

From the
Farther Trees
Issue 8 October 2022



From the
Farther Trees

A Magazine of Fantasy

Issue 8 October 2022

Editor: Rick Hollon

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Farther Trees Press

farthertrees.wordpress.com

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Contents

- 5 [Contributor bios](#)
- 7 [“For a Date with Death”](#)
Deborah Sage
- 9 [“Hidebehind Seeks”](#)
Ellen Huang
- 18 [“Beware the Wiles of the Weird Woman”](#)
Avra Margariti
- 20 [“The Unsent Letters of Antonia Reiter”](#)
H. E. Casson
- 27 [“Nobody Thinks with Their Liver”](#)
Kwasi Shade
- 29 [“when you bought pirated poltergeist \(1982\) and got
a homemade, found footage film instead”](#)
Tommy Blake
- 30 [“The Humanity Switch”](#)
Alyssa Cokinis
- 32 [“It does not matter”](#)
Lorelei Bacht

Contributor bios

Lorelei Bacht's poetic work has appeared / is forthcoming in *The Night Heron Barks*, *Queerlings*, *Barrelhouse*, *Sinking City*, *Stoneboat*, *streetcake*, and elsewhere. They can be found on Twitter @bachtlorelei and on Instagram @lorelei.bacht.writer. They are currently watching the rain instead of working on a chapbook.

Tommy Blake (he/they) takes bisexual disaster to a new level with their love for squishmallows but only the Halloween ones, dressing up as Hayley Williams in the 7th grade with cherry-red-in-the-light-only auburn hair for Halloween, and watching *Danny Phantom* all year long. They have multiple poetry chapbooks, notably *Trick Mirror or Your Computer Screen* (fifth wheel press, 2022) and *lacuna* (kith books, 2022). His full-length poetry book *So, Who's Courage* is forthcoming with bullshit lit in July 2023.

H. E. Casson (they/them) is a writer, a Torontonionian, and an all-around okay human. They are old enough to remember two distinct eras in which everyone un-ironically wore plaid. Their writing has been shared by *Cast of Wonders*, *Taco Bell Quarterly*, *the League of Canadian Poets*, *Serotonin*, and *Ghost Heart Literary Journal*—among others.

Alyssa Cokinis is a writer/theatre artist currently in Oregon. Previous publications are in *Renesme Literary*, *Beatdom*, *The Minison Project*, *Chaotic Merge Magazine*, and others. Play productions/readings: Atlanta Fringe Audio, New Plays from the Heartland Festival, MadLab Theatre, and elsewhere. They are the founder/EIC of *some scripts literary magazine*. More at: abyssoflyss.carrd.co

Ellen Huang (she/her) is an aroace writer of horror and fantasy. She reads for *Whale Road Review* and is publishes/forthcoming in *Longleaf Review*, *Lucent Dreaming*, *Prismatica*, *Hallowzine*, *Spooky Gaze*, *Bowery Gothic*, *warning lines*, *Crow & Cross Keys*,

Grimoire, *Apparition Lit*, *Not Deer Magazine*, and more. Much of her work is grounded in themes of progressive faith and platonic love. She is currently working in a fairytale chapbook, a diverse fantasy collection, and an asexual horror anthology. Follow @nocturnalxlight on Twitter or worrydollsandfloatinglights.wordpress.com.

Avra Margariti is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Pushcart-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. *The Saint of Witches*, Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is available from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter (@avramargariti).

Deborah W. Sage is a native of Kentucky, USA. She has been published in *Enchanted Conversation: A Fairy Tale Magazine*, *Eternal Haunted Summer*, *Literary LEO*, and the 2022 Dwarf Stars Anthology. A former business executive, who after years of being committed to the bottom line, is gaining equilibrium in her psyche through her endeavors in folklore.

Kwasi Shade says: "I am a new media activist. I am interested in representing the true myriad of Caribbean dichotomies in my stories and testing the parameters of Creole dialect vernacular. I am also attempting to articulate the principles of Carnival design, exploring Carnival as design philosophy in an attempt to further represent with my drawings, the Carnival aesthetic."

For a Date with Death

Deborah Sage

Powder your face with ashes cold from the hearth,
Rouge your lips with blood drawn by a shard
From a mirror shattered in anger.

Wear a dress of emerald silk,
And scarlet shoes ruined from dancing
In midnight circles among ancient stones.

Adorn your ears with drops of amethyst and onyx,
And bind your neck with a velvet choker.
Weave tendrils of ivy through your hair.

Perfume your skin with oak moss and sandalwood.

Veil your ashen countenance in Spanish lace,
Hide your eagerness
And gnawing dread.

When the moon turns her face
Summon a driverless carriage
With ghost-grey horses bridled in silver.

The horses will know the way.

In a café by a windswept sea,
Ask for a candlelit table draped in gossamer web
And shredded silk.

When he arrives
Order plums and pomegranates
And blood-red wine.

Talk of the weather and
Of Shelley and Keats
Do not mention Byron.

Order black coffee laced with brandy and
Share kisses cold as marble
Until the sun rises.

Call for the check.

Hidebehind Seeks

Ellen Huang

Content warning: predatory behavior.

The hunched creature traveled by shadow, going wherever darkness went. Sometimes, his long spindling tail would curl out and drag from the shadows. Creeping along on several dripping black claws, he followed his acute sense of smell, accustomed to having no eyes until within inches of his prey.

At last, at last, the smell grew strong: blood coursing through veins, just beneath soft flesh surfaced with goosebumps. The heartbeat of his target drummed harder, harder. The taste of fear was electrifying in the air. He could see—could *see!* At last, skin on his face gave birth to eyes, and colors came into focus... a little moving figure of heat came into focus... a child with braided blonde hair and a little blue dress... a pair of wide brown eyes and a dropped jaw. The creature opened his mouth, wider, wider, nearly splitting his head in two, and—

With a scream, the child leapt. A girl no bigger than his smallest foot, she knocked him over and clutched his tangled mane in her grubby hands. The creature fell back but managed to let out a roar, blowing the girl's wild hair back, before hitting the forest floor. The impact shook the earth beneath them with a rumble like thunder. The girl's high, staccato laughter burst from her. She was nice and warm against his mangy fur, embracing him. She rested her head against his great furry belly, riding his deep breaths up and down, up and down.

He couldn't remember the first time he scared her, greeted her, and became close to her any more than he could remember the day he was born. But ever since, the girl's scream turning to laughter had been the most delicious sound in the world.

But then, as would happen, all went dark again. It wasn't just the cool, nighttime dark, but a complete black nothingness. The child was out of sight, and so the creature was left blind again. The smell of the spindly twisted trees lingered and teased his nose; the tumbles of dry grass tickled his skin. His chewed, pointed ears picked up the sounds of his own deep, rumbling breathing. These enhanced senses promised him he was still alive.

He grunted, raised his nose and sniffed the humid air, but there was no more sweet scent of the living girl. Strange. Usually there would linger just a hint of her mortal smell. Usually there would be something small he could soon trace back to her in a matter of a few weeks. Before the new dread could seize him, he hunched and crept along the shadows, searching for the one child who loved the night-mares' forests more than the dreams' gardens.

Monsters were the pests of the universe, the spawn of fear, made to feed off fear. The creature had crept along this earth, hunting and striking fear in mortals. And he loved it.

Many of his kind were hidebehinds, which would stalk mortals and hide behind trees whenever the prey tried to look. Hidebehinds would expertly creep up behind wanderers until the very last second, and then strike the sharpest trauma in an instant. *He*, however, was round as an All Hallows' Eve pumpkin and not very good at hiding-behind (the spindly trees were uncomfortable shapes to imitate, anyway). Besides: long, drawn-out fright was more than enough for him. Especially when it reached the girl's laughter as a finale, like applause for his performance.

Now, creeping all alone, he blinked his blind eyes in the darkness, feeling the eerie emptiness of this place with only the wind for company. Even the wind seemed starved, as empty as his cavernous stomach.

In his ears came the buzzing sounds of sprites. Born of scattered light, sprites were meant to bring joy—yet there was a sting to their voices. "*She's finally come to her senses, beast,*" one had taunted

once, flying hither and thither. *“You’ll never see her ag—”* The creature had then roared ferociously at the thing. He didn’t know what happened to that sprite since. Maybe it got eaten.

He’d have to go further than this place, leave this dream-space full of maddeningly unhelpful sprites behind. After much deep rolling breaths and long periods of just taking in the satisfying darkness, he stumbled blindly out into the world, sniffing the air. He needed to find the little girl again.

He crept through a few seasons of fallen leaves before he sensed... life. It was a pack of humans that were camping out in the woods, and he could almost taste the fear. The creature could feel their heartbeats, smell their coursing blood, and almost hear their chorus of screams, just tucked away beneath their throats and stifled emotions. He wanted so badly to barge in on the little ghost story they were telling.

From a small distance, he could feel the beautiful danger of fire as the heat danced back and forth, flickering what he sensed to be light upon his face. He could smell the roast of soft and sugary manmade food impaled on sticks, much like what the little girl’s breath smelled like sometimes. He could hear their voices as he crept closer, painfully, on tiptoe. Even more delicious than the smell of roasted sweets was the story they were telling, the fear they were simmering.

Cursed ghostly drums, living haunted hands, and the dead come back to life. It made for an appetizing story. The creature caught his heart beating louder and louder, like the thumping of the ghostly drums in the story. He caught his mouth watering, dripping with delight, and his claws tapping ever so slightly against the ground like the tap-tap-tapping of the disembodied hand in the story. The human hearts beat even more, echoing in his perked ears, and their blood coursed even faster and richer, just beneath their tender marshmallow flesh. He could almost see them—blurry figures of heat, trembling, huddled closer and closer. He relished in the fear, coming as close as he dared, step by step. They came into focus...

Then one of them screamed.

“BEHIND YOU, BEHIND YOU!”

The creature’s ears shot up, pierced by the shrill sound. One of the humans was standing straight up, pointing a finger directly at him, mouth gasping like a fish in its last moments on land. The littlest human’s eyes shut tight as if he would make himself go blind now, as if he actually *wanted* the torture of not being able to see. This the creature could not understand.

No trees could conceal him. Others looked up at him and gasped, joining in the chorus of screams.

“Oh, my God!” “What is that?!” “*HELP!*” They held each other tight while the tallest one grabbed the largest stick he could find, stuck it into the fire, and flashed it back and forth before him.

“Back! Back to the darkness!” yelled the fire-wielder. What before had been a whispering storyteller voice now escalated to an excited shout. His eyes were alight, as if he might have recognized the creature from a scary dream once upon a time.

The creature stepped back, and back, and back. The fire roared before him. He had the chance to roar back, savor their fear, and leave. But he had never noticed this pain before that struck in his heart, at the repulsion on their faces.

He turned, fell down on his several legs, and ran. Retreating away, he shut his eyes and let their lids close in with the rest of his skin. The colors, the flashing fire—that brightness would fade away into the dark in time. In time.

After he had settled and caught his breath, he lifted his heavy ears again. The wind carried their far-off sounds—stimulated sounds of staccato at different pitches. Like what the girl used to have. Oh... had he been mistaking her laughter for such horror all along? Could it be that he really could only bring this disgust, and just now saw it? Welling up inside, he leaned his head back and released a soft, murmuring howl, the kind that only the young who didn’t sleep at night would hear. Let this be the last scary thing he did.

As time went on, and on, and on, he passed by several of these groups. Sometimes the rush of hearing camping humans would perk his ears up. Sometimes he still felt the pull to come close and breathe a mischievous breath on their campfire, just enough to flicker their

heat, just enough to prickle the hairs on the back of their necks. But then he remembered the horror on their faces...

Hidebehinds were meant to scare children from wandering too far from their parents. He was born to punish those who stayed up too late or trespassed territory. He was made to give humans challenges, make it hard for them to sleep at night. But the girl he loved had been a good-hearted one, who wandered to catch glowing bugs in a jar as gifts for her elders, who stayed up late to plot artful surprises with crayons on their dry walls. If he ever got to see her again, he promised, he would not stir up fear for her anymore. And he would leave all the woods for her.

With an effort, he straightened up, despite the pain on his spiked back. He stood taller so his tail would not drag along the ground. He tried biting off his claws. He would find the girl and make her happy. He would show that he could bring joy. He stretched out his mouth into a crooked smile, and beamed at the world he could not see, but could learn to feel. He smelled flowers sweet, and sometimes that hurt his nose, but the newness of it all could excite him. He tried fluffing up the fur on his ears and squeezing himself into a small round size, like the little baby animals that wandered by his woods and sometimes too curiously close to his mouth... oh, but he must not think about that now.

This unforested world was dangerous territory for a blind monster to stumble through. At least for now he did not have to worry about shielding his dormant eyes from the light. But he could feel the harsh spots of light sometimes, the weight of extra heat down his back, and it made him want to curl up back in the forest. But he pressed bravely on, through odd fields of very short grass and cutting through paths that wound only one way.

The creature's ears and nose picked up scary stories being told within walls, within little houses. Little jump scares sizzling and popping like popcorn. It made his stomach growl. Perhaps... as long as he kept bundling himself up, he could just get a morsel of that human-prepared fear. Some people made fear so well! He didn't want to stir it, just sample a bit to keep him going. Instead of creeping this time, he bounded over, stomping, trying to give shouts of joy like a good, endearing animal.

That didn't quite work, either. They still screamed at him standing upright, crooking a smile, with enormous fluffs of fur in a desperate attempt to cover his horns and pointed ears. In the midst of trouble he caused, the creature sighed and retreated, back, back to the darkness where he belonged.

No matter how accustomed he had grown to this tamer, sharper world, he still felt homesick. He was probably weeks, months, seasons away from the place he began. He came to a place with much wider grass, which he took to be a clearing, and lay himself down, heaving a great sigh. Crickets chirping were all the beauty available to him. But as crunchy as they were, he did not feel filled, satisfied. He shuddered. The air wasn't any warmer, even if he did come a long way and his fur had grown long and thick. Even if he did almost risk coming close to sunshine a couple times. The creature curled his long, shaggy, sharp-ended tail around himself in a perfect circle, and bent his head down in defeat.

That was when he heard the scream.

Fear! It quickened his pulse immediately, perked up his ears. It was in the distance, but he could easily make it with some leaps and bounds.

If a monster really was all he could be, then let him eat! He leapt up, ready to follow the fresh scent of terror. There was something so sour about it, that it even disgusted him for once. But he hated the competition, the fear that he didn't create. He dropped on his several feet and bounded through the darkness, his tail flying behind him. His long fur flew in the wind, nice and cold, and the air rushed about him, and his feet beat the ground in a glorious rhythm. The rush of the hunt washed away the confines he had been keeping himself in.

Suddenly, colors came into focus. His eyes opened from the skin on his face and squinted in the wind. The arrival of the long-missing sense of sight caught him off guard and he stumbled a bit from his running. What was happening? His vision hadn't been this sharp since... He shook his head and pushed his limbs further. There was moving heat... then there was a blur of blue fabric... there was flesh and blood that matched what he smelled, and there was a girl, her

blonde braided hair in a thrashed, wild disarray. Her brown eyes widened. Her hand was caught in something.

The creature roared mightily at whatever other monster was here grabbing at her. It could have been a living tree, as sometimes the trees he knew, or their hidebehind-dryads, would nab and grab at wanderers. He beat the ground, prepared himself, bared his dripping teeth, and pounced with all his might. The cold air brushed through his fur the way blood coursed through humans. The leap in the air felt more powerful than usual, as if he were flying. When his claws made impact and sank into the other treelike monster, drawing blood, he winced a little, too excited. This was no ordinary tree. This was flesh and blood.

The tree-monster cried out, and if sounds could kill, the creature would have been wounded.

The creature cringed, almost backing away, once again shaken by the cry of a human. The treelike thing was human. But soon after, the treelike thing burned with heat and reached out at the girl's legs, just under her blue skirt.

Seeing this, the creature raged. His snarl had never been more ferocious. He pounced, throwing the tree-man back fifty feet. The creature loomed over with a watering mouth full of gnashing teeth. Now every fiber of the hidebehind's many immense limbs wrestled this enemy predator. His dripping black claws dug in and caged the tree-man.

There was so much fear here now, and the creature devoured it up ravenously. He was now sprouting eyes he never knew he had, wide dark circles tattooing his side. He resembled an enormous caterpillar, but with dirty matted fur of a mammoth, and the ferocity of a cobra strangling its prey. Every time the tree-man attempted to scream anew, the hidebehind creature gobbled at his breath, as if sucking the very volume out of the cries.

A gasp, a scream turned to a choking cry for air, struck the creature's ears, deafening them. He felt the heartbeat race, and then... then the heartbeat disappeared. It did not repeat. It did not attempt a return. The body went limp as a sack.

The creature gasped. The rush of racing blood was not the same when it was spilling out of an unmoving body. The rush of the

hunt...it faded away into the eerie air. All of a sudden, fur matted with sticky blood, a life wrested out before him, the hidebehind creature lost his appetite.

He winced, even whimpered, afraid for once. Afraid of the quiet before him. Afraid of the emptiness in the thing beneath him, the thing had just hollowed out. This was further than he had ever gone before, and it meant he really could not change. This hunting and pouncing could not make anyone happy; he was a monster. So he turned, as he must revert to the darkness, where he belonged.

THUD!

The creature jumped, whipping around in fear. There before him was the girl with the blonde braided hair and blue dress, who did not run away. She had dropped a boulder onto the tree-man's corpse on the ground, crushing his head in. A little too late perhaps, but she looked like she just wanted to finish the job, or destroy evidence of the tree-man's face. Or perhaps even make it look like the hidebehind wasn't the one who killed.

The creature's jaw dropped. He stood, petrified for once. Was this figure standing before him really whom he'd thought it was?

She was covered with strange spots black and blue, and the creature winced a little instinctively. It didn't suit her, he thought. Weakly, the hidebehind wondered how she had found crayons that colored beneath the flesh like that.

She stared up at him with shimmering brown eyes, breathing hard. Then she leapt upon the creature, a girl as tall as his leg, knocking him over. She clutched at his muddy, shaggy, stained fur, and kissed his growling, empty belly, and laughed so hard her eyes were dripping with tears, or crying so hard that her laughter burst from her. The girl's cries turning to laughter was the most delicious sound in the world. The creature embraced her—oh how he had missed that sound!

It really was laughter, he affirmed, the sound of joy. The echoes of such staccato sounds he had heard from campfires after the human screams weren't much different. Could it be that even through fear, he really could bring happiness, and just couldn't see it?

Her voice took on form as she whispered, “You’re back, I’m so glad you came back.”

The voice struck him. It sounded so different. It was lower, and the words had more shape and echo to them. But at the same time, he could hear that this was the voice he had been wandering the world searching for. Her laugh lit up his heart like lightning. He closed all of his eyes all over his body, as there was no fear here, but he could see her just the same. From deep down, he made a purring sound which became rolling thunder beneath the earth.

Beware the Wiles of the Weird Woman

Avra Margariti

Does your daughter's heart quicken, fine fellow,
When she sways and leans against
Cold-lit windowsills smooth as bodies,
Sighing longingly into the caliginous dark
Of the sky? Do strange shadows flit
Into her bedroom nocturnal, taking the shape
Of a weird woman
Daring to dress herself like a dandy,
Paler than moonshine?

Is your daughter oneiric-eyed and grave-voiced
In the morning, inexplicable perforations
Across her temple of flesh,
Foreign ideas about arts and literature--her place
In this world--
Falling from her knife-slash mouth during
Supper, when she stares at her food
Devoid of appetite and only drinks with abandon
Red, red wine.

Do you catch her at all hours kissing
Her fading reflection in the mirror,
The mannequin of shadows

That always follows her around,
Does she stare at starched shirt collars
And ruffled sleeves as if they were a butcher's bundle
Of meat she craves to unwrap?

And that weird woman again,
Showing up at your front door,
Fine fellow, in her bat-headed cane and riding breeches,
Wide-brimmed mourner's hat
And a shine underneath, as if
By too-long teeth reflective like gem-stars over
Clandestine subterranean lakes?

Does this woman ask to be invited in,
Or for your daughter to come out
With her into the temptress night
Perfumed with black-heart roses?
Does she beat leathery wings,
Does your daughter run like a wraith
Down the staircase overlooked
By a panoply of family portraits--

Does she fall exultant
Into the embrace of hooked wings?

The Unsent Letters of Antonia Reiter

H.E. Casson

Content warnings: death, child abuse, depiction of misogyny, mention of reproductive trauma.

Oh my father, the man I once called good-father and gentle-father,

It has been almost a year, but I am reticent to contact you. If I could, I would write only: I love you and I wish for you to love me. I cannot send these words, unshielded, into a heart that holds such hatred. There is danger in that. Every other word on this page, then, is my shield.

I *do* love you. I *do* wish for you to love me. This wish, it is a kind of spell-work. I could scratch it into bones and hold the bones over the fire. I could make you dream good dreams of me. Instead, with each new moon, I wish. And with each new moon, I write you a letter that I will not send.

In my dreams, you are still good and gentle. You laugh. In the crisp memories of sleep, I hear you pray for me to come home. I feel the keen sorrow under the cold resolve of your transgression. It covers your life, a cloud that will not pass.

I am the cloud.

Do you remember when I asked you, “How did a baby come to be inside of my mother?”

“Magic, my Antonia,” you said and laughed your braying donkey laugh.

Maybe lovemaking is magic. My wives and I agree, the two are not separate.

Do you remember when I asked you, years later, “Gentle-father, why have you trapped me in this barn?”

“Magic,” you answered again, your voice as grim as the day she died, the day the not-yet-a-child died inside her.

You were more right the first time.

I discovered magic accidentally, at thirteen years old. It was the night of her death, when you made me dig a hole and wrap my cold mother in a stained horse blanket.

“She cannot rest among the holy,” you told me, when I stopped to scrape out the dirt from under my nails with a piece of straw, “and you shall sleep out here until the rain washes away the filth.”

I remember how heavy she was, like living had made her lighter. It is true that death is a weighty thing. You told me not to honour her, since she must have been a sinner.

“If Eve survived childbirth, then surely any pure woman would.”

You wore hate as mourning cloth because you would not wear grief. Still, I planted chamomile on the site. That was my first magic. A mother deserves flowers wherever she rests.

They did not grow white. They grew red as the blood moon. I took the flowers and dried them, made tea. When I drank it one night, I dreamed of her. These were not the Alpträume that woke me, screaming. In these soft dreams, I rode my fair horse Magnus across our bountiful fields to the house. I came in through the door, the latch never pulled in to keep me out. Together, our family rolled and boiled Knödel or read from the Grimm’s stories. The baby, hale and growing, played with a potato from the garden or crawled on the straw mat you had woven for him. This is the felicity that could have been. To visit, all I had to do was drink the red chamomile before I slept.

In the morning, when I awoke, I would find a father I did not know. Dour and cruel, you would read to me from *Der Hexenhammer*.

“She met a demon,” you would snarl, “and laid with him. You will be like her, a consort to evil. Why do you look so long at the girls in church? Why do you scream at night? Why do you whisper over your herbs and taunt our Lord?”

I was afraid of you. I still am (though my wives could break you with a look and a half-mouthed word). I will find the courage, someday, to remind you that you were not always a man of these old beliefs.

Do you recall when you took me to see Herr von Draiss' Laufmaschine? You let me try it, even when the other fathers said their girls could not. You looked at the wheels, examined the handle that would let a man choose his path. You sat on the long wooden seat and rode it once around the room. You talked about what it would take to make one of your own. Then you sat me upon it and told me to fly, arms spread wide, while you pushed from behind. Good-father, you used to love cleverness. You used to love me.

I read back over this missive and it is too much like the chaos that grows in me when I think of you. I will burn it and start again.

Love,
Your Antonia

Dear father,

Another moon has begun, so I write to you again. Perhaps this time, I will send it. I am writing to tell you that I am alive. Are you glad to hear it? Magnus, as he lives now, sends you forgiveness for your cruelty. There was a time when you might have believed that a horse could forgive a man.

I do not wish to add to the isolation and hurt you feel, alone with just mother's grave and your empty barn. A man who came to me for help with his boils told me that your fields have stopped growing. You say I cursed you. I would never curse you, gentle-father, but I cannot bless you from this far away. I have tried. If you plant the star-knotted rope you find in this letter, and water it with your tears, you may find abundance returns. If you would have me, I would ride Magnus to you and work magics with just a kiss and a song.

Oh! The boil-man also says you believe I flew away that night! No woman on her two legs could have left so swiftly, you declared. This is not true. I cannot fly. To put you at ease, I will tell you how I left you: in pieces. Each time you were cruel to me, I left you a little

more. My heart left you before my body did. I know the day it left for good.

“Come into the barn, my daughter, to help me tend the horses.”

Vitriol had settled in your skin, but still I went with you. The horses were friends and Magnus, chestnut and good-natured, was attached to me. I was protected in his presence and my work was much stronger. Do you think I mended your leg with only herbs? I brushed his fur and collected strands to help you along, braided into the rope I hung by your bed. I wonder if he hangs there still, helping you without your knowing. To go to the barn was not a frightful thing for me, despite the way your voice and words said different things.

You know what happened then—how you entrapped your only family and killed my friend, how you tried to cast out a demon that does not exist. Oh, my Magnus. Why father? Why did you kill him?

“A familiar is a spectre come to earth!” you said, and BANG!

How could you punish me after I had done magic after magic, blessing our weak crops into strength, tending to our ill animals, calming your tempers?

Mist! Why can I not just say to you what I have to say? I write and rewrite these letters. I gather new spells to enclose. I draw pictures of mother. I draw pictures of Magnus. And every night, I throw them in the fire because I am not saying what I mean to say.

Love,

Your Antonia

Father, the father you are now and not the one I wish for you to be,

This is the story of how I ran away from you, using the inventiveness you once admired and the magic that could save you now.

After you took Magnus from me, you left his body to rot. I could not bear it, to watch him decay. Also, you did not promise me food. I set to the task of preserving him. Without you and mother to help—alone in the barn with the buzzing flies, the biting mice, and my silent

Magnus—I did a poor job of it. Memories of hog slaughter and family co-mingled in my mind. I dreamed of us, all four, making Schweinekopfsülze. I dreamed of holding the baby while mother prepared the broth and you boiled the hoofs.

Working alone I found the meat was rough, with fat like the yellow butter mother dyed with carrots. There was a half barrel of blood, at least. I thought to paint the walls with it, setting my familiar's protections all around me, but I worried that would tear my nerves loose. I needed clarity as I planned my escape.

“Now you defy Leviticus,” you said, when you found me at my work.

Is eating a horse a greater sin than betraying a daughter? I am sure the men who wrote *Der Hexenhammer* gave no thought to that.

I still wonder why you left me with a blade that could cut sinew. Oh, that I were the sort who could turn the knife on you. You knew I was not. You claimed to fear what I was, but knew I could do you no harm.

Verdammt! All of this is true, but still, I have not told you how I travelled so quickly.

Here it is, finally.

As I undid Magnus, I spoke with him. Our commune was stronger than it had been while he lived. One night, in my dreams of blood and flowers, he reminded me that Herr von Draiss' Laufmaschine was also called a dandy-horse. Like a horse, it was meant to be sat upon and ridden. The dream was the birthplace of my plan; but more-so, it was the beginnings of the strength it would take to leave you.

I later learned that one of my wives, Henriette, had the same dream. They began to prepare a place for me before they even knew me.

To build my own Laufmaschine was not a small task. I would chew on horse meat to feed my body and then sit very still. In my mind, I tried to see the machine. I saw two small wagon wheels with two V-shapes which affixed them to a long board. Finding a long board in a barn is like finding the cruelty in your soul—a simple task. I pulled one from the loft above the stables. It was Magnus who suggested I use his leg bones to attach the wheels from your broken

cart, his blanket to pad the board, his ribs to offer me a grip. You slept your dreamless sleep and I drilled, sawed, balanced, re-drilled, measured, and re-sawed. I am not Herr von Draiss, but I have patience. Every morning I hid my work away and waited for you to try to undo my magic with the Angelic Salutation, with the sign of the cross, with thirst. How could you know that the hollow you left in me was filling with gifts from the unknown source that affords my magic?

After you left, I would sleep. Soon I began to dream-see a room filled with drying herbs and laughing women. Magnus told me this would be our home.

My Magnus-Laufmaschine was not as fine as the first upon which I sat. No part on it was sanded smooth or painted with colours to excite the eye. Instead, it was like a quick-raised barn, made of knotty wood and bent horseshoe nails.

When I was done, escape was easy. To this, I have given much thought. Here is what I think: you wanted me to go. Were I to stay, you would have to decide between loving me as I was or destroying me. What a decision for a father to make. How weak you were not to make it. Instead you called me a witch and left me to stink and decay in your barn.

I left at night, my dress stained brown with old blood, my pockets full of mother's red chamomile dug down to the roots. The leather hinges on the door were less to cut through than my familiar's bones had been. The moon, full in invitation, lit the wheel-rut path away from our dead home.

"Goodbye father!" I did not say it quietly, still hoping you would not let me go.

There was no answer. I threw a leg over my Magnus-Laufmaschine and pushed off. So

you see, I did not fly away. I rode. Magnus' skull pointed in the direction of a home full of those who, like me, can grind healing from the soft pulp under the bark of a tree. My dreams led me here, and Magnus kept me safe and made me swift.

My arrival was a celebration. While I saw my wives in my dreams, I did not see the children! We have twelve in all and Henriette has foreseen one more coming soon. They are the children that we deliver

to folks who cannot keep them or do not want them. They live with us and we feed them Knödel and read to them from the Grimm's stories. On warm days, the older children ride Magnus in circles around the herb garden and I laugh my braying donkey laugh.

Magnus is still helping me to escape, only now it is an escape from sadness.

Oh father.

I read this and I wonder, will you be more or less afraid than if I had told you that I could fly? Perhaps, despite the pull in my chest, I will not offer to ride back to you. I will not send you spells for good fortune. If you want my magics, you can walk to me. You can speak kindly to my wives and beg forgiveness from my familiar. You can wonder at my family, so much bigger than I could have dreamed. You can smile and call me good-daughter and gentle-daughter. Then I may find a way to welcome you.

So mote it be,

Antonia

Nobody Thinks with Their Liver

Kwasi Shade

Content warning: alcohol, depiction of colonialism and racism.

It was not something well foreseen
 nor thought delivered
 when with the contents of this message
 came the delayed reprisal
 of a ghost, stating:
 Please. Return. To sender.
 Nobody thinks with their liver.
 Any organ would feign disease
 or adopt suitable stomach
 to tout the claims of such
 miscommunication.
 A laugh is best met unexpected.
 The peak of a haunted mouth
 seething
 from behind
 clouded nightly libation.
 The work of ungodly spirits
 whisked away by rum distant ships.
 The short end of her untimely esophagus
 bled my beheaded name

 on the master's sordid whip.
 The vestigial intoxication

of overture;
they forgot me
in the drunk bowels of the dead
risked with
long pale turgid dilemma
in coherence of breath, and love, and ribs, and lungs and noses.
Memory was tended to our skeletal curricula.
We who were always possessed
upon the indignancy of foreseen insolvency.
The ghastly clandestine
of the missing negro birth.
Alawo na, ne te femi. Alas,
nobody hires ghosts.

when you bought pirated poltergeist (1982)
and got a homemade, found footage film
instead

Tommy Blake

Content warning: blood, allusions to chronic illness, suggested sexual assault.

after Poltergeist (1982) and VHS (2012)

how the pallid sun blears in a salved sky—pale and stocky bulging to her palms placid cold—a box tv busted open from the next of dawn, glitching and here, no one fears until she's ripping—	desiccated by this pulsing by static when she's sucked dry coming seertold. here, no one feasts on her
rippling to a werewolf straightferal and clawing through cheesecloth, it throbs in the color or ectoplasm or come whole	out of her skin dawn, clear as to puncture it until of organic ghosts to be swallowed by a warm host—
throat-down, her voice ringing raw like a skinned thing and buzzing buzzing like parasitic pixels in flickerbright	and rotting the meat of its body expired with gray larvae puncturing flashes.

The Humanity Switch

Alyssa Cokinis

Content warning: violence, depiction of murder, mental illness (meds/forgetting to take meds), depiction of grief.

Inspired by The Vampire Diaries

How convenient to have an excuse to cater to the evil you always refused to dig up. How extraordinary in the way empathy can just vanish with simple blink, how necks snap and heads roll and hands tear hearts out of chests as though it is all nothing.

I think I have too many emotional anchors that would pull me out of it I feel way too much there's just so much that I grapple with in my mind on the days I forget my meds or the days before I had meds or days of high stress it's all so much nowadays

but I like how Blondie handled her humanity turned off: methodical, seeking fame, minding her own business before others threatened her. I think it must have been nice for her while it lasted, to be able to survive grieving the death of a loved one and not sacrificing your mental health: just placing it all on hold for a bit. That sounds so appealing, and that was before she was irked enough to start slaughtering innocents.

Does flipping off our humanity have to mean we turn into heartless monsters? That depiction never set right with me. I suppose the metaphor is we turn into predators, though we forget that we're always prey to someone else.

Or can it mean we're just disengaging for a while, just going through the motions, without falling down a deep dark depressive rabbit hole? How convenient that would be. I'd love not to feel some days, not facing responsibility until it all comes rushing back, existing in my own void. That must be nice, to be Caroline, just wanting to ace her audition without the heavy ache of grief.

It does not matter

Lorelei Bacht

how I was made, or who or when –
all I can say is that I am fallen.

I never treasured the pasture, the lamb,
never cared much for daisy crowns, picnic
baskets or babbling brooks, bluebirds,

until conned into taking residence
parallel to the green, unable to touch it,
to eat. On every windowpane, the faint

glint of a crepuscular red.

And I know that I could step out of it:
a simple matter of sunlight.

But I am terrified.

And resentful: everyone dies in their own
bed – why should I make a decision?

In the courtyard, white dresses come and go.

I watch from a ceiling of trees. And I
will have to choose: my stomach
or the opposite. I resolve to make a visit.

When nights and days reversed, clocks
stopped, not a mirror in sight, when
every body touched falling to dust –
why bother a romance?

They come and go, the nightingales,
pretty mortals. And every spring
the same, the same:

all tweet-tweets and rose buds, all bees,
and newcomers.

I want an us that is not so damn fraught,
this one declares by the willows.

I do not know whether to laugh or cry.