buried vegetables. But just as he was about to step through the hedge, onto the path, he paused. He suddenly understood: the wolves had been people once, people who had been cursed by the hag. Other travelers might pass through these woods. He hefted his axe into his hands and waited for the grandmother and the girl to emerge.

He did not have to wait long. He flinched at the twin screams of fury that erupted from the house. The cottage suddenly did not look peaceful and beautiful. Even as he watched, mold and decay started to creep across the walls, spidering from the corners of the windows to the ground. The snow turned black and patchy, melting away to reveal the withered and blackened garden below.

The nomad’s hands were slick with perspiration, but he did not back out of the garden. He waited, eyes fixed on the door.

It slammed open and swung on its hinges. The girl that stood in the doorway was not wearing a cloak made of red cloth. Teeth bared and eyes wild, she stood dripping blood from a coat of flayed skins.

Behind her—not small and plump at all now—swayed something like the grandma, if she had been taken at either end and stretched like a thread on a loom. She hunched over to move out of her cottage and her head cleared the roof when she stood. She was as tall and thin as the black bark birches. Her hands ended in fingers as brittle as twigs. Her lips dripped black resin. Her eyes were huge and empty sockets.

The nomad swallowed. “Why, grandmother,” he said, stepping backwards towards the hedge, “what large eyes you have.”

“All the better to sssssssee you with my dear,” the creature said, twisting its long, thin body towards him.

The girl’s eyes were fixed on him. She looked hungry.

“Grandmother, what very long arms you have.” The nomad held the axe

before him, and kept backing towards the gate.

The hag took three long, whispering strides through her decaying garden, and stood above him, craning over him. “All the better to hhhhold you with, my dear,” it said, its long, long fingers stretching towards him. It smiled down at him with teeth as sharp and jagged as broken wood.

His breath caught in his throat, but he steeled himself. “Grandmother, what large teeth you have.”

The moonlight reflected off of the silvered back of the grandmother’s eyes; predator’s eyes. “All the better to eat you with my dear,” she said, and as quick as a trap snapping shut, she and the girl shot towards him.

But the nomad was prepared. Just as they reached him, he ran, tripped, and fell backwards out of the garden.

The hag set its long, root-like foot on the earth outside of her garden and froze, eye holes lengthening in shock. “What is this?” He could hear the growling behind him. Growling emanating from every shadow in between the trees, menacing and triumphant. He shuffled backwards on his hands and feet towards the soft padding of wolves’ paws on snow. The hag’s expression was fearful.

The nomad took a deep breath and sang as his friends came to finish the job.

# Sabo Tasha Cemetery, I Walk By

Martins Deep

Martins Deep (he/him) is a Nigerian poet, artist, & and currently a student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His works deeply explores the African experience of the boy/girl child. His creative works have appeared, or are forthcoming on *FIYAH*, *The Roadrunner Review*, *Covert Literary Magazine*, *Barren Magazine*, *The Hellebore*, *Rathalia Review*, *Mineral Lit Mag*, *Agbowó Magazine*, *Surburban Review*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *FERAL*, *Kalopsia Literary Journal*, *Whaleroad Review*, *Kalahari*, *Qwerty*, & elsewhere. He loves jazz, adores Bethel Music, and fantasizes about reincarnating as an owl. He tweets @martinsdeep1.

“Sabo Tasha Cemetery, I Walk By” © 2021 by Martins Deep.

Today, the cemetery here in Sabo is not  
as silent as the dark room  
whose brick walls tasted my body as brittle mica—  
each smither bursting forth with a shrieking ache.

Blackbirds sprinkled here & there  
in this place of void calling to my void  
in the accent of rustling leaves.  
There's a guitarist seated on a tombstone  
with an epitaph scaped off by the jealous fingers  
of an unremembered dead. A ghost hovering by  
drops a crumpled sheet music into his hat as he busks.

They say there are more dreams  
here than there are dead bodies.  
I'm moonwalking, hoping a dream playing possum  
lassoes me taut around my wrist.

Reaching home, mother meets me by the door,  
*“Efe, i was told you were seen  
at that cursed place smiling at the wind. why?  
was it your father again? he must stop calling your  
name.  
you’re the only one i have left”*

I latch the door of my room,  
unsubscribe from a mortician’s YouTube channel,  
and open my curtains to the sun watching  
the reflection of its yellow face  
on my forehead smeared with olive oil.

# Galatea and Her Sculptor

## I. Papadopoulou

Ioanna Papadopoulou is a Greek author, currently residing in Glasgow. She studied Art History and Heritage Visualization and has worked in museums, libraries and community centres. She is currently on a Museum studies course. She has been published at *Hexagon Magazine*, *Idle Ink* and *Collective Realms* and an upcoming story at *Nymphs*.

“Galatea and Her Sculptor” © 2021 by I. Papadopoulou.

I have always been called Pygmalion’s love but this isn’t my story. I was made of marble and was part of Gaia herself, older than all humans. But my fate wasn’t to remain a part of the earth.

I don’t remember much from my time before I was made a piece and was brought in front of Pygmalion. I felt his hands over my matter and the more he sculpted my form, chipping me apart and uncovering the being hidden inside, the clearer my new identity and name became.

“Galatea,” he named me and I felt immediately at home. I waited patiently for him to give me his final touches. He gave me eyes, a mouth and a body. I felt how he caressed me to give me breasts. I could feel how carefully he made them be the right size and added perky and well-rounded nipples. He took steps back and watched his work and I felt ecstatic as he gazed at how perfect and sexual he had made me be. I am not going to lie. I felt proud to belong to that creative genius. I felt worthy and important that I was made to inspire such looks and to forever be marked as a masterpiece, evidence of Man’s genius.

I wanted it. That’s where my problems began. I could never show that I wanted it so I was only left to be an object to better describe Pygmalion.

He came back to me with passion and desire. His touch kept bringing me to life and I suddenly was aware of the limitations of my material. I was made of marble, a noble material. I knew that it only exemplified Pygmalion’s skill. I knew that by being made of that material, I elevated him to artistic supremacy. I reminded myself that it was his genius that needed to come through me.

Oh, how I wanted it. I still hadn't really realized my problems. The desires of decorative stones matter little to their creators.

The labour of my making was long and luxurious. I enjoyed the process, as Pygmalion's warm body was so close to my cold one. I enjoyed how I made him writhe and brought goosebumps on his skin. I felt elated that my existence, the pinnacle of his artistic existence, was able to have such profound physical effect on a genius like Pygmalion. I enjoyed his sweat over my body and I wished I could give him mine, if I only had some to give.

I didn't want him to feel unloved or unwanted. I wanted him to understand how his gaze of love and passion towards me had given me the gift of thought and self-awareness.

Oh, how I wanted it! Oh, I was a fool.

I first realized that something was wrong when Pygmalion came to the studio with some men behind him. They carried another piece of marble which they left next to me. It was a solid block, without life or face. It was still part of Gaia, as I once had been. I couldn't turn my face or body, as movement isn't awarded to my matter by the Gods. I was only able to feel that something was going terribly wrong but couldn't find any words for it.

"Place it with care," Pygmalion instructed the men that carried me away from our home. I felt a stinging bitter feeling of betrayal and pain. I didn't want these men touching me. Their hands were rough and uncaring as they grabbed me and I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell them to stop but I had no voice, only my thoughts, trapped in this marbled existence. They covered me with a cloth and left me alone and scared in the dark.

How could my Pygmalion let anyone but himself touch me? I was his greatest masterpiece. I was the divine gift of artistic genius. I was necessary for him to shine. How could he let them touch me?

I nearly laugh at these thoughts I had. They are to me now so naive but I excuse myself because I was just months old when these events that defined me happened.

I was put in a public temple, devoted to the Goddess Aphrodite.

It was then, in my horror and despair that I realized that I had gotten my story all wrong. I wasn't his Galatea anymore. I had been abandoned and discarded to be another statue of the Goddess of love, in a room with many others.

I hated my name, then. I wanted to go back to when I was just marble, with no being, living inside Gaia and part of a bigger and wider whole. That state of being didn't require me to think and feel. That didn't pain me when I remembered how I shared my love with Pygmalion when he made me.

The memories of his touch, which once had brought me such love and pleasure, such pride and final existence, now made me wish I had the ability to weep.

I was his perfect creation. I held on to that. I was built and sculpted to be a perfect female.

It was in that temple, discarded among other statues, inferior to me, that I first gazed on a real, breathing, feeling and warm woman. She was a crippled creature, who walked hunched and cleaned our room. I had seen glimpses of myself in Pygmalion's eyes and I knew that I looked nothing like her.

It was her that made me forget some of my sorrows and love for Pygmalion. She cleaned at night, caressed all of our bodies and admired us with patience. Her worship of us and admiration was different from all the other people that came. She was broken. She struggled to bend and move and I felt that she and I were exact opposites.

I wanted to do the same but my material didn't let me. She was so broken that it pained her to move at all. If only I could swap lives with her, I thought. She could stand here in my stead and I could move away.

Life in the temple was hard. The temple of Aphrodite was a place of sexual pleasure and I was degraded. I became pornographic. People didn't simply lust for me but expressed it as they gazed at me. I was cursed to not be able to close my eyes and had to watch all of them. Other times, the priestesses of the temple took care of the men. I still had to watch and sometimes, some women, looked at me back. I thought then they mocked me as if they knew that I could see, feel and judge.

Nowadays, I imagine I was simply a better sight to look at than the men they pleased.

They were called Priestesses of Aphrodite but really the temple was a brothel and they were the prostitutes. I dread to think what that analogy makes me.

Time went on like that and I forgot my name and my sculptor. I had no concept of time to tell you how long it had been since he came back into my life. He stood in front of me and looked at me with a longing gaze. I was too wise by them to be elevated by such looks. I thought I couldn't bear it if he used me as all the other men did.

He didn't. He simply looked at me and admired me. I thought that he admired me, Galatea. I was still unwise of the ways of the world, you see. I can now say with definite certainty that he was admiring himself.

He came many times and I learnt of his fate thanks to the priestesses' gossip. "He made this one," one of them, Phoebe, said as they walked among the halls one night when all the men had left and they were free to

do and be as they pleased.

“It is beautiful,” Ianthé, the other priestess said. “Look at the details.”

Phoebe scoffed. “It is exactly what a man thinks of women,” she said and the other nodded. I didn’t understand what they meant and, even to this day, I don’t think I do.

“He has never made another one like her,” Phoebe continued. “I heard all his next works were rejected.”

They spoke more of Pygmalion but I don’t remember the exact words. Perhaps, I don’t remember these words either and I am simply imagining having heard that conversation. I cannot tell for certain.

Pygmalion came again to see me many times. He always looked at me with longing and admiration. He didn’t make me feel loved anymore, though. I felt pleased that he suffered once he abandoned me. That it wasn’t his hands that made me great but rather the other way around. I was the only piece of marble he could ever make a masterpiece of.

I watched him pray in front of me and heard the whispers of his wishes.

“Oh great goddess of love and desire,” Pygmalion prayed to Aphrodite. “Give me back my life. Give me back what I have been missing to bestow upon you all the gifts and pleasures of the world. I wish for Galatea, the only woman I ever longed for to come to me.”

His words struck me as odd and then they alarmed me. I had once wished for the life he had and for me to join him. Yet, after all these couplings and ejaculations I had watched, I didn’t want that anymore. At least my white, cold surface made people move away. He kept on praying for me to come to life and I found myself praying to Artemis, Athena and Hestia as he prayed to Aphrodite.

I screamed for them in my mind that begged them to show me some mercy. I wonder if they felt it odd that I prayed to them, who were Goddess of chastity, from a temple of lust and sexual pleasure. “Please do not make me,” I begged. “Great goddess, please protect me. Let me remain as I am, a creature of thought and internal feeling. I wish for nothing else but to remain as I am.”

I prayed to Gaia, who I was once part of for help. “Please do not let them defile a part of you more than they already have to.”

I know they all heard me. I know it because I felt Aphrodite’s breath over my body. I felt her approach, inside her own temple where there was a musky scent of sweat and semen all over in dedication to her and she was stronger. As she started fulfilling Pygmalion’s wish, I kept on praying to the chastity goddesses and Gaia.

It was an arrow, which nobody appeared to have thrown, which came right through my chest, breaking me apart.

With cracks all over her, chipped and broken, I was free and saved. Aphrodite wouldn't have used her power to make an ugly creature that wouldn't fulfil Pygmalion's sexual desires. She wouldn't want her power to be associated with a female rejected by a male so she left me as I was. Soon, I was taken off from display and left, broken and unattractive, in storage. They couldn't destroy me as I was a statue of Aphrodite and her image wasn't to be mocked. I was left in peace for a long time and have remained in that state of storage ever since.

I moved from the hands of pirates, merchants and priests until I am here, in this new storage place. My authenticity is even disputed but I don't mind. I am in storage and, because of that, I am free of the purpose that Pygmalion forced upon me without my consent. I am not to be watched and admired. I simply am.

# Da Capo al Fine

Raluca Balasa

Raluca Balasa holds an MFA in Creative Writing: Fiction from the University of Nevada, Reno. Her approach to writing is character oriented, often dealing with love/hate relationships, antiheroes, and antagonists who make you agree with them. Her short work has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine*, *Aurealis*, *The Mithila Review*, and *Grimdark Magazine*, among others.

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Content warning: extensive discussion of mental illness, suicide, and self-harm, blood.

Patient: Alina Gabris  
Therapist: Dr. Serena Keyes  
Session I: 08/13/2019

Students at the Royal Academy of Music are always worrying they'll make mistakes at recitals. Me? I worry what will happen if I don't. My fingers were frozen at that recital a year ago. I was hoping the stiffness would be enough to make me skip a note on the faster passages in *Nocturne in C Sharp Minor*. A slip of my finger, maybe continuing a semitone too high after a chromatic scale, and the song's perfection would be ruined without anyone noticing. You don't understand; I can't just *plant* mistakes and then recover. My instructor makes me memorize every piece, which means I rely on muscle memory. A single mistake could throw off my entire rhythm, and I didn't want that to happen either. I wanted to be a world-class pianist.

The lady at the front called my name—“*Al-eye-nah!*”—and I was so

anxious I couldn't even be mad at the way she butchered it. As always, my instructor was sitting in the front row. Giles has the hearing of an owl, so I knew I couldn't make a mistake he wouldn't notice. I nodded to the judges and took my seat on the bench, fanning my skirt around me. Some people take ages to sit and adjust the bench. Instructor Giles says to get on with it or go home, so that's what I did.

I started with solid chords. The air seemed to freeze in the room, and though my fingers were stiff, they worked. Soon I was flying through the trills, feeling that thrill I always feel on a grand piano in a room with proper acoustics. I told myself the next trill was the one I'd miss, then the next one until there were no trills left and I was slowing down. The last five bars, the ones I always screwed up at home, went well. I couldn't make myself ruin the trance in the room. My hands didn't listen to me anymore; it was like the music had possessed me. Soon, the piece's last notes were vibrating beneath my fingertips.

The audience stalled as if I'd punched them, and then they were on their feet cheering for me. I had never played that well. The truth is that sad songs are still my favourites. I felt proud of myself, but something nagged at me.

I hadn't made a mistake.

My legs shook as I rose from the bench and bowed. I hoped that maybe nothing bad would happen, that I'd messed up somewhere and just hadn't realized it. I looked at Giles, and he was smiling. *That* was how I knew I'd been perfect.

The vision took over me like they always do: suddenly and vividly. I didn't see the stained-glass windows of St. Matthew's church anymore, or the benches, or the proud way that Giles clapped for me. I saw my mom screaming. I remember blinking to make it stop, but the images played over my eyes like a film reel. I heard sirens wailing, none as urgent as my mother. I'd never seen her like that, sobbing until she wasn't even breathing. She crouched on the floor, holding both of my wrists in her hands as blood dripped between her fingers and down her arms. *My* blood.

When the vision let me go, I collapsed into my seat and didn't even hear the judges calling me to accept the gold medal.

Session II: 08/21/2019

Is this thing recording? I have a movie to catch at seven. Just friends from the RCM. I don't want them to know I come here. They think I'm sick a lot.

The first vision was six years ago. I was nine and hoping to get good

enough to skip over Grade Two piano. (The even grades in the RCM are for babies. Nobody tells you that, but everyone knows.) My instructor then, an old lady who couldn't keep her cats off the piano, asked me to learn Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Memory." If I could learn the easy version in two weeks, she said, I was ready to move to Grade Three.

I practiced every day. Mom got so sick of how I'd mess up the chords in the fourth bar that she threatened to stop paying for my lessons. Sometimes I purposely repeated the same bars just to annoy her. She thought talent meant instant knowledge, that playing the piano meant knowing every song under the sun and taking requests for her friends at dinner parties.

I've always performed well under stress. The first time I played Memory perfectly was at one of those dumb parties. It was the first real song I'd learned, except maybe some Bach inventions. What I mean is that it was the first piece with a real melody, with feeling behind it.

As soon as I'd finished, I knew something was wrong. I couldn't hear; the only way I could tell my mom's friends were clapping was through the vibrations travelling up the piano. My vision went white and I thought I'd faint.

Then the images started. Grains of colour came together to form a face. I couldn't see it well—the visions have become clearer over time—but I knew it was my grandmother because I felt her. The closest analogy would be a distinctive smell, I guess. With some weird sixth sense, I smelled my grandma's presence.

"Where's Mama?" She said it just like that, like a kid. "Kata, where's Mama?"

She faded and I had only a headache to show for it. I didn't tell anyone what I saw. Had no idea what it meant. But a year later, Gram was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and I found out Katerina was her sister who'd died in a train accident in 1940.

Are you serious? It had *everything* to do with the song I played. I can't sing, but I can tell you the lyrics.

*Memory—all alone in the moonlight. I can dream of the  
old days  
Life was beautiful then.  
I remember the time I knew what happiness was.  
Let the memory live again.*



Oh, God, don't put me on antidepressants. It's not like I only foresee tragedies. Sometimes the visions are happy. Sometimes, after a playful Mozart piece, I'd see my crush flirting with me or my mom finally getting me that cat I wanted. Once, after seeing myself get an A on a test, I tried failing it on purpose. Put "C" as the answer to every multiple-choice question. Turns out it was a psychology test, literally, and I was the only one who *had the guts* to choose C for every question. Good or bad, I couldn't change the future I glimpsed.

The Cassandra myth? I wouldn't call it my *obsession*. She saw the future too, so I figured studying her could tell me how to make it stop. I spent hours researching her on the internet and in the library. Too bad the girl went crazy because no one believed her, then ended up murdered by some king's wife.

I wasn't sad about her death. At least she hadn't killed herself. At least she'd fought her curse until the end.

### Session III: 08/28/2019

Are you seriously going to start with this? What abuse? I have a perfectly good life at home! It's just me, my mom, and our cat Hamilton. The most abuse that's happened to me is Ham kneading on my lap when I'm wearing shorts. If you're looking for a reason to my madness, there isn't one. I would never kill myself.

Fine, so I *was* pissed on our way back from the recital, but not because of Mom pushing me too hard. At St. Matthew's, Giles had told the judges that I'm emotional and delicate. He'd patted my hand and said something stupid about me going too far with the idea of *rubato*. I know he was trying to save face, but I'd almost slapped *his* stupid English face. Of course it bothers me that Giles thinks I'm sensitive! I want him to know the real me.

Like I said, I didn't mean to play *Nocturne* perfectly at that recital. I wouldn't risk being consumed by a vision like that just to make Giles proud. I'm a perfectionist by nature, like it's in my genes. I get it from my mom.

She kept shooting me glances in the car when she thought I wasn't looking. Anytime something's wrong with me, Mom asks if I'm hungry. That time, I didn't snap like I usually do, but I grabbed her free hand. I was still thinking about her crying over my limp body. I think I told her I loved her, because I remember her knuckles turning white on the steering wheel and her asking if I was sick. My affection worries her. If there were a Shittiest Daughter award, I'd be winning it since middle school.

It's not that I feel guilty for anything. I'm just saying I haven't always been as... open with her as I could have been. As affectionate. That doesn't mean I'm angry with myself. I told you: I'd never kill myself.

Mom said she was proud of me. Her hair was partly out of its messy bun, and she was still wearing the coffee-stained pantsuit she'd worn to work that morning. I told her I hated *Nocturne*, hoping it'd keep her from asking me to play it at home. She smiled and said I was a *true artist*—that I absorb the composer's sadness so I can embody the song. Mom's pretty naive about the arts, which is fine, but right then her idealistic view on what happened made me want to barf. Artist, emotional, sensitive. That's *not* who I am. But if I told her the truth, I'd suffer Cassandra's fate. No one would believe me and I'd end up wasting time with a psychiatrist—no offence. So I had no choice but to become Alina, the little artist who needed sheltering from the world. Someone I'd beat up at school.

#### Session IV: 09/04/2019

The next song Giles made me learn was Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." "A reprieve to repay you for your hard work on the nocturne," he said. Only Giles uses words like reprieve, and only Giles thinks a great way to repay work is with more work. He annoys the hell out of me.

When I started practicing, I kept wondering what kind of vision "Hallelujah" would give me. I wasn't sure what the lyrics were supposed to mean, and the melody sounds sad even though it's in a major key. But did the song's meaning even matter? If these visions would happen anyway, why fear them? Gram would've had Alzheimer's no matter what I did. My friend Sabrina would have started a rumour about me because she's a bitch, not because I'm a good pianist. This was stupid. Why fear something I couldn't control, right?

Unless I could control it. Cutting your wrists isn't something you do by accident.

I raced upstairs to my room, emptied my jewelry box, and threw away every sharp-edged bracelet I found. Then I tossed my manicure set, my shaver, and my pocketknife.

The problem with these visions is that they don't give me a clear timeline. I waited three years to get Ham. I had no idea when my latest vision would happen, so I closed my eyes and tried calling up the details I'd seen during the recital. Mom was wearing one of her pantsuits. We were at home—I could tell from the lacy curtains over our blinds—but I wasn't sure which room. Maybe if I convinced Mom to move, I could avoid this.

Maybe if I convinced her to burn those suits?

The thought made me laugh like a crazy person. This is confidential, right? I went downstairs and stole a few gulps of Applewood from Mom's liquor cabinet. (I prefer beer, but all our other bottles have been there forever, rare and un-stealable stuff like Trappist ales.) Maybe I'd become an alcoholic and cut my wrists in a drunken rage. Or maybe it was all a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When Mom got home, she found me curled on the couch with dried tears on my cheeks. She held me and asked if it was a boy who upset me. I said yes. I was Alina, the sensitive artist.



Sometimes I feel like I *am* Cassandra. She had curly brown hair and dark brown eyes, like me. Thank God she was also supposed to be some great beauty—and don't start with the low self-esteem crap. I'm just saying that plump, short, gap-toothed girls are hardly considered beauties these days.

Mom keeps telling me Greek women are supposed to have a little meat on their bones. When I get mad and say I'm not a "Greek beauty," it's because I don't want to be one. I don't want any more similarities to Cassandra. Sorry. I sound like a brat.

My grades started slipping after the suicide vision. I stopped sleeping. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw flashes of tragedies that would make me want to kill myself. Giles dying in a car accident that I caused, even though I wasn't old enough to drive. Me getting pregnant, even though I didn't have a boyfriend. My mom dying of some illness, even though she'd just had a check-up and I saw her in the vision.

When I turned sixteen, I was so scared of messing up behind the wheel that I failed the driving test three times. When Sanjay – a senior at my school – asked me out, I said no because the last thing I needed was someone else I had to worry would die. The people I loved became liabilities. I wanted to be alone.

Mom started having these long, teary phone calls with my aunt. Said I was distant. I didn't look healthy. Was I doing drugs? I went to the piano when she was on the phone and played louder than usual to drown her out. Hamilton started getting scared by my playing, kept darting under the couch.

On one of those nights, I took out my old copy of *Turkish Rondo*. I begged my curse to show me something happy, something that would prove things could get better. But my fingers were clumsy and I couldn't get the notes right. No vision came. I dug out my Brahms waltzes from

Grade Three, but couldn't play those, either. Anything happy made my fingers recoil from the ivory.

So I played "Phantom of the Opera" and saw myself getting into a fight at school. The next day, I kicked the shit out of the pretty girl Sanjay was dating because I figured there was no point fighting destiny. Might as well fight someone I could beat.

#### Session V: 09/11/2019

Can I ask you a question? It's been bothering me since that recital. What if I'm the one making these things happen because I'm too selfish to give up the piano? What if my music is cursed?



Giles would never let me take a break, so a month ago, I slammed my hand into the dining room table when Mom was at work and said it was a basketball injury. My index finger looked like a cucumber. Giles had to cancel my next two recitals while my sprain healed.

Those three weeks without the piano were agony. The only bad thing that happened was that I couldn't play, but that was almost as bad as having the visions. I know it sounds weird, but if I stay away from the piano for more than a couple of days, my heart starts beating so loud it's all I can think about. I hear the blood rushing through my body like a tide. I had these moments when I'd break down and try to play even with my sprain. It took forever to heal.

I started learning a new piece as soon as the pain was bearable. The day I mastered it, I learned Giles has cancer.

#### Session VI: 09/18/2019

If I'm making these things happen, if I'm only good at sad pieces, if I can't make myself stop playing the piano, maybe I *should* kill myself. Fine, I've thought about it. But resisting suicide is the only thing I can still control. If I resist that one vision, maybe I can stop the others from happening too.

Here's my thought. Cassandra was cursed by the sun god Apollo so that no one would believe her prophecies. Get it? Things could have been different if someone had listened. The Trojan War could have been avoided and the future might've been changed. The prophecies themselves

weren't her curse; it was that no one believed her.

I'm not Cassandra. I decided to tell Mom about my visions, thought maybe she'd believe me. She sent me to you.

It wasn't Mom's insisting that convinced me to go. It was the day that Giles stopped me mid-lesson, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, clasped his hands together and said: *I'm worried about you.*

I broke down in tears right at his piano. Not because he has cancer, or because of my visions, but because Giles still worries about a melodramatic teenager after everything he's got to deal with. He put a hand on my shoulder and I thought he'd say something reassuring after that, but he just said to pull my bench back, if it wasn't too much trouble, because I was getting snot on his grand piano. Obviously, that made me spray snot everywhere.

So here I am.

Session VI: Cont.  
Recorded Therapist Intervention

Dr. K.: Thank you for your honesty, Alina.

A.G.: Let me guess what you're thinking: *schizophrenia or PTSD?* You've already pegged me in the mental disorder box.

Dr. K.: Actually, I'm wondering if you've ever had a vision that hasn't come true.

A.G.: Only the one.

Dr. K.: What do you say we make it happen?

A.G.: You've got to be kidding.

Dr. K.: If we make it happen in a controlled, safe environment rather than waiting for it to happen on its own, the vision loses its power. Consider this a progressive form of exposure therapy. People with agoraphobia are sent out in public where they can isolate themselves if the panic sets in. People who fear spiders are exposed to small, harmless ones in stages. We would need your mother's consent, of course—

A.G.: That's impossible! There's no *safe* way to kill myself!

Dr. K.: You don't know that. The vision hasn't happened yet, Alina.

Session VI: 09/25/2019  
Recording

Dr. K.: Thank you for joining us, Mrs. Gabris. The tea is lovely. Alina,

how are you feeling?

A.G.: Kind-of weird about doing this at home, but fine, I guess. Can I hold Ham while you guys talk?

Dr. K.: Of course. Mrs. Gabris, your daughter has an interesting manifestation of OCD. Alina attempts to control her obsessive, negative thoughts by playing the piano. Consider this an alternative form of the tapping or counting that most other patients engage in to relieve stress. When the song finishes, so does her focus. Her mind opens to the thoughts again and they return with twice the intensity. Because of this, she has come to the conclusion that they happen as a result of her playing, when in fact the correlation is the other way around. She plays more in order to calm herself when the thoughts get worse.

A.G.: Don't look at me like that, Mom. I'm not sure I even believe her. No offence, Dr. Keyes.

Mrs. G.: So you want us to stage your own suicide? Are you both mad?

A.G.: You make it sound dumb when you say it like that.

Dr. K.: Please try to understand, Mrs. Gabris. Having that scenario play out is Alina's greatest fear. If we play it out in a safe, make-believe fashion, we free her from the fear of what-ifs that has been holding her back.

Mrs. G.: Is this true? Do you think this will help, Ali?

A. G.: I don't know. I'm not sure. But I really, really want Dr. Keyes to be right.

Mrs. G.: Alright. We'll try anything.

### Post-Session VI: Self-Report

09/25/2019

Alina Gabris

I'm sitting in the study with candles flickering on top of the piano. I lit them mostly for the creepy effect, but also because I didn't want to turn on the light and risk Mom knowing I'm up. I'm writing in my old book of Chopin nocturnes now. I spent the last two hours re-mastering the individual sections of *Nocturne in C Sharp Minor* using the muffler on the piano. My hands are shaking, but I won't lie: I'm still pretty good at it. And I hate this song for what it did to me, for the vision that's ruined my life, but when I play it, I still feel at peace.

As long as I don't get to the end.

Was it tomorrow's therapy that I saw years ago? Is that what's driven me mad—a stupid act staged by a shrink? What if it wasn't, and this time when I finish the piece, I'll see the deep cuts in my wrists as I bleed out in

Mom's arms?

Three bars before the end, I forced my hands off the keys. The unfinished music still screams at my nerves, begging for the tonic chord, but I won't give in. Vision or no vision, I can still carve my destiny tomorrow. I *will*.

So for now, I wait.