# THE FUTURE FIRE

Social Political & Speculative Cyberfiction

Issue 2025.74

ISSN: 1746-1839

Art by Barbara Candiotti

# The Future Fire 2025.74

> "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art—the art of words."
>
> — Ursula K. Le Guin (National Book Awards, 2014)

## Contents

The Future Fire (http://futurefire.net/) is edited by Djibril al-Ayad, with associate editors Regina de Búrca, Valeria Vitale, and M.L. Clark; occasional guest editors Kathryn Allan, Emma Bridges, Fábio Fernandes and Lori Selke, and copyeditors Brian Olszewski and Hûw Steer.

ISSN: 1746-1839
Contact: editor@futurefire.net

# Editorial

Djibril al-Ayad


Maybe art doesn't have the power to change the world in the short term, and even if it did, there's plenty of bad art out there glorifying violence and selfishness and distrust and lone heroes and regressive values. But art full of resistance and change, art full of community and beauty, art full of caring and hope, can help to redress that balance. It can make changes in us, which is a precondition to our being willing to change the world. To our having a community worth saving the world for.

Useful and beautiful art can take many forms. Words, yes, both prose and verse and ambiguous; graphic arts, figurative, abstract, surreal or otherwise. Art can give us good examples or bad, can instill us with hope or with warning, can offer community or feed righteous rage. So today welcome to several stories of monsters: of fragile community and solidarity, even with the monsters among us; of monsters even in a place of love; of monsters as societal predators, and subcultures that feed on each

other; monsters who live in the margins of an eco-parable. Welcome to stories of beauty even in ecological collapse; of community even among violent clash of cultures; of the beauty of language even among unequal cultural contact and colonialism.

Whether they fill you with longing, or fear, or familiar grit, or spoopy charm, the stories, poems and art in this issue are a reminder of a world worth saving. Join me in thanking Barbara, Carmen, Eleanor, Justin, Lauren, Nancy, Naomi, Rowley, Toeken and V. for their beautiful work. See you next time.

Djibril al-Ayad, September 2025

Comment on the stories in this issue on the TFF blog:
http://press.futurefire.net/2025/09/new-issue-202574.html

# The Sons of Victor Levitak

## Rowley Amato

"They were a culture, these New York Jewish Communists, a nation without a country, but for a brief moment, a generation, they did have land of their own: two square blocks in the Bronx."
Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism*

"Will there be evil in the city if the Lord has not done it?"
Amos 3:6

Victor Levitak was not well-loved by the other residents of the Coop, but we sat a feeble shiva for him anyway.

We gathered in the lobby, draping old blankets and shawls over the mirrors and windows and reflective surfaces. We nibbled whitefish and rugelach from Liebman's Deli and sipped tea from a dented copper samovar that Feiga Rosenthal schlepped down from the third floor.

The Coop chairman, Bert Katz, said a few uninspired words about Victor's "commitment to the cause." He spoke in vague terms about the "essential" role he played within our Coop and the Amalgamated Garment Workers Union as a whole.

Marty Feinberg worked with Victor on the fabric cutters' line down at the Lefcourt lofts and was, by our estimation, the closest thing he had to a friend. We looked to him to deliver the mourner's kaddish. He stared at his shoes and quickly rushed through words that held no meaning for us, until, eventually, his Hebrew failed him.

"Well, anyway… he found peace." He shrugged. "A great blessing, in my opinion."

True enough, we supposed.

Victor Levitak died sometime in his sleep. We didn't know when, exactly, and the doctor who examined him provided no explanations. But we were told that he did not suffer.

His death saddened us, of course, but did we really mourn him? In truth, we didn't feel much of anything at all. We went through the motions because it seemed like the right thing to do.

Victor had always been a puzzle.

We rarely saw him at Coop meetings. He did not participate in the chess club, or the Coop newsletter, or any of a dozen other activities. When pressed, he would say he was a Communist, though he did not attend any of our working groups. His praxis was lackadaisical, his contributions to the union unremarkable.

On the streets of New York, among the goyim, he could hide behind his lack of English. But all of us in the Coop spoke Yiddish, and most spoke Russian. When we saw him in the lobby, he seemed eager to escape any mild threat of conversation.

Marty returned to his seat. We bowed our heads in quiet reflection. Some of us tore loose threads from our shirtsleeves and the hems of our skirts, for we saw no use in rending perfectly good garments.

Amid the faint plucking of threads, we heard something else. Soft whispers, echoing in the floors and the wall, echoing through layers of plaster and asbestos.

We heard the faint rustling of wings.

We dreamed up our Coop in the smoke-filled union halls of Manhattan and the sunny Socialist colonies of the Catskills.

Imagine it: a sprawling cooperative housing complex for the men and women of the Amalgamated Garment Workers Union—radicals and rabblerousers all. The homes would be spacious and affordable, far from the noisome squalor of the Lower East Side, where cold water hellholes rented for twenty dollars a month and speculators traded buildings like butchers haggling over sides of beef.

We were Russians, Poles, Ruthenians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Hungarians, people who hailed from every corner of the Pale. All were welcome in our Coop. It would be a worker's paradise, greater than any single apartment building. It would be a monument to the movement, its very existence an act of insurrection.

The principles that guided us were simple: no family would ever be evicted and the rent would never be raised. A group of elected committees would manage day-to-day affairs, and all major decisions would be decided democratically, with every resident granted a vote.

The skeptics among us said it was doomed to fail. The iron fist of capital would smother it in the cradle, they said. The plutocrats in City Hall and Albany would see it crushed. And yet, we scrabbled away, gathering up our pennies and nickels and dimes, opening lines of credit with the union bank, drafting appeals in the pages of the *Daily Worker* and the *Forward*.

The union bought up virgin land in the Bronx, empty blocks on an empty grid. We followed news of the construction as if the Giants were on a pennant run. At union meetings, shop stewards delivered reports, announced setbacks, collected funds. And we happily gave.

When the buildings topped out, the union held a banquet at the Grand Theatre on Second Avenue. By summer, we had begun to relocate, marching forth from our Lower East Side hovels to the bright, sylvan reaches of the north Bronx.

And as we settled into our new apartments, we were struck, suddenly, by the feeling that the Coop had always been here. It had always existed. We had only to raise it like a megalithic monument from the Tuckahoe marble that slumbered beneath our feet.

There was a communal kitchen and a dining hall, a butcher and a grocery store, a school and a library. We constructed an auditorium, where we held our weekly Committee meetings, as well as concerts and plays and lectures.

An entire neighborhood, concentrated within two city blocks.

The building encircled a leafy courtyard modeled on a fanciful vision of an English country garden mixed with an august American university campus—cloistered kingdoms forbidden to our kind. Tufts of spirea and globes of hydrangea and great, sturdy elms flanked our stone paths. Ivy spurted up the brick walls and Japanese maples reached across pools filled with water lilies and tiny bejeweled goldfish.

Politics infused every aspect of life in the Coop.

At Committee meetings, we would rise to our feet and sing the "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "The Internationale"—the irony was not lost on us, but hadn't we staked our lives on such contradictions?

We were all Jewish reds. But within that narrow palette existed a dozen different shades. In the lobbies and stairwells, Communists clashed with Socialists,

Stalinists with Trotskyites, Anarchists with everyone else. We spoke a muddled dialect of Yiddish and English, though there were some Hebrew speakers, and even a few Esperantists (though everyone thought they were a bit nutty).

It was the high-water mark of the movement. The Crash of ‘29 exposed to the rest of the country the hermetic secret we had always known—that American Capital was an illusion, a rotten flimflam resting on a foundation of sand. An urgent optimism tinged those years, before Russia’s pact with the Nazis, before HUAC and the blacklist, before Khrushchev denounced Stalin and his terrible excesses.

Back then, *The Communist Manifesto* sat on every bedside table. We studied it like our grandfathers studied Talmud.

Marx explained the full spectrum of human experience. His writing illuminated the concealed gearworks of the world, and reading him helped us decode hidden meaning like sacred gematria. It stoked a fire that burned within each of our breasts and gave purpose to our endless toil, for even when we worked our fingers raw and bloody in the dreary sweatshops of the West Side, even when the bulls cracked our skulls on the picket lines, we knew that the forces and vectors of history impelled us ever forward.

Revolution lay just around the corner—five, perhaps ten years at most. Of this we were certain.

On the streets and in the factories and sweatshops, we were querulous kikes, pernicious pinkos, bomb-tossing commies. We were Jews without money—half-literate, hook-nosed strangers in a strange land, sneered at by the baronial Goldmans and Guggenheims of Fifth Avenue.

The rabbis called us goyim in all but name; the Zionists called us sellouts and self-haters. But within the Coop, we were scientists in a laboratory, mystics standing on the cusp of the divine.

We were the vanguard of a righteous army.

Arrogant? Yes, but hadn't we earned the right? With our bare hands we had conjured utopia, a model that would be studied for generations to come.

We were beholden to no boss or landlord, and no power on earth could uproot us.

Strange incidents bedeviled the Coop in the bleak winter months that followed Victor Levitak's death.

Late at night, in the basement's empty corridors, we heard muffled whispers and sudden, groaning croaks. In windowless rooms, we felt the tickle of breeze on the napes of our necks. In the third floor's darkened alcoves, we saw flashing eyes, like those of the feral cats that skulked in Van Cortlandt Park.

The *Cooperator Times*, our little mimeographed biweekly, carried breathless reports of burst pipes, shattered lightbulbs, erupting sinks. A noxious stench permeated the entire south wing, and tendrils of black mold crept up the walls of the stairwell.

The Coop Committee dispatched commando squads of handymen and plumbers and electricians, all of whom returned shrugging.

Wild ideas coalesced. We heard whispers of a cabal of nefarious counterrevolutionary elements—a snake pit of landlords, bosses, and government agents. They had infiltrated our ranks to wage a clandestine sabotage campaign. And because we would not bow at the altar of

the dollar, they sought to destroy us, like the mamzer Palmer after the war.

But among the elderly residents, another theory spread over games of bridge and pinochle—a shared joke among those old enough to still cling to the superstitions of their lost childhoods.

They said that a brood of sheydim haunted our Coop.

The old folks would sit in the lobby, sipping black tea through sugar cubes clenched in their teeth and gnawing slabs of desiccated date-nut bread. Suddenly, a hush would fall over them, and they would toss a pinch of salt over the shoulder or spit three times—*puh-puh-puh*.

At first, we rolled our eyes at this behavior. Few of us attended shul, and we had done much to banish the shtetl hocus-pocus of our less enlightened past. Marxist doctrine precluded such childish fantasies, which clashed with the rational materialism that guided our project.

And yet, once loosed, the trickle of rumor would not be staunched. Soon, the "Coop sheydim" became scapegoats. They assumed the blame for lost watches and clogged toilets. Whenever a fuse blew out or a flower vase broke, we would glance at each other with raised eyebrows.

Old Rifka Gittelman suggested that we enlist the services of the Rav Patai, but this suggestion was not taken seriously.

They grew bolder as winter dragged on. Not content merely to rattle our cutlery and spring leaks in our plumbing, they lashed out in more unnerving ways.

One night, Myra Stein was shelving books in the Coop library when a small shadow darted behind a row of bookcases. A moment later, the shelves collapsed,

sending the collected works of Sholem Aleichem tumbling across the floor.

Bonny Abramovich, in 4-D, returned from the laundry room and found her porcelain ashtray shattered. The ashes had been dumped in her simmering pot of cholent, forming a gray archipelago.

As Hedda Dubinsky, 3-K, rummaged through her closet for a can of floor wax, a small, clawed hand shoved her inside. The door slammed shut and locked, trapping her for three hours, until her husband returned home from work.

Vivian Chaiken, 2-H, awoke to the sound of her baby crying. When she went to check on him, she saw, crouched on the edge of the crib, a small, squat shadow leering down at him.

News of our haunting spread, and we began to host journalists. The Yiddish press, mostly—the *Morgen Freiheit,* the *Forward*—though even the goyishe *New Leader* sent up a cub reporter. They descended like tourists, eager to gawk and write about the bizarre case of the Amalgamated Garment Workers Cooperative Apartments.

In all this time, we came no closer to finding a solution to our tsuris.

The Coop Committee had written to rabbis of all denominations—men with knowledge of such matters. The letters went unanswered, though one rabbi who led an Orthodox congregation in Yonkers expressed his sympathies and said that he would recite a Mi Shebeirach.

The entire building crowded into the auditorium at the next Coop meeting, trudging across the frozen courtyard. As we settled into our seats, the dusting of snow on our hats and shoulders melted. We steamed in the heat of so many bodies, shuddering and lowing like damp beasts in some lonely frontier barn.

The evening agenda listed but a single item: what will be done about the sheydim?

The Mazur brothers—two Bundist firebrands who lived on the third floor with their long-suffering mother—proposed forming resident patrols and arming them with baseball bats and socks full of ball bearings. Lewis Tabachnick said that we should appeal to the Comintern for help—but he said that about every little thing, and no one paid him much heed.

Our librarian, Myra Stein, declared that evicting the entities would constitute a violation of our Coop Agreement. For hadn't we built a community that rejected the barbarism of capital in favor of solidarity? To throw them out would be a betrayal of our most basic ideals. How could we live with ourselves?

This comment drew laughter and jeers, but a few residents stood and applauded.

In the back sat Moishe Bernstein, a tarry stratum of cigarette butts forming around his feet. He was a notorious schicker, and he took nips from a flask hidden in his jacket. The debates grew more circular, more convoluted, and his groans grew louder. He slumped deeper in his chair, his tie loosening until it draped around his shoulders like rumpled tallis.

As our Yiddish instructor, Herb Zavin, droned on about Hegel and the master-slave dialectic, Moishe suddenly leapt to his feed.

"No more! No more!" he yelled. "I can't take it."

"Please sit down, Comrade Moishe," said Bert Katz, our Coop Chairman. "Comrade Herb has the floor."

"It's too much, I say." He swayed on the balls of his feet. Some shook their heads; some laughed.

"We're beating around the bushes here. We all know what we must do."

"And what's that, comrade?"

"The Rav Patai. He is a friend to the worker. He will help us."

Vigorous nods. A smattering of applause. Bert Katz sighed.

We knew of Rav Patai by reputation, of course. Everyone back on the Lower East Side knew him. They called him the Ba'al Shem of the Bowery.

He was an actual rabbi once, years ago and an ocean away.

We heard he was a student of the Netziv of Volozhin, a correspondent of the wise and prolific Ish Shalom, renowned across the Pale of Settlement as a scholar of Talmud and learned in the fractal secrets of the Zohar. From Odessa to Vilna, he performed small miracles across the Tsar's consumptive empire—healing the sick and infirm, casting dybbuks from temperamental dairy cows, fixing shattered wagon wheels

There were other rumors too. People said that he was a pariah among the rabbinate—those old men who sat hunched in their yeshivas, blind to the suffering of the world while they argued about whether the Torah permitted the peeling of an onion on Shabbos.

They cast him out because they knew how easily he spoke the Tetragrammaton and its innumerable syllables, how readily he bellowed the ineffable Seventy-Two

Names of God. They knew about his perambulations in desolate shtetl cemeteries, his nocturnal communions with all manner of sheyd.

Now, he worked out of the basement of a laundry on Henry Street down by the East River. We always saw him going from one job to another, dodging traffic as he scuttled across Delancey Street. He was a fixture of the streetscape, like a mailbox.

But to seek the aid of such a man…so many of us resisted the idea. Rabbis were one thing, but a witch doctor? A street peddler who eked out a living selling potions and amulets to batty old yentas? It seemed to admit defeat. It implied a weakness in our system, a catastrophic flaw for which Marx failed to account.

And yet, our Coop was built on contradictions.

The meeting adjourned with a vote to send a letter to the Rav Patai. Our so-called Ba'al Shem.

Our savior arrived a few nights later. He came with no emissary, no fanfare, emerging from the snow as if from a dream. Word of his arrival spread quickly through the Coop, as members of the Young Pioneers ran through the halls banging on doors.

We crowded into the lobby to get a glimpse of the dark figure standing in the doorway. He wore a stained kaftan and an enormous mangy shtreimel. Payes fringed his leathery face, the hanks of gray hair knotted like the wool of a ram, merging with his voluminous beard.

Though he still dressed and looked like a rabbi, he had held no clerical authority for years. Still, some of the older residents bowed their heads, as if the sight of such a man kindled some buried ancestral memory.

“I have come to see about your sheydim,” he said, accent thick as pale borscht.

Bert Katz bowed his head and led him through the lobby. We followed from a distance, murmuring to each other.

In the lobby, the Ba’al Shem paused every few steps to run his fingers along the lobby’s dusty molding. He rapped his knuckles on the tiles and pressed his ear against the cracked plaster, like an exterminator hunting a nest of rats.

They ascended the stairs to Victor Levitak’s apartment. We followed close behind.

“Nu,” he said. “You can see their mark.”

He pointed to a scarified symbol burned into the corner of the door as if someone had held a branding iron to it. The letter ש, pronged like a pitchfork. Or the footprint of a bird in wet cement.

We heard the faint sounds of rustling wings and trilling coos. “Do not come in,” he said, as he entered the apartment. “Under no circumstance.”

The door slammed shut behind him.

We waited in the quiet halls. We could hear each other breathing.

“Can he be trusted?” Fred Slivken hissed.

Ruby Gopnik shrugged. “You’ve heard the stories.”

Everyone seemed to know someone whose friend or cousin or grandmother or neighbor had witnessed the miracles of the Ba’al Shem.

We heard that he distributed scrolls to dockworkers during the big harbor strike a few years back. When the cops charged the picket line, their night sticks shattered like spun sugar.

We heard that he once captured an estrie that had taken up residence in a Chrystie Street brothel. He lured the parasite up to the roof and trapped her by tying up her hair with a length of silver thread.

Another time, a family of Galicians under threat of eviction called upon him. He raised a golem in their aid—a hulking automaton sculpted from the muck and rubbish dredged from the bottom of the East River. The golem proceeded to maul the offending landlord, dragging him, screaming, into the river's watery depths.

After what seemed like hours, the Ba'al Shem emerged from the apartment. He straightened his patchy fur hat and smoothed his beard.

"The Banim Shovavim haunt this house," he said. "As I suspected."

We did not know these words before. He could have been referring to a strain of fungus.

"They are called 'the Lost Children,'" he said, sensing our bewilderment. "Mischievous abominations, born of union between man and demon."

He leaned in close and whispered, "The man who lived here has lain with the Screech Owl."

Victor Levitak. *Victor Levitak*—our putz of a neighbor, a man unremarkable in every way. Except, apparently, for the fact that he had shtupped a demon.

"Do they… do they mean us harm, Rav Patai?" Lewis Tabachnick asked.

He shrugged. "Eh. Depends. Tell me about the man."

We looked at Marty Feinberg, who worked on the line with Victor and delivered the mourner's kaddish at our slapdash shiva. He seemed abashed.

"What is there to say, Rav Patai? Victor Levitak was a difficult man who kept to himself. He was a good fabric cutter."

"Married?"

Marty swallowed. "Yes. Back in Kishinev. Sarah, her name was. He had a boy, too. Max. They… well, they died in the pogrom."

The Ba'al Shem nodded. "No heirs, then. There is precedent for this, I fear. Do you know of the Posen haunting?"

We shook our heads.

"I thought not," he sighed. "No matter. In time, we will learn their intentions."

We began to see him at all hours wandering the halls, murmuring to himself in Hebrew, performing strange rites.

He erected an eruv—a ritual boundary—by tying a colossal piece of string to the streetlights that flanked our Coop and running it along the perimeter of the building. He distributed mezuzahs and had them nailed to every single door and archway in the complex, from our lobby's grand entryway to narrow bathroom closets. He festooned the ceilings with garlands of garlic and scattered salt as he shuffled down the corridors like a serf sowing grain.

We did not understand the purpose of these rituals. When asked, the Ba'al Shem provided cryptic explanations that made little sense to us.

"The Banim Shovavim are here," he said. "Yet, they are not. They are mere wisps of smoke—indications of a

distant fire. They must be coaxed and bound. They must be reasoned with."

He recruited a minyan from our ranks—a ten-man posse consisting of Coopniks of varying degrees of piety. He trained and drilled them in ceremonies of thaumaturgy and exorcism.

Everywhere he went, his minyan followed. Beside the courtyard fishpond, they dug a makeshift mikveh rimmed with ice. In the dining hall, they built an ark from scavenged boards, in which the Ba'al Shem placed a homemade Sefer Torah, a scrolled patchwork of animal hides collected from the ashcans of kosher butchers. The Torah was inscribed with ink boiled from onionskin, so red that it looked almost like blood.

Strange though it was to live in a house cursed by demons, it felt stranger still to live, suddenly, in a house blessed by Hashem.

His presence stirred within us a quiet spiritual fervor. We excavated frayed, moth-eaten yarmulkes and tallis from the backs of our closets. We read old Torahs streaked with mildew, the words of blessing and prayer returning like once-forgotten lullabies.

The old women of the Coop began trading the cures and talismans of their shtetl childhoods, vague recollections of recipes and decoctions passed down by their own grandmothers. In their purses, they carried embroidered sachets of herbs purchased from a Chinatown apothecary—cloves, orris, rue, acacia.

He sent them to a Sephardic healer with whom he had dealings on Orchard Street. They procured from her bottles of olive oil steeped with the wrinkled bodies of newborn mice, which they warmed over a flame and daubed in their ears. They returned with little paper

packages of mumia, a precious powder made from dried and pulverized foreskins. They slept with the substance under their pillows for three nights, in honor of the three patriarchs.

The creatures continued to harass us, as if the holy man in our midst only agitated them. Sometimes, we would hear wings flapping through the halls, claws clicking and clacking over the black-and-white checkered tiles.

Sometimes, when we looked through our peepholes, we would see a pair of yellow eyes staring back at us.

The Coop buzzed as the date of the ceremony approached. The Ba'al Shem and his minyan fasted, consuming nothing but bread and water and pinches of salt. We felt like denizens of a city under siege—the Zealots of Masada, or the Republicans in Madrid.

The night before, we unplugged our appliances and shut off our lights for Shabbos. We watched from our windows as the minyan bathed in the frigid courtyard mikveh, blushing at the sight of our naked neighbors, our own fathers and brothers and sons. They dressed in white shrouds, clutched tight against the February night. They wrapped themselves in tefillin, the thin leather straps cutting into their flesh.

When the time came, we walked down to the basement's communal dining hall as if in a funeral procession. Tepid sunlight seeped through the high egress windows of the basement. The Ba'al Shem sat at the head of a long table, flanked by his minyan.

In his right hand, he clutched a large human skull. It seemed impossibly old, the bone smooth and brown like

the shell of a chestnut. Jagged glyphs were carved into the cranial dome—letters in Hebrew and other, older languages.

The gaping eye sockets seemed to follow us as we filed into the room. We knew then why the Rav Patai had so rankled his fellow rabbis. We knew then why he fled to America.

When the sun began to set, he recited Havdalah to conclude the Sabbath, pouring syrupy wine from a small tin kiddush cup. We sipped from mismatched glasses and tore loaves of challah and sniffed matchboxes full of heady cloves.

He lit a single braided candle. The match sputtered, but the flame held strong. The minyan lit more candles, clustering them on our tables, leaving the rest of the room in murky gloom. We could see through the basement's windows the first evening stars—planets, surely—just barely visible in the luminescent haze of the city.

He unfurled the Sefer Torah to the Book of Tehillim. He faced the wall of darkness, his congregation of shadows. He held the skull in the palm of his left hand and a tarnished Torah pointer in his right.

He read the words of the psalm, the thick, phlegmy Hebrew thundering across the basement hall.

*"You need not fear the terror by night, or the arrow that flies by day;*

*The plague that stalks in the darkness, or the scourge that ravages at noon;*

*A thousand may fall at your left side, ten thousand at your right, but it shall not*

*reach you;*

*You will see it with your eyes, you will witness the punishment of the wicked;*

*Because you took the Lord—my refuge, the Most High—as your haven;*

*No harm will befall you, no disease will touch your tent.*

*For He will order His angels to guard you wherever you go."*

He repeated the psalm, then repeated it twice, three times. The room shivered and contracted.

They were with us. We could sense them slinking in the dark.

He spoke the names of God and His angels and their heavenly spheres. The litany of Sefirot tumbled from his lips with the rote indifference of a child reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

We felt a slight breeze. The wall of shadows shifted.

He spoke louder. "Reveal yourself."

A pair of thin flames wavered in the eyes of the skull.

"Reveal yourself."

The flames grew. The letters inscribed on the bone burned, glowing red like dying embers. We could hear the Ba'al Shem's fingers sizzle, smell his charred flesh. Myra Stein—who, as a young seamstress, had narrowly escaped the great Triangle blaze—nearly fainted.

The rabbi clutched the skull tighter.

"Reveal yourself."

A thin claw emerged from the skull's parted mouth. Then another and another, until a pair of small hands clasped the broken teeth, prying them wider.

"In His name, reveal yourself."

A gust of wind blew forth from the darkness, extinguishing the candles on our tables. We heard a commotion as the rabbi spat orders at his minyan. They scurried around the room relighting candles, executing

this work with the deftness of stagehands moving scenery.

The mouth of the skull yawned, black jaws unclenching. A pale head squeezed through the opening.

The rabbi held the skull in his outstretched arms. A thin neck attached to a stocky, round body heaved itself out from the open mouth. The thing tumbled out onto the floor, righting itself as it fell. It crouched on the linoleum tiles, staring up at us with a pair of enormous yellow eyes.

The creature shrieked.

It was the size of an infant with the face of a boy, yet its mouth converged into an orange beak. It squatted on the floor on crooked legs, its twisted genitalia dangling between a pair of scaly talons that scratched and gouged holes in the tiles. Its arms were flat and lightly feathered, the dead wings of a half-plucked chicken.

The creature sprang up to the table and shrieked once more.

From the skull's open mouth, still in the grip of the Ba'al Shem, another hand reached out and another creature emerged. Then another, and another. They gushed forth like an unclogged faucet, a dense spray of puckered flesh the color of schmaltz left out on the kitchen counter—waxen, seminal. We pressed our palms to our ears as they hooted and screeched on our Shabbos tables, too many to count.

We felt something else in the room, too. An immense shadow skirted the circle of candlelight. A mass of feathers and claws and eyes—so many eyes, flashing in the dark like a pack of predators. We could feel ebony wings stretching, filling the basement, enveloping us in the smell of decay—not the stench of putrefaction but the

rich, heady aroma of the forest floor, a fallen bough teeming with life.

The Ba'al Shem placed the gnarled skull on the table and stepped toward the looming shadow.

"Speak, O Screech Owl," he said.

A rumbling growl reverberated from the shadows. The eyes flashed like shoals of herring, whirling and settling into a glittering sequence of shapes that ran together like a zoetrope. A vibrant cipher of light and color.

And in these lights, we bore witness.

In the days that followed, we could hardly talk about this moment, though we had all experienced it, like a shared dream.

In the night, she came to him as Sarah. His Sarah.

He sat up in bed and stared up at this woman he loved. He studied the touch of moonlight in her red hair, the splotchy birthmark on her left rib, the curve of her breast, as he alone remembered her. When he moved closer to the edge of the bed, he saw her folded wings, her sharpened talons.

He knew, in his heart, that his Sarah was dead, that the thing standing in his bedroom merely wore her skin. And yet, as their eyes met, they seemed to come to an understanding. An arrangement of mutual benefit.

She led him to her bedchamber, deep in the coiled caverns of his dreams. She pushed him onto her bed, and he gazed up at her—not with shame or brutish lust, like so many others, but with pious, venerating terror.

When she was done, she quickly upraised herself from his body and gathered up the seed that dripped down her

talons. She drew blood from his veins and luminous ichor from her own. She squeezed sweat from his flesh and wrung waxy oils from her shining black plumage, like bolts of dyed fabric.

She formed this mixture into a tacky unguent, kneading and folding, kneading and folding. And from this dough, she plucked tiny globules that she rolled and shaped into a clutch of perfect, crystalline eggs.

Between her slender fingers, Victor Levitak glimpsed the Four Worlds—the great, limitless whirlwind of Qliphoth.

She tended to her babies in a nest crafted from her own feathers and bones. The eggs hardened and thrummed with life, and when he came to her in his dreams, she would press his palm to their shells. He would feel the flutter of tiny hearts, the flow of blood through delicate veins, and when he held a flame to the shells, he saw the shadows of his children, floating like languid fish.

Bones calcified. Musculature congealed. Flesh thickened. And when the evening came that they cracked their shells and lifted their pink heads to the light, he looked into their cinched, blind eyes, little blue blood blisters, and tears welled in his own.

And those nights as they lay together—their legs intertwined, their souls entangled—he told her stories.

He told her about the Socialist meetings on the outskirts of Kishinev where he first met Sarah, how he saw her standing in a circle of men, shouting about the downfall of the Tsar, her thick red hair piled high in a braid. He told her about the wedding in provincial Zguritza, how his bride fought with his uncles about politics at the reception. And he told her about his son,

shy little Max, who crawled between his mother's legs and clutched at Victor's fingers with clumsy little hands.

He told her about the fearful rumors, the foreboding sense of doom. The marching priests who carried Bibles in one hand and torches in another. The stench of woodsmoke and vodka. Distant screams. Blood on the doorstep. Brains dashed on the cobblestones.

He told her how he wandered out of the city in a daze, since nothing remained for him in smoldering Kishinev. How he crossed the dusky Carpathians, hurling himself into overgrown hedgerows at the sight of another traveler on the road, hiding in musty barns at night.

He told her about his bleary months in Hamburg and the lurching Atlantic crossing, the entire ship reeking of vomit and coalsmoke and fresh paint.

He told her about New York. How it overwhelmed him, how he felt like he didn't exist amid the swarms of people in the street, how he spent sleepless nights sitting on a stiff boarding house mattress, eyes red and teary, a pair of fabric shears pressed to his throat.

She listened to his stammered, fragmented stories. And when he finished, she sat up and caressed his cheek. Slowly, she began to change. Her limbs stretched, her eyes widened and fractured, her back bent into an arch, and her joints and bones cracked, until she rose to her full height. She grew taller than an oak, a skyscraper, a mountain. She sloughed off the skin of Sarah Levitak like a bathrobe and revealed her true self—her ancient, terrible beauty.

A dazzling galaxy of eyes stared down at him and a voice, both soft and monstrous, rumbled.

"Go to them," the voice said. "Go to them in the World to Come."

Victor nodded. Tears welled in his eyes.

The tips of her expansive wings swooped down and brushed his lips.

The bedchamber fell away and so did he, hurtling through the vast gulf of space, whether by her will or some other inscrutable force that dwelled within the creases and folds of the Four Worlds, unseen yet palpable, like the gravitational pull of an undiscovered planet.

The glittering lights dimmed. The entire experience was but a fleeting moment, like déjà vu.

The shadow had dissipated, gone to attend to other business in other worlds, the nature of which we could not possibly fathom. We looked around at the flock of children roosting in our basement.

The Ba'al Shem sat in the chair off to the side. In his burnt fingers, he held a small piece of challah, which he offered to the creature he had struck with his Torah pointer. It eyed him warily, then snatched it away and scampered off under the table.

In the back of the room, someone was murmuring softly. We turned in our seats.

Marty Feinberg spoke the mourner's kaddish. The words came easily to him this time. Myra Stein joined him. Then Bert Katz and the Ba'al Shem. Then Moishe Bernstein. More and more joined in, until the entire Coop uttered the words together. Our voices swelled as one in remembrance for our neighbor, our comrade, our Victor Levitak.

"May his memory be a blessing," Marty Feinberg said.

"May his memory be a blessing," we responded.

"May his memory be a blessing," trilled the Banim Shovavim, their voices high and reedy like a chorus of castrati.

We did not know Victor Levitak—we did not *care* to know him. But as we sat in the darkened basement, we felt as if his litany of pains might be our own. How many of us had fled—from Odessa, Warsaw, Zhitomir, Bialystok, Shedlits, and a hundred other villages and shtetls whose names time would soon forget? How many of us had buried a wife, a husband, a child? How many of us had felt the aching despair of existence in a foreign, uncaring land?

The Banim Shovavim bounced and capered and pecked at our plates. And as we watched them, we realized that Victor Levitak's strange little sons—his lost and wayward boys—were our own. They had always been ours, since the night he left us to travel byways unknown. We could no sooner cast them out than our own flesh and blood.

Myra Stein was right. How could we live with ourselves?

The Ba'al Shem drew up the covenant. It was signed with pens and talons dipped in ink and sealed with globs of paraffin wax.

They mostly congregated in the library. Something about it drew them—the quiet, hidden alcoves, maybe. During the day they slept, roosting in the contemporary Yiddish fiction section, preening over the circulation desk.

They curled up like housecats in the bookshelves' nooks and crannies, constructing delicate papier-mâché nests from strips of rag and newspaper. When we checked out books, we nudged their plump, squawking bodies out of the way.

But these annoyances were minor. We had lived with worse neighbors. Plus, they made excellent exterminators, since their diet seemed to consist primarily of rats and cockroaches. All over the basement, we would step over their regurgitated pellets, little cottony kishkes stuffed with brittle bones and carapaces.

Sometimes, late at night, if we happened to be walking back to our apartments from the basement, we would pass by the library. Sometimes, we saw the librarian, Myra Stein, sitting on a stool in the center of the room, surrounded by the sons of Victor Levitak.

They would train their wide saucer eyes on her, their bodies still as porcelain dolls. She would read aloud selections of Marx—*Capital*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, the *Manifesto*—and they would let out little chirps of contentment.

# Sentinel
## Lauren Ferebee



The morning after I dreamed about Hannah's mermaid, three dead seagulls washed up on the shoreline. I took

note of each one, their bent bodies limp on the sand, then lifted them by their feet, feathers dripping, to take into the lab. An omen, I might have called it once.

There was a snowy brightness to the air, alerting me that I'd lost track of time again. I weighed the birds, considering the recent length of days. It could be close to Christmas now, in which case it was time to fire up the truck and take it in to the outpost, see if Hannah had sent mail.

The birds were trash-dead, like most of them. Their stomachs stuck out like crumpled paper, stuffed with plastic, a cruel parody of fullness. You'd think the chemicals would kill them first, but we're resilient, us little meat and blood breathers. We adapt without knowing it, until one day all the shit in the world just gets too much inside us and we stop. There should be a better prize at the end for surviving so long.

As I carted the birds out to the decomposer, a notice fell off the door. Like its predecessors, it warned of my upcoming eviction. The End of the Sentinel Program, it proclaimed, like a government-sponsored apocalyptic tract. The end was coming, but then again it always was, some end.

I lifted the decomposer lid, smelled chemical death, a sharp too-sweetness like burning plastic. The birds disappeared into a sheeny muck, and I tossed the letter in after them, its featherless white wings quickly sinking.

I'd watched, like they asked me to. I'd measured the inches of the Rise. I'd measured Hannah the same way, until she was tall as the resort town ruins, until one day she was gone. And I would be gone soon too if the people that put me here had their way.

Flurries fell patchily in town, obscuring The Wayfarer's sign, which glowed with Christmas lights in the shape of seahorses. It'd be a slick road back if I didn't decide to stay the night. As I kicked open the old door, the scratchy sounds of "Strangers in the Night" signaled the only true miracle December was likely to bring this year: the repair of a centuries-old jukebox in the corner. The Wayfarer's windworn proprietor, Rebecca, raised her head and waved a white flag my direction. A letter.

One cursory glance around revealed the usual folks: a couple of hardened ecologists who'd made a career studying seaside ruins, scattered contractors who maintained the Habitability Perimeter fifty miles inward, and of course, Rebecca, slinging shitty beers behind the bar. Few people were moving in these days. There used to be more, before the Rise made it abundantly clear that it would keep rising.

Rebecca tossed a letter my direction. "Merry Christmas." She leaned in expectantly, probably hoping I'd open it there, but I tucked it away into the deep pocket of my fishing jacket, right next to my hipbone. She eyed me curiously, then turned away. That was the good thing about bartenders. They were never too curious.

A man turned on his barstool next to me, and I realized he was a stranger, his neatness telegraphing a recent military background. His wavy hair was too long to be regulation, but he had soldier eyes: sharp, haunted, and forever searching for danger. His were dark blue. A hundred years ago someone might have said they looked like the ocean.

"I hear you live on the line," he said, studying me. Rebecca and I glanced at each other as she scooted a beer my way.

"She brings by fish every now and then and we fry it up and have a big fuckin party," Rebecca told the stranger.

The man raised his eyebrows. "It's safe to do that with the fish?"

I smiled, anticipating twenty questions. "I know good from bad."

He leaned in, studying my face. I wondered if he saw any danger there. "How much good is there still, really?"

I saw from the set of his mouth it was a genuine question. "Look, I'm not a prophet or any kind of preacher," I said, "I don't have the stomach for telling people how the world is."

He smiled, a smile that was surprisingly bright. "Isn't that your job?" he asked. "Isn't that your whole job?"

"And what's your job?" I asked. "Now that you're not in the service?"

If I had surprised him, he didn't show it. "You should know," he said. "It was in the notices."

The notices. I'd never imagined that those anonymous harbingers, each of which I'd re-molecularized into soil, might translate into reality. The idea of leaving seemed so unthinkable, I'd thought I could stave it off by pretending it wasn't happening. He must have been at my door this morning, taping the latest missal to it. Some Christmas activity, evicting strangers. Historically, it hadn't gone well.

"Don't shoot the messenger. I think they should let you stay," he said, reading my face.

The ecologists were dancing now, spinning in slow circles to an acapella version of “Hallelujah.” I’d never seen them dance and none of them were any good, but somehow under the dim lights and the music, it seemed all right to not be any good, to just be moving. Their arms swooped and swung in imprecise but enthusiastic movements. They made me think of the birds, how they would have moved when they were still alive and battling the coastal wind.

“Do you dance?” he asked me.

I thought about it. “I have a daughter,” I said finally. “I used to dance with her.”

“Well, I’m going to dance,” he said. And he got right up and danced, silly and strange and nothing like I expected from the person sent to oust me from my home. I felt a twinge and wished he had asked me to join him, which was not what I expected from myself.

Twenty years ago, I smoked. Now I just stand outside buildings and pretend. Tonight I felt for the letter in my pocket, touching the smooth paper, thinking of the eviction notice I’d tossed in the decomposer, how I watched it sink.

“You open your letter yet?” Rebecca asked from the doorway. I shook my head, looked out at the falling snow. The outpost seemed more like early civilization than late, it was so sparse and simply made, a few buildings, some dirt roads. What remained of the Anthropocene cracked and decayed beyond it in the darkness.

“That guy’s here to move me off,” I said. “Been getting notices for weeks.” If I had a cigarette, I would have ashed it. Instead, I flicked my fingers through

snowflakes. Rebecca brushed snow off an old ratty lawn chair, sat in it.

"Might be good for you, a new beginning." I nodded out of politeness. It was the kind of thing you just said yes to, even if you didn't agree. A new beginning, sure, it sounded good. I touched the letter again. It sounded better than running away.

I got home a little after midnight and fell on the icy steps to the house. I banged my leg so bad I ended up lumbering into the house like a drunk bear, my knees hovering above scratchy industrial carpet. Underneath the house's manufactured heat, a deep cold lurked.

Some nights I bothered going to my bedroom first, pretending I slept there, but tonight I just crawled straight into Hannah's. Everything just as she left it, except the letters under the twin bed, opened, read, and stashed there like sad and broken birds.

I climbed onto her bed, felt the familiar sense of relief being surrounded by her former life. Her two corner windows framed the dark and unfathomable sea-deep, made it finite. The puffy tenderness of my knee foreshadowed a deep bruise in the morning. I pressed at it, wincing.

The truth was, I couldn't let Rebecca see the letter because I would have to lie to her about it later, as I had so many other times since Hannah left. Even away from me, I knew Hannah's rhythms: two or three years in a place, cheerful and full of news, and then I'd get one that just said *Mom, I'm disappearing.* And she would, for a while. She'd go silent, then pick up the correspondence as though nothing had happened.

The first few times I received the news of her disappearing, I'd tossed my house keys at Rebecca and gone hunting. But I'd found myself incapable of really interfacing with the world beyond after so many years alone. Cities made me panic. I hated the pace of life beyond. When I did manage to find her friends, her old addresses, they were surprised to learn she'd vanished, had no idea where she'd gone.

It was as though she had never been in the lives she lived at all, as though she fabricated them for me to find long after she'd left them. There is nothing quite like having a daughter who kidnaps herself.

I had shrunk my hopes to one: that someday she'd come home. And that one, given my pending eviction, was slowly fading too.

I let the white paper flutter unread to the floor, where it joined its brethren under the bed. Like I did every night, I propped up pillows and stared at the square of the sea in Hannah's window until it submerged me, and I slept in darkness.

I woke gasping to a sharp rapping on the door. I stumbled to my feet, my knee cringing at the sudden movement and limped to the door. Outside, the ex-military evictor from the bar shivered at the door.

I scowled at him as I opened it.

"I've never seen the ocean before," he said, teeth chattering. I was silent. It was too early for this, whatever it was. "It's big," he added.

"Well," I said. "Go stare at it for a couple of days while I pack. Don't die of exposure."

"Is it true you've been out here for twenty-five years?" he asked. I squinted at him. It was the kind of question that needed coffee for an answer. I invited him in, but he

said he'd meet me on the back porch. People get like that about the ocean. They see it once, and they can't let it go.

Whatever genius designed our mobile little house had neglected kitchens altogether in favor of a lab, so I was treated to the photographs of the three dead seagulls up on the wall while the water boiled on a hotplate. The coffee was in an almost-clean beaker. Everything tasted like saltwater.

I found him on the back porch as promised and sat next to him, our breath clouding the air together.

"I have these dreams," he said. "About what's down there. Old houses and all the things inside them that float around, like a graveyard. But I've never been. I'm afraid of it."

I stared at the meager snow on the ground. "I don't dream about anything," I said finally. "It's all gotten swallowed up."

"Is it true," he asked me. "Is it true that there are whole towns under there?"

I nodded slowly. "I've seen them. I've seen… all kinds of things. Some you wouldn't believe."

"You're one of the last ones left," he said finally. "Most of the others are dead or missing."

I snorted. "Sorry, that just sounds like a threat. Like you're here to kill me."

He stood up, worried. "No, no, actually, the opposite. Curious how you've kept yourself alive."

I froze. I thought of the many nights I'd spent awake in Hannah's bed, watching the mobile spin above my head, listening to the rustle of the letters as the cold outside air swept through cracks, imagining death.

"Huh," I said. "That's an interesting question. I'll have to think about that."

His name, I learned, was Paul, and he had come from Texas, a water guarder from one of the last reservoirs. He was a contractor now, a private security guy, though, he told me, he still worked for the government.

"I guess the difference is," he said, "that now I can wear my own clothes and I can quit anytime I want to."

"Are those big differences?" I asked him. He shook his head. I'd brought him into the lab, though I supposed leaving him on the stairs to freeze to death looking at the ocean might have been the smarter move.

"None of this stuff belongs to me." I waved around at the glass containers, the fridge, everything. "So, I'm not sure what we do with that."

He shrugged. "They didn't send me with any boxes or anything."

"I guess I have some under the house, if they're still any good," I said. "But it might take a shovel to find them."

We spent the better part of the morning digging the old regulation tubs out from under the house. Most of them were saltwater-rusted, but they could still hold things.

"There's one in here that's really heavy," he said. My heart dropped. "You can leave that one," I said, but it was too late. The lid was off.

A million pictures of mermaids with sharp teeth and rainbow oil-skin stared back at him. "Jesus," he said, stepping back.

Hannah's belief in mermaids started early, maybe because she was lonely. At five, she came in one morning, her eyes wide.

"I saw something with sharp teeth out in the water," she said. I thought it was a fish. "No, Mom, no, it had a face like me." She seemed half-pleased and half-terrified at the thought. I went along with it, since I was the one who had brought her out here, made her the kind of child that needed imaginary friends.

She never had a name, Hannah's mermaid, though pictures of her soon decorated our house: a rainbow sheen over her skin that Hannah claimed was old oil, hair tangled with algae, eyes round and indistinct like a fish. Even I started to think that I saw her sometimes when I'd go into the water. Sometimes Hannah would wake up gasping like she was drowning, long after she'd stopped talking about the mermaid. I'd catch her singing songs I'd never heard, staring out the window at the ocean.

I think most people, Rebecca included, assume that Hannah left because she was restless or bored, but it wasn't that. Hannah was haunted. It was my fault for bringing her here, raising her in a place that people weren't supposed to be in. The earth had resoundingly been reclaiming it from us for years. And it had taken her too, my bright-eyed girl. She didn't have any land in her. She washed like the sea from place to place. She refused to be caught.

I didn't talk about Hannah to anyone, not even the few people who knew her, so the words felt difficult. "I had a daughter," I said. Paul nodded. "She isn't dead," I said, reading the sadness on his face. "She's just lost out there

in the world, and she won't come home. Not that this is a home."

"What is this, then?" he asked me.

I considered, thinking of the way we'd creep the house back up the beach as the waterline rose. "It's a shell," I said. "Like what turtles have. It's just enough to keep surviving."

"You could go find her," he said. "Go live with her."

I thought of Hannah's last day in the house, the way she cried and begged me to come with her. "No one is supposed to live here," she had spat at me. "This isn't a real place, it's full of ghosts."

I could have gone then. I could have listened. "You know how it is," I said to Paul. "You know how it is for us. Our generation. You protected the water until it was gone. We can't leave."

"We're guardians," he said.

"We're grievers," I replied, closing the box of mermaid drawings. He caught the lid before it went all the way down.

"That's not who I am," he said. I looked into his eyes, that old blue of remembered ocean, and took his hand, so I could close the box. There were calluses etched right where his fingers connected to his palm, like he had been carrying heavy cargo a long way.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said, holding onto my hand. "But I'm not willing to put that kind of sad word on it yet."

I laughed. "Oh," I said. "Oh, you're an optimist. Great."

That night we sat amid half-packed tubs and ate freeze-dried food. Mostly the day had been spent in silence, him in the lab, me in the bedrooms, going back

and forth to the composter with things I didn't want to bring with me.

"I guess they're usually ready to go then, the others," I said. "You don't have to pack for them." He stretched out on the ground and sighed.

"Most of the old posts were abandoned a long time ago," he said finally. "Actually came upon a few already out at sea. Those reports you do, those logs, they got rid of everybody who did anything with them years back."

I thought of the three birds and a sharp pang hit me, though I had suspected something like this for a long time now.

"You must have known that," he said, as though he could read my thoughts. "You must have at least wondered."

I shrugged. "They kept paying me to be here, so here I was."

He sat up on his side, gazed at me. I looked away. It had been such a long time since I'd felt the weight of another person's curiosity.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked. "Why not just tote the whole house away, put me out on my ass?"

"You're the last one," he said. "I don't know what happens after you."

*That makes two of us,* I thought.

The hauler arrived early in the gray morning, a house-sized hole on its back. By then I'd stacked up what little I cared to own in my truck bed. I hesitated over the drawings. They were a ridiculous thing to think of bringing, but I couldn't leave them.

I sat out on the beach holding them in my lap while I watched the hauler take the house away, Paul instructing and guiding it. In a week or less, the shore would reshape itself as though it had never been here at all.

Once the house was gone, Paul sat next to me in the sand. For a long time we watched the waves crest the ruins of resort towns, now home to whole ecosystems of new life.

"She said it was just ghosts here," I said finally. "When she left. But it wasn't. It isn't. There's so much life here. So much death, yes, but so much life. Who will watch it? Who will know?"

He stood up without answering and offered me his hand again. I took it and stood up, letting the box of drawings fall in the sand, releasing its strange and colorful contents to the briny wind. I stumbled a little, and he steadied me. He didn't let go.

I looked at him then, really looked at his face, and in it there was a kind of earthiness that I had long since forgotten, like his whole being went far down into the ground. Without thinking, I reached out and touched his cheek, almost expecting it to be made of bark, or dirt. Instead, I felt the fine grit of stubble across his cheek.

"You're right, this isn't a place for ghosts," he said, leaning into my hand. "But it's no place for humans either. Maybe it needs to live and die on its own terms for a while, like we do."

That night, I saw the mermaid. I'd driven the truck down near the water one last time, after having a few at Rebecca's. Being landlocked made me nervous. Paul said it would pass, that I'd get used to the feeling of endless

flat surfaces, an unmoving horizon, but it hadn't happened for me yet.

The mermaid looked less human than Hannah's drawings, though I could see how she'd mistaken it for a creature like her. It didn't speak at all, only sang in a low, almost invisible vibration. They must have been here for years, watching us measure and collect and tell stories about what we knew.

The mermaid came up near shore and I walked out partway to meet it, but it kept its distance like I might be dangerous. I held up my hands. A moment later it did the same, revealing webbed fingers, delicate, translucent skin. Gills rippled on its chestbone like waves. *So vulnerable,* I thought.

A sadness rose up in my gut almost like I was going to vomit. There'd be no one to witness this, not for years. Perhaps that was right. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, things have to heal themselves alone. And other times you need a witness to heal toward, someone or something that will watch as you become whole, seek solid land even if at first it rocks under your feet.

The mermaid waited and I did too. It was winter and the water was cold, and the light vanished so quickly. It was the kind of darkness I remembered from my childhood, a long road in the country on a winter night. I ached for that place, that time.

I opened my mouth and a sound came out, maybe a song, a low sad vibration traveling toward a pair of glittering eyes, which suddenly vanished, leaving me anchored in nothing except my own two feet and the water quickly rising around me.

I turned and walked toward shore.

# Seven Stories for Now and Later

## Nancy S. Koven

Art by John Gould and H.C. Richter (1854)

*1. Harpactes kasumba*

A thickset bird shuffles along the railing of the viewing platform, catches me looking across the river at

its home, then turns to face the same way. We become an old married couple, exchanging sighs and idly scratching away the afternoon's humidity. Its face is like weathered copper. My skin, too, is oxidized, the latest excision dressed in petroleum jelly and a sweatproof bandage underneath my hairline. There are no spiders for it to eat, but it doesn't seem all that hungry.

After some minutes of quiet meditation, it speaks: "There are many stories in that jungle. Here is one of them. Of the twins you carry in your belly, one will be stillborn; I'm sorry, that's just the way of things. The second you will sacrifice so that we may live on, and live in this forest, a little while longer." Its voice is like a cracked recording.

I say nothing. Its 60-cycle hum is soothing, reassuring.

"Lidia?"

"I'm not Lidia."

"I'm sorry, then. That story was meant for another. I sometimes get confused."

The bird tilts its jeweled head toward me, and I almost expect to hear the clanking of bangles and rings. I see now that one of its coal-black eyes is hazy with cataracts. It's getting on in years, like me.

"Still, you'll die having mothered a great many children," it continues, already forgetting I'm not Lidia. "One will claim she has no mother, but she'll go on to collect old photographs of you and bird feathers. She'll teach her grandchild the songs of birds who've gone extinct."

"Like you?" I ask.

"Like me," it agrees.

*2. Libellago stigmatizans*

Dinner consists of a tank-grown fish that's been curried. I've paid handsomely for this one-person table overlooking the river; nearby, people stand in queue behind a red velvet stanchion for their thirty-minute share of this same experience. Serialized meals will be served late into the night to accommodate the crowd.

The forest across the river is why each of us is here. From my seat, I make out a thick stand of silver-backed trees with teardrop flowers in white. Resam ferns and tangled climbers fill in the gaps. Further distant, the canopy wall rises several stories in the air, a combination of old-growth relics and satellite-fed holograms. "No more than twenty-five percent artificial greenery," the villa brochure promises.

It's too hot to be in formal attire, but we are. My dress pumps aggravate my bunions, and I'm annoyed I packed them. The voices of fellow diners, terse and staccato, punch like ginger and lemongrass.

"Lidia?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

My interlocuter is a petite male damselfly that I'd overlooked as part of the table's centerpiece. With acrobatic maneuvers, he clasps himself to a painted replica of a female, his abdomen fusing with her neck in a wheel-shaped embrace, penis seeking vagina.

"You look like Lidia." The orange patch between his eyes gives him a clownish expression, but his tone and manner are quite serious. He holds this pose while I finish dessert.

"That's a resin figurine, you know," I say after a while, trying to be helpful.

"Damn," it mutters, then twitches away toward the water, the moon highlighting its frayed, threadbare wings.

*3. Rhinolophus sedulus*

"I saw sixteen species today alone," says the woman dangling plump, varicosed legs from the top left bunkbed. She holds a list of extinct animals up to her reading lamp and slashes through several names with a loud ballpoint pen, oblivious to the value of the paper the words are printed on. "Rather convincing mechs, don't you think?"

"They guarantee thirty unique encounters in a week's time or half your money back," replies her righthand counterpart, who's wearing a seersucker nightgown with 'Bella' embroidered on the breast pocket. She's applying a tanning cream that smells like burnt toast that will later stain the sheets.

"I could only afford the three-night package," pipes the small woman below her, "and it took over half my late husband's inheritance for even that." The top ladies offer condolences to the widower, lamenting how men rarely live past sixty these days. "Don't make 'em like they used to," one quips. With fertility rates so low, no one dares ask after children.

I remain quiet in my berth on the lower left. The overhead lights are out, and the breeze through the open window cools the sweat on my skin. None of the women detect the microbat that's flown in and attached itself to the mosquito netting around my bed.

"That lottery system's something else, too," continues the first woman. "I had to wait twelve years for my number to be called."

"Twenty-one," counters Bella.

"I just wish we could get over there," pines the third. "To wait all this time, pay all this money, fly all this way, and not even be allowed in the forest—"

"We don't want humans ruining the last tropical jungle on earth, do we now?" says the first, injecting pedantic sarcasm into her voice in imitation of a tour guide from earlier. "Besides, you can see all kinds of greenery from right here. Never seen so much green in my life."

The bat and I peer at each other through the mesh. Its eyes are lost in complex whorls of skin that serve as its snout. Its triangular ears, far too large for its face, jut out from a cocoon of dark brown fuzz. They're the only parts that move as it hangs upside down.

"Are you Lidia?" it whispers.

I shake my head no, not wanting to draw attention from the others.

"Can you pass on a message to Lidia?"

This time I nod my head yes.

"Can you please tell her we really need her help and ask if she'll come back? She said she'd be going away, but we didn't think it'd be for this long." As it talks, it sheds white powdery residue from its muzzle that looks like it doesn't belong there.

To the room at large Bella says, "You know, people do try crossing the river at low tide to get over to the forest, but they inevitably get stuck in the mud flats."

"Or caught by night patrols," adds the varicosed woman.

“But I don’t want much,” the tiny woman protests. “Just a single leaf to take home.”

*4. Tetragonula atripes*

Morning consists of synthetic coffee and a visit to the villa’s Living History Museum. Although I’m early, there’s already a horde of people encircling the dais in the center of the room. Hushed voices and flash-frozen smiles let me know they’re waiting for the Malayan tiger to appear.

I work my way over to the self-paced bee exhibit occupying the far wall. There’s no crowd here, and the few stragglers look vaguely disappointed; no one much cares about the bees. The collection consists of fourteen seemingly free-floating specimens: green-eyed, red-bodied, and black-legged, with wings done up in sepia tones. A slender metal pin pierces the abdomen of each bee, effectively tethering the group to the sleek shelving unit below. Antennae, heads, legs, and wings are free to move about so that, when the bees are in motion, they appear to fly over a field of polished metal. Right now, the bees are still.

Behind me, an amplified roar vibrates the cartilage in my ribcage. The mech tiger has arrived.

I put on the earphones and push small red buttons that feed me units of information. I am told that the bees are social and stingless. A discreet placard indicates they were designed by someone named Lidia.

“Tell me about Lidia,” I murmur.

The bees jolt awake en masse, as if electrified. “Lidia cares for us,” one says.

"She's our mother," says a second. The others nod in vigorous agreement.

"She tells us stories," says a third.

"Tell me one," I urge, quieting myself to listen.

"Lidia got lost in the forest."

"The bees found her, gave her honey."

"The hornbills offered her fruit."

"The giant squirrels pointed her to fresh water."

"The pangolins taught her to be safe."

"The wild pigs showed her how to bed down for the night."

"The katydids sang her lullabies."

"The civets kept her warm."

"The colugos watched over her as she slept."

"The lorises wished her good morning."

"The mouse-deer led her home."

An alarm begins to wail somewhere above my head, effectively breaking my reverie and silencing the bees. Further down the wall, at the display of solitary pollinators, security officers descend on a teenager who's attempting to wrench a pinned butterfly off its stand; there's a booming market for stolen eco-mech. The bees, as if short-circuiting, wink out one by one.

As I make my way toward the exit, people clutch at my shirt sleeves, imploring me to take a picture of them with the tiger. A single woman walking alone is always happy to oblige in this way. Their cameras are fancy, heavy. Through the lens, only a few patches of orange and black are visible amid the sea of exuberant, human faces.

*5. Ahaetulla fasciolata*

The mockolate bars inside the vending machine cost more than a day's worth of meals. The first and last time I tasted real chocolate was at age five when my adoptive parents learned they'd conceived a biological child of their own. It was already normative back then to celebrate a conception as opposed to waiting for the birth.

As I feed the first coin into the slot, two small, pale eyes flicker open on the inside of the glass, regarding me coolly through horizontal pupils. What looks initially like a slender piece of vine wound around the metal spirals of the dispensing tray turns out to be a snake, its muted, brownish-gray body lost against a backdrop of neon candy wrappers. "Danger, Achtung, Cuidado, Attenzione, Hatari, Tehlike…" it says, cycling through thirty-something additional languages before pausing.

It sways its freckled head to-and-fro, giving the impression of a pendulum moving in slow motion. It samples the air with the tines of its tongue, its fangs strangely relegated to the far back of its mouth.

"Lidia likes her sweets, too," it says finally.

"Do you miss Lidia?" It takes effort to ask this; I realize I've been holding my breath.

"I miss her laugh. Soft, full of wonder. Like new skin." It draws out each word with great care, as if dreaming.

"Carefree and happy?" I ask.

There's a long pause. "Moreso, lost in thought and often sad."

I fish out a pen and sticky note from my purse and write: *Careful, snake inside vending machine*, adhering the paper to the lip of the coin return. The air is muggy, and I'm not sure it's going to stay put. As an afterthought, I lean in and scribble an addendum: *Achtung*…

*6. Parathelphusa reticulata*

From the gift shop, it's a pleasant downward stroll along cement switchbacks to reach the waterline, where villa caretakers have gone to great lengths to simulate an immersive jungle experience this side of the river. Artificial rattan palms, underplanted with polyblend bromeliads and heliconias, line the walking lane.

No one hurries—it's between shows—and clusters of people, who're disproportionately fair-skinned, loiter under shade sails to consult cartoon-styled maps. A looping soundtrack of tropical birds plays from loudspeakers hidden somewhere overhead. Smiling attendants, marked by silk orchid lapel pins, sell drinks from curbside huts made from plastic thatch. Like the other visitors, I clutch a pineapple-shaped bottle of flavored water.

People generally look happy except for one middle-aged man who's crying in front of the saltwater tank of a Neptune's cup sponge. An astute docent, toting a mech otter in a harness, attempts to lead the man away. The otter looks bored. I sidestep a small crowd gathered by the cinnamon frog enclosure to follow the signs pointing toward the swamp forest crabs who inhabit the riverbank. The water is cycling into low tide, revealing what the garbage-trawlers missed. On the distant shore, I make out a lump of grayish-green, a crocodile perhaps. I can't tell from here if it's smiling.

I sit cross-legged on a flat rock and prepare to wait, idly picking bits of dried mud off my sandals; I know to be patient. Eventually, I'm rewarded with voices, too many to count and almost too small to hear, coming from

a shallow, tea-colored pool. The creatures are polished, reddish-brown clones of each other, handsome but with clipped, belligerent voices that crash over each other in waves.

"new threat detected: human; <<recommend assess>>—"

"code 5: routine maintenance required; <<recommend contact Lidia>>—"

"aversive variable detected: excess salinity; <<recommend climb/purge>>—"

"human threat persists; <<recommend speak>>; *what do you want?—*"

"What can you tell me about Lidia?" I manage to interject.

"human speech detected; <<recommend assess/speak>>; *Lidia is not here.—*"

"aversive variable detected: sunlight; <<recommend swim/climb/burrow>>—"

"I want to fuck; <<recommend approach conspecific/speak>>; *do you want to fuck?—*"

"Do you know where she is?" I ask.

"human speech detected; <<recommend assess/speak>>; *Lidia is in the forest.—*"

"code 19: internal corrosion, mild; <<recommend contact Lidia>>—"

"I thought people weren't allowed over there," I say.

"human speech detected; <<recommend assess/speak>>; *People are not allowed in the forest. Lidia is Mother. Lidia rests in the forest.—*"

"Are you sure she's there?"

"human speech detected; <<recommend assess/speak>>; *Lidia said good-bye. Lidia said do not*

*follow. We followed Lidia into the forest. We watched Lidia lie down in the forest.*—"

"code 2: system error; <<recommend reboot>>—"

"How long has she been there?"

"human speech detected; <<recommend assess/speak>>; *Lidia has been resting for eight months, eleven days, three hours, forty-four minutes.*—"

"I want to fight; <<recommend approach conspecific/speak>>; *do you want to fight?*—"

"new threat detected: otter; <<recommend burrow/assess>>"

The docent ambles up with the otter in tow, flashes a sympathetic smile, and encourages me to follow her. She holds out a handkerchief, and I realize my face is wet.

"human threat resolved; <<recommend log entry>>—"

"otter threat resolved; <<recommend log entry>>—"

"code 8: battery low; <<recommend recharge/enter power saving mode>>"

*7. Presbytis femoralis*

"I'm so glad you could make it," says a moist, fidgety woman who pumps my hand a second too long. Deep grooves crisscross her forehead where she was wearing a headband magnifying lens moments earlier. "I know it was a lengthy and complicated process to get here, but I hope you're enjoying the accommodations so far. Trip of a lifetime and all…" A nametag introduces her as Dr. Ong, the villa's assistant cyberneticist, which I already know from the letter I carry in my pocket.

On the table next to her are a bowl of congealed soup, a soldering iron and array of deconstructed prosthetic

limbs, and a glossy black-and-white langur. The room smells of spices I can't immediately identify and strong body odor. The monkey has a diminutive face, its brown eyes recessed under a pointy cap of dark fur. Grayish-white wisps line its belly and inner thighs in a surprising upside-down T. "The child," it says, studying my features closely. It's not obvious if it's referring to me or to the miniature primate lying face down on a nearby workbench.

"Yes, I'm Lidia's child," I reply.

"This is my child," the langur says, flipping the limp body over by a paw and presenting it to me. The neonate is the shocking inverse of its parent, with black limbs and black tail but bold white fur covering the rest of it. Its eyes are closed.

"I've been trying everything I can think of to resuscitate it," says Dr. Ong by way of explanation, "but Lidia was the real talent."

"We all miss her," she adds after an uneasy period of silence. The adult emits a chuckle-like *tat tat tat*, then becomes engrossed with an errant patch of hair on its abdomen, the room and all its contents already dismissed from its attention.

"Would you like to see where she worked?" Dr. Ong asks. She shows me into a small, adjacent room that's outfitted with a series of dusty tables, shelves of equipment, and a small bed in the corner. The bed's unmade, but it doesn't look like it's been slept in recently.

"Having a private room was the one luxury Lidia afforded herself. She worked hard every day of her life, right up until the very end." Dr. Ong gazes out a window overlooking the forest across the river, her expression wistful as if hoping Lidia will emerge through the trees.

Bits of jungle reflect through the glass, bathing the walls and work surfaces in alien greens. Dr. Ong catches me looking at her, then shifts nervously on her feet. I wonder if they used to be lovers.

"Her contract with your adoptive parents forbade her from ever contacting you during her life, but she kept tabs on you the best she could." Dr. Ong gestures to a set of printouts thumbtacked neatly to a corkboard frame by the bed. Many of the clippings are faded from age: pictures of my childhood, graduation photos, wedding announcement, news of the birth of my son. Some of the pin-ups are newer, the ink fresher: tidbits about my career, obituary of my husband, news of the birth of my grandchild.

"She wasn't ready for you when you first came into the world, but I like to think she became a good…" Dr. Ong lets her voice trail off. "Here, I've saved some things for you. Some photographs of Lidia and her journals. She wrote in her journal every time your birthday came around. You'll find those particular entries page-marked with bird feathers."

From the next room, there's the sound of clattering dishware and a wet-sounding burp; the langur has jumped somewhere forbidden and is sounding off a self-congratulatory *tat tat tat*. "Let me go see to that," Dr. Ong sighs and scurries next door.

Easing myself into a smile and into a chair, I sit down at Lidia's desk and begin to read.

# Unblooded Gospel

## Justin Taroli



There’s a guy at the bar with lips like wet marble and a credit score you can feel in your spine. He orders vodka

neat. Who drinks vodka neat? People who don't need mixers, or feelings, or food. People who glide.

"Don't," says Marcus, leaning into me. "He's one of them."

I laugh loud enough that it startles the couple next to us. "One of what?"

Marcus just says, "They drink. But they don't piss. Think about it."

He always says shit like this. Paranoid, poetic. He's had every STD they make. We met in a waiting room where the magazines were laminated and all the pamphlets had smiling men on them, hands in back pockets, looking into each other like one of them's about to die first.

The guy at the bar looks over. Eye contact like a scalpel. His smile's too slow, like it's remembering how.

I leave Marcus at the table and go. "Vodka?" I ask.

"Double," he says. "You?"

"I'm a negative."

He smiles wider. "How tragic."

We don't talk much. I follow him out the club's back exit, down an alley that smells like fried dough and bleach. He touches my throat like he's feeling for the pause between beats. I kiss him first, because I want to. His tongue is dry. His teeth—when they graze me—are not metaphor. "I'm not like other boys," I whisper.

He doesn't care. He bites. And when he does, it's like sucking on a live wire, because I lied. I lied so good. I lied straight through my gums. I lied so hard I brought death with me.

He recoils. Mouth open, panting steam. Blood on his chin, sizzling. Actually sizzling.

"I'm *positive*," I say, wiping my neck. "Undetectable, but you know. Still a little toxic."

He falls. Not like in movies. More like an insect in winter—knees buckling, then nothing. I leave him twitching by the dumpsters. When I get back inside, Marcus is gone.

The next night, I wear a mesh shirt and a bandage on my neck like it's a club stamp. I let people think it was rough trade. I let people think I'm prey. I let people look. In the mirror at the bar, I adjust my lip gloss until it reflects the LED lights like a warning flare. I look edible, but slightly off. Like sashimi left out too long. That's the bait.

They gather at the bar. Always the same types: translucent and toned. They glide instead of walk. They don't carry phones, just stand behind people who do. You learn to spot them by the hunger in their stillness. Real people are always fiddling—drinking, texting, touching. These things just wait.

One slides up next to me. This one has cheekbones like knife hilts and eyes like day-old snow. "Do I know you?" they ask. Their voice is soft, like a violin note you feel in your molars.

"I don't think so," I say. "But I bleed pretty."

A pause. Almost imperceptible. Like they heard something they shouldn't have, or smelled something rotten under a perfect meal.

"You're funny," they say, but it isn't a compliment. It's a test.

I smile and finish my drink. I leave without paying, and they follow.

In the alley, they don't waste time. Fingers like cold vines press against my jaw. My head tilts back without resistance. There's an intimacy in being opened. But I learned something from last night. I took Marcus' advice. I got prepped. Literally. The vial hanging from the chain around my neck isn't decorative.

When they lean in to bite, I twist the chain, shatter the glass between my fingers, and shove the open wound into their mouth. Not my neck. My palm. Blood and glass. They bite down on reflex. Too fast. Too greedy. The reaction is instant. They don't scream. They *hum*. A low, vibrating noise like a wire being sawed through. Their mouth fills with steam and something black. Their eyes rupture first. Then their tongue dries and curls like burnt paper. They drop, clutching their chest like something is flapping inside it.

I watch them die with my cigarette still lit. This one takes longer. Less dramatic. More like watching someone drown in syrup. I light a second cigarette off the first. "Two for two," I say, and walk back toward the club.

Inside, someone's DJing a remix of *Tainted Love*, which feels too on-the-nose to be accidental. Marcus is still missing.

I don't see Marcus for three days. Which isn't unusual, not really. He disappears all the time. But usually there's a text. A meme. A photo of a back alley Jesus statue with eyeliner drawn on in sharpie. Something that says: *I still think I'm funny.* Something that says: *Don't die without me.*

By day four, I start walking past his building. It's a fourth-floor walk-up over a shuttered juice bar in Hell's

Kitchen, the kind of place that smells like sugar rotting in plastic. I buzz his number. Nothing. The super says he hasn't been home. I leave a paper bag of Red Bull and peanut M&M's on his welcome mat. That's how we used to apologize to each other.

The next night I go to The Tomb. That's not its real name, but it may as well be. A long, low bar with black curtains instead of walls and a chandelier made of ribs. People love to pretend it's exclusive, but all it takes to get in is the right shoes and a willingness to pretend you've never been scared of your own reflection.

I ask around. Everyone knows Marcus. Some say he left town. Some say he got clean. One guy says he saw Marcus leave with someone last week. "Someone tall. Real pale. No sweat, even in leather." Then he adds, "Didn't speak. Just touched Marcus' elbow, and he followed."

The story is vague, but the detail sticks. These things—they don't speak unless they want to. And when they do, it's not always with words. Sometimes it's a scent. A pulse. A look. Whatever they are, they don't move like people. They're fluid. They don't blink enough. Sometimes they hum at frequencies just below your hearing. I've seen it. In crowded rooms the music will stop for a second and the air gets thicker, like syrup poured down your throat. And they appear. No sound, no door, just there.

The night I noticed it first, I thought I was high. Now I know better. They're not just rich, or beautiful, or sadistic. They're wrong. Just off by a few degrees from human. They don't cast shadows right. I saw one once in a bathroom mirror and its reflection lagged behind.

Outside the Tomb, I light a cigarette and stare at the sky. No stars in Manhattan. Just planes and satellites pretending. I don't want to admit I miss Marcus, but I do. His messiness. His teeth. The way he rolled his eyes like it was cardio. The way he saw everything—*really* saw it—and still showed up to parties just to throw glitter on the corpse.

If they have him, they're not keeping him for fun. They're not lovers. They don't make friends. They consume. Slowly sometimes. Lovingly. But they don't stop.

Back in the bar, someone brushes past me and I smell it—chlorine and clove. The way the air smelled the night I watched one of them die. I turn, but no one's looking. The scent fades. I order a drink I don't want, sip it, and wait for something to happen. In the bottom of the glass, I see it. A reflection. Not mine. Not the bartender's. Not anyone near me. Marcus. Pale, hollow-eyed, staring up from the ice like he's at the bottom of a lake. Then he vanishes. I leave the drink and run.

They call it a benefit, but no one says what it's for. The invitation arrives folded into a black glove, slid under my door like a threat. The event's called *A Night for the Senses*, which is either high-concept or just a bad joke. Either way, it's bait, and I bite.

It's held in a decommissioned bathhouse in DUMBO—drained pools now filled with candles, steam machines pumping scentless fog through tile corridors. The art is vague and wet-looking. People stand around in architectural clothing, drinking red liquid from ceramic

bowls shaped like vertebrae. A chandelier overhead pulses in time with the bass, as if it's breathing.

I come alone. I always do now. The air's humid with intention. There's a nervous sheen to the crowd, but no one sweats. That's the first sign. I drift. Pretend to belong. I know how to loiter like a socialite. When I lean against the wall near the bar, I feel it—that crawling warmth between my shoulder blades. Watching. I count reflections. One too many. A man in a corner mirror looking at me, but not visible in the room.

I move down a hallway lined with velvet ropes and stretched canvases—portraits of men whose pupils have been scratched out—I find a side lounge lit in green and gold. A velvet couch. A man sitting with his coat still on, eyes scanning the crowd like he's memorizing exits.

I sit across from him because there's nowhere else to go. Because I don't want to be followed into the bathroom. Because I recognize the look in his eyes: someone who already knows what I know, and worse.

He speaks first. "If you're here for the wine, I'd skip it. Doesn't pair well with irony."

His voice is thin, frayed. He doesn't smile. Doesn't ask who I am. Just watches me.

"I wasn't invited," I say.

"No one is," he replies. "You're selected."

I look him over. Hollow cheeks, a jacket too heavy for this crowd. His hands are covered in faded hospital bracelets, stacked like bangles. I recognize one of them—Mount Sinai ID, yellowed at the edges. I wore the same kind once. "They didn't finish you," I say.

He shrugs. "They got bored."

"What's your name?"

"Pace. Or what's left of him."

A woman glides past the doorway, her eyes lingering on us just a fraction too long. Pace doesn't move. Just says, low and flat, "They don't like us talking."

I glance back at the bar. No sign of the figure in the mirror. The fog's rolling back in. "What are they?" I ask.

Pace leans forward, resting his arms on his knees like someone praying to stay upright. "They're old. Older than shame. Older than consent. They eat feeling. Preferably fear. But hunger's hunger, right?" He exhales, and for a moment it sounds like a sob. "I thought they wanted sex. That's how they start. But it's never the body. They want to unmake you. Slowly. Savor it."

We sit in silence as the party continues just out of reach. Laughter like glass breaking. Music with no melody. Pace finally adds, "You have something in you. They can smell it. That's why they haven't taken you yet."

"What do I smell like?"

"Resistance," he says. "Or revenge."

A server walks past carrying a tray of pale pink tongues on crackers. Neither of us takes one.

When I finally stand to leave, Pace doesn't look up. Just mutters, "Check the mirror."

I turn toward the long silver installation above the lounge entrance. In its reflection, Pace sits alone, hands folded. No me. No couch across from him. Just an empty space.

The fog gets thicker on the way out, like it knows I've seen something I shouldn't. I push through bodies that aren't dancing so much as swaying in synchronized submission. Someone touches my elbow—a cold graze, featherlight—but when I turn, no one's there.

I take the fire exit. I don't trust the front door. The stairs are wet like they've been licked clean and my boots slip twice before I reach the bottom. No alarms go off.

Outside, the street is too quiet. The air feels pressurized, like right before a migraine. Across the avenue a billboard flashes an ad for bottled oxygen. Beneath it, a man in a fur coat watches me without blinking. His mouth hangs open slightly, as if remembering how to breathe.

I walk faster down toward the waterfront, past locked warehouses and abandoned ferry terminals. The wind off the East River smells chemical and bruised. I should call someone. I should tell someone what I saw. But Marcus is still gone. Pace is barely a person. And everyone else I know is either on PrEP, on tour, or on something they don't have a name for yet.

I stop under the Manhattan Bridge. It's a place Marcus used to take me when he needed to scream. Not talk—scream. Just a full-throated noise into the night, echoing off the bridge like proof of life. I try it now, but all I can manage is a dry cough.

In my pocket, the invitation has gone damp. I tear it in half, then in quarters, then into smaller pieces until my hands are full of pulp. When I let go, the wind doesn't take it. The paper just sits there on the sidewalk like it's too heavy to move.

Behind me, a car engine turns over. Headlights snap on and I freeze. The vehicle doesn't move. Just idles. Waiting. I can't see the driver. The windows are tinted black. Not luxury tint—void tint. I turn away and walk toward the train. A few blocks up I hear the engine again, closer now. Still not moving fast. Just keeping pace and watching.

I duck into a bodega and pretend to shop. I buy gum I won't chew and a bottle of water I don't open. I wait around for a few minutes but the car never passes the window. It's like it dissolved.

When I finally make it home I check the locks twice. Then I drag a chair in front of the door, not because it'll stop anything, but because I need the gesture.

I watch myself brush my teeth in the mirror above the sink. For the first time in a long time, I don't like what I see. Not because I look sick or scared, but because something's changed in the way my reflection moves. Just slightly. Like it's a step ahead of me now.

It takes four days to find Pace. I go back to the bathhouse twice, but it's sealed now, locked behind construction scaffolding and signs that say things like *temporarily closed for private restoration*—which is rich, because the place was never open in the first place.

I try bars. Galleries. Clinics. I even check an old queer community center in Chinatown where Marcus used to run a writing group. No one's seen him, but someone gives me a name I haven't heard before.

"Try the tunnels," they say. "People like that always end up in the tunnels." It's not advice so much as folklore.

On the fifth day I take the subway late, stay past my stop, ride until the end of the line in Brooklyn. I wait until the last few passengers file off then I walk the platform like I'm looking for a dropped contact lens. Eventually, a maintenance door creaks open. I catch it before it shuts and descend into the dark.

No lights. Just water dripping and concrete that hums with old electricity. There's graffiti here, but it's not

written in any alphabet I know. It looks etched—not spray paint, but clawed, like the tunnel itself was marked. Beneath the third staircase there's a man hunched under a broken EXIT sign smoking something thin and gray. His eyes catch mine like they were waiting for me.

Pace looks worse than before. Thinner. Greasier. Like he's been sitting in a memory too long and started to rot inside it. "I thought you weren't following me," he says.

"I wasn't."

"Then why are you here?"

"I need in."

"To what?"

"You know."

He doesn't answer. Just stubs the cigarette out on the sole of his shoe and says, "Come on, then." But he doesn't take me to the lair. Not right away. First, he leads me through steam tunnels, past rooms filled with burnt mattresses and broken light fixtures. He moves slow. Not out of caution, but because he wants me to see. Wants me to understand what I'm asking for.

He speaks only once, after we pass a room where the floor is covered in hospital bracelets. Hundreds of them. Most still locked closed. "I'm not a guide," he says. "I'm just what's left."

We come up through a maintenance shaft behind a studio in Brighton Beach. The kind of place that smells like coconut oil and disappointment. From there, it's another walk through alleys I've never noticed, buildings with no windows, lights that flicker only when you look away.

Pace stops in front of a brick wall. No door. No sign. Just brick and the sound of wind moving through a vent above us. "Watch," he says. He touches the wall. Not

taps, not knocks. Just lays a palm flat against the surface. The brick doesn't open exactly—it peels like paper burning without flame. Behind it just darkness. A hallway, narrow and breathing.

I hesitate. "You sure he's in there?" I ask.

"No," Pace says. "But it's worth checking out."

I step inside and the wall seals behind me. No sound. Just gone. Inside, the floor feels soft and wrong. The walls aren't walls—they're membranes, veined and pulsing. The hallway slopes downward like a throat.

I walk. No lights. Just faint glows from under the skin of the place. I pass shapes. Things on tables. Things that twitch. Things that maybe used to be people. I hear voices—but not talking. Not words. More like a chorus of hunger layered over silence. Then I find the room. Circular, like a drained fountain. And in the center is Marcus. Not bound. Not unconscious. Just waiting. His eyes find me immediately. Too quickly. Like he's been watching the hallway through the walls.

He stands and moves like he's been rehearsing it. "Devon," he says, voice soft, unbroken. I don't say his name. I don't step forward. He's beautiful. And that's the worst part.

The room doesn't breathe, but it has a rhythm—something pulsing just below silence. A hum in the walls. Or in my blood. I'm not sure anymore. Marcus stands at the center of the room like he was placed there, like someone posed him and forgot to press play. His arms hang at his sides. He's barefoot, dressed in something smooth and pale that moves like liquid when he shifts his weight. I don't recognize the material because it isn't fabric.

He says my name again. “Devon.” It’s not a question. Not surprise. Just a statement, like observing the weather or naming a wound. I don’t answer as I take one step forward. The light in the room doesn’t follow me. He smiles slightly. Not symmetrical this time. Something slips out at the corner of his mouth. “You shouldn’t be here,” he says.

“You shouldn’t look like that,” I reply.

He laughs, short and flat. “They gave me things. Took others.”

“What did they take?”

Marcus tilts his head. The movement is precise, mechanical. His eyes scan me like I’m something under glass. “I don’t sleep anymore. I don’t taste food. I don’t dream.” He pauses. “But I remember you. So maybe they failed.”

I take another step closer. My boots don’t echo. The floor swallows sound like it’s hungry for it.

“Are you still you?” I ask.

Marcus doesn’t answer right away. His hands twitch once, then still. “I wanted to die,” he says. “Not because I was scared. Because I thought that was the rule. You get close enough, they finish you. But they didn’t. They opened me, looked inside, and left me there. Like I wasn’t enough to digest.”

The way he says it—there’s no pride, no shame. Just fact.

“What are you now?” I ask.

He looks at me then. Not with hunger. Not with awe. With something like guilt. “I think I’m a message.” That lands in the middle of me like a nail. He takes a step forward. “I told them about you,” he says. “After I realized what they were. I said you were sharp. That you

were impossible to drink from. That you had blood that tasted like forgetting." My body tightens but I don't move. "They listened," he continues. "They're still listening."

I glance around. The walls don't have corners. The air doesn't have weight. We're not in a room—we're inside something. A body. A thought. A trap. "I came here to bring you out," I say.

Marcus nods, almost like he expected that. "But you're not sure if you can," he says.

"No."

"I'm not sure either."

We stand like that for a long time. Two silhouettes in the middle of something older than language. Something waiting. Marcus reaches out—not fast, not threatening. Just slow and deliberate, like someone turning a page. His hand brushes my jaw. It's cold but not dead. "If they try to take you," he says, "I'll try to stop them." I place my hand over his, because I want to believe him. But I'm not sure that's what I came here for.

Marcus walks me to the exit without speaking. His hand never leaves my back, but it's not affectionate. It's directional. Like a guide dog trained to lead you through landmines. The walls don't close behind us. They absorb. The hallway re-forms as we pass, erasing the path like skin sealing over a wound. He stops at the edge of the lair. "This is as far as I go," he says. I turn to face him, half-expecting him to flicker out, or dissolve, or say something cryptic like *remember who you are*, but he doesn't. "I told them I'd bring you in," he says. "I told them you'd come."

I nod. “And now I’m leaving.”

He shrugs. “Maybe that’s what I told them, too.”

Then he’s gone—not vanished, just absent. Like a light you forgot was on, suddenly out.

I climb alone back through the cartilage tunnels and the service corridor that smells like mold and formaldehyde. I come out near the river in a warehouse district I’ve never seen during the day. My legs ache, but not from running. From tension.

I call Pace and he doesn’t answer. I don’t blame him. I sit on the curb until morning watching a single rat pick apart a slice of pizza from the inside out. When Pace finally texts, it’s just a pin drop.

The address is a café in Long Island City pretending to be a co-working space. I find him in the back corner stirring a cup of something too thick to be coffee. He’s dressed like a scarecrow now. Layers of old club flyers and band tees. His eyes look like he’s been reading in the dark for a year. “I saw Marcus,” I say.

“I figured.”

“He’s still in there. I think they’re planning something big.”

He raises one eyebrow, finally looking at me. “Bigger than luring half of Chelsea into foam parties and curated orgies? What could be bigger than that?”

“A harvest.”

He goes still.

I lay it out. What I saw. What Marcus didn’t say. The architecture that was breathing. The shapes on the tables. Pace listens, his fingers twitching against the ceramic like he’s counting down something in his head.

“I’ve heard things,” he says. “People disappearing in groups. Not just the usual. Whole orgs. Health

collectives. HIV advocacy projects. Anyone too public." He opens a folder on his phone—screenshots, event pages, private invites. Most are gone now, deleted. But a few remain. A flier for something called *Purity Function*. Another: *The Unblooded Hour*. All at the same location. Same date. Three nights from now. "Warehouse in Bushwick," he says. "Used to be a body modification clinic. Now it's a 'healing center.' They're calling it a queer wellness gala."

I look at the flier. The logo is a red drop inside a white circle. *Come light. Leave lighter.* "They're going to drain them," I say.

Pace nods. "But not just to feed. To cleanse. They think they're filtering the blood supply and starting over."

I ask the question that's been buried in me since night one. "Why can't they drink mine?"

Pace smiles, small and humorless. "It's not the virus. Not exactly. It's the memory of it. The blood changed. It remembers being hunted. Touched. Altered. It became something they can't digest. It's not poison, Devon. It's truth." He pulls something from his jacket. A vial. Dark red. Opaque. "This is mine," he says. "From before the meds. From when I was still detectable. I keep it cold." I stare at it. He adds, "They can't stand it. It hits them like sunlight through a locked casket. It burns from the inside out."

I ask the only question that matters now. "How do we get it in?"

Pace grins. First time I've seen him look human. "I have ideas."

We don't call it a plan. Plans are things people with time make. What we have is a sequence of tasks strung together by fear, hope, and a shared willingness to fuck everything up if it means even one of them dies screaming.

Pace has the vials—sixteen of them, stored in a box meant for insulin. He kept them hidden inside a storage locker behind a shuttered Planet Fitness. When he opens the cooler, the smell is copper and rot and something else I can't name. Not foul. Not clean. Just old. He says, "These are all from people who didn't make it. I saved them anyway. Now they get to finish what the rest of us couldn't."

We rent a van. Not a black one, too obvious. White and windowless. Looks like someone's sad catering business. Pace wires the ventilation with a makeshift dispersal rig—plastic tubing, a cracked humidifier and an old CPR mask. It shouldn't work, but when we test it in an empty parking garage, I cough blood-mist for ten minutes straight and feel like I've been baptized in rust.

Next: outfits. Can't go in looking like revenge. We need to blend. Pace finds us both matching jumpsuits with minimalist logos—*VitalGlow Wellness Collective*. Too clean. Too beige. Perfect.

The warehouse is already being staged. We scout from the roof of a neighboring condo building, pretending to vape and look lost. Inside, workers unload crates of silk cushions, latex recliners, walls made of fog. They've got security. Not guards—hosts. Too symmetrical. Too still. You can spot them by the way they never shift their weight.

We memorize entry points. Ducts. Side doors. Emergency exits that haven't been tested since the

Reagan years. If things go wrong, we burn it all. If things go right, we still burn it all.

Back at Pace's place—if you can call a storage unit with a cot a place—we sit and drink Gatorade like it's wine. He's quieter than usual. Not solemn, just distant. Like he's already halfway to whatever comes next.

"You could run," I tell him.

"I ran for years."

"There's still time."

Pace shrugs. "Not really. Even if we leave, it keeps going. The parties. The feeding. The forgetting. They win when no one remembers."

I ask him what he wants most out of this.

He takes a long time to answer. "I want someone to be scared of me. Just once." I understand that more than I should.

That night I dream of Marcus. Not the one I saw in the lair. The one from before. Laughing in a cracked leather booth. Eating pickled eggs with his fingers. Daring me to kiss him in a bar full of people who'd rather not know we exist. I wake up with the shape of his name in my mouth.

Pace is already up, packing the last vial into a holster under his shirt. The sun isn't up yet, but it's coming. You can smell the light in the air. The city shifts slightly, like a beast in its sleep. Tonight's the gala. And we're bringing the plague.

They call it *The Function* in public, *The Unblooded Hour* amongst themselves. No real address—just a location ping and a confirmation QR code with a pulsing white dot at the center, like it's alive. Everyone invited is told to wear white. Some show up in linen robes. Others

in harnesses and mesh. The dress code is “ritual purity.” No phones. No jewelry. No metal that could reflect.

Inside the warehouse, the lighting is soft and pink. Fabric walls breathe gently with hidden fans. The floor is padded, muffling every step. It feels like walking through the inside of a lung. The scent is a neutral and warm synthetic calm. The kind of thing pumped into wellness spas to keep you from noticing you’re being observed.

Pace and I arrive early wearing our jumpsuits, each of us wheeling a case. No one stops us. No one looks twice. We nod. We smile. We blend. The creatures are here already but they don’t stand out. That’s the trick. They dress like us. They act like hosts. But you can spot them if you know what to look for—too still, too symmetrical, too clean. Eyes that don’t dilate. Lips that move before they speak.

A voice over the speaker welcomes the guests. It’s genderless and medical. It thanks everyone for “offering themselves to the process of undoing.” People clap. Some giggle. Everyone thinks it’s a joke.

In the center of the space is a shallow pool ringed in mirrors. Around it, lounge chairs and IV stands. Beside each: a porcelain bowl. It’s not a party. It’s a collection site.

We set up the humidifier in the back, inside what looks like an aromatherapy diffuser. It clicks once when we turn it on. Nothing obvious. Nothing dramatic. Just the sound of mist beginning to hiss. I watch Pace as he opens the first vial. He doesn’t flinch. He pours it into the reservoir like it’s water.

The effect isn’t immediate but it builds. The guests start to sweat first. Not the creatures—us. The humans. Like we can feel it in our skin, something uninvited.

Something pressing back. Then the creatures start to shift. Subtle at first. A blink that doesn't reset. A smile that freezes too long. One of them cracks his neck and it doesn't stop cracking. A woman in white begins to convulse in her chair, eyes wide, mouth open. Her tongue begins to split down the middle.

And then it's chaos. They try to breathe but the air won't let them. It fills them with memory. With contamination. With lives they thought they could devour and forget. One drops to her knees, skin blistering like it's been kissed by light. Another tries to run but his feet burst before he makes it to the door. The guests scream, but not all of them run. Some are high. Some think it's part of the show. One man dips his fingers in the pool and watches them dissolve like sugar. A creature falls into the mirror ring and shatters the glass. His face doesn't bleed. It peels. Like wet tissue pulled off meat.

The scent of old blood fills the room. Not fresh. Not metallic. Something deeper. Cell-deep. The sound becomes unbearable—like a choir made of dying dogs and opera singers with punctured lungs.

I lose sight of Pace. I don't see Marcus until it's nearly over. He stands at the center of it all, covered in blood that isn't his, and calm. His palms are open at his sides. His eyes meet mine across the chaos and he doesn't smile—but he sees me. And I know then: he was never completely theirs.

The mist stops hissing. The screaming stops, too. What's left behind isn't silence. It's ruin. The white floor is red. The guests are gone, or limping, or sobbing into the wreckage of what was supposed to heal them. The creatures who remain are twitching piles of symmetry

undone. Marcus walks toward me, barefoot. I don't ask if he's okay. We both are, and we aren't.

Outside, the night hasn't changed. The city still breathes. Taxis still pass. A man walks his dog on the corner like nothing happened. Pace limps out the back exit, dragging the case behind him. He doesn't say a word. None of us do. Some things don't need to be spoken to be believed.

I don't hear from Marcus again. But I don't expect to. He was never the kind of person who lingered after a party ended—he slipped out, took the side exit, vanished before the lights came up. Maybe he's still out there. Maybe he isn't. Either way, I carry him differently now.

Pace stays. Not forever, just longer than he used to. He crashes on my couch, leaves clove cigarette burns on the window ledge, drinks my coffee without asking. I don't mind. We don't often talk directly about what happened. We talk around it. He tells me about a dream he had where his body was made of glass and someone played piano through his spine. I tell him I've stopped sleeping with the lights on.

Sometimes we walk the city late. Not aimless. Just watching, checking corners. Looking for reflections that lag, silhouettes that don't cast heat. We don't see them anymore. Whatever we did at that warehouse, it wasn't just destruction. It was interruption and a warning. A signal that we remember.

It doesn't feel like we won. It feels like we're in the echo of something no one else heard. I stop going to bars. The lights are too soft. The bathrooms too clean. Every

mirror feels like it might show me something that isn't there—something behind me, smiling too slowly.

Pace finds a job shelving books in a gay bookstore that pretends it's a nonprofit. He reads medical thrillers during his lunch breaks and writes things on scraps of receipt paper—words I'm never allowed to see. He lives above the shop now. Says the creaking at night keeps him honest.

The city's quiet in new ways. People still disappear, but differently. Not all at once. Not at parties. One here, one there. Like the hunger didn't die—just sank deeper, found a new shape.

One morning, I wake up to find a business card slipped under my door. It's blank except for a raised red dot in the center and a faint scent—lavender, bleach, iron. I burn it without touching it twice.

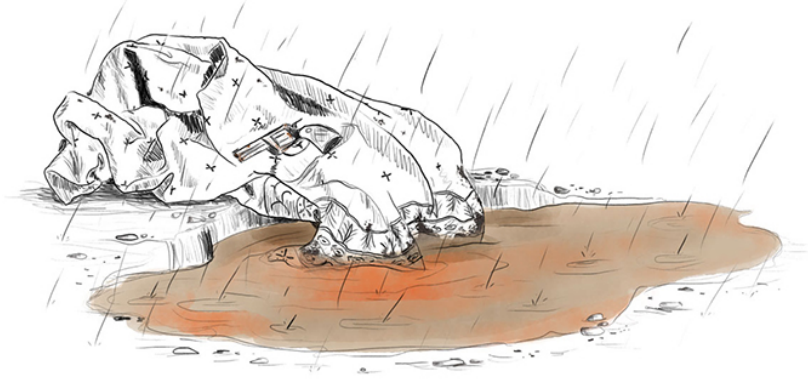
There are still parties. Still people who want to be consumed. But now the air tastes different when you walk through it. Now some of them hesitate. And a few even ask questions.

One night Pace hands me a folded flyer for a queer sobriety group that meets in the basement of a Unitarian church. "You should read something out loud," he says. "Just to see if your voice still works." I go and don't read, but I do listen.

Later, I sit on the church steps and watch the sky turn pink like a bruise healing in reverse. Pace joins me without speaking. He pulls out a protein bar and eats half before realizing it's expired. I take the rest anyway. We're not redeemed. We're not even sure we're safe. But we're here and something else is too.

# The Better Ends

## V. Zixin





I felt you.

We were both teenagers at the time. Or near enough, anyway. Neither of us knew when our birthdays really were. Children didn't seem to be born in Shenzhen. They materialized around alleyways and market stalls before being adopted by the proper enclaves. I was dressed up in a set of scratchy overalls and had found a nylon jacket that almost matched the shade of leather I was looking for. The cardboard cutout on my head was supposed to be a cowgirl's hat. I was wearing a pair of boots that my brother had died with.

You were dancing inside the market. Someone had sanded down a pallet of wood for you to move on, so while the rest of us scuffed our boots against concrete you seemed to glide. Sets of metal bracelets had been looped around your feet, only to melt into the robes you were wearing. Scraps of red, purple, and green drifted around you. It made you seem to linger, which was ridiculous.

You ended each step like you were ripping off a band-aid, uncompromising and sudden. You stomped your foot and it was like you had plucked my body into song. You were the best. I knew that because no one else was up there with you. You would tell me later that the stall owner couldn't afford any more dancers, that you had just been too much of an expensive investment to begin with, but none of that changed that they had picked you to invest in. I watched your foot hit the mat again and I felt nailed to the spot.

The song must've ended after that. You were bowing and people were throwing coins and bills at you. I picked up the best thing I had at the time, my hat, and tossed it in. I thought it would be fun to have it land on your head.

It hit your eye instead.

I wasn't trying to run away. I just needed some time to think. No one ever paid attention to urchins, so I guess I had gotten used to being ignored. It was scary when everyone looked at me, and scarier still when arms wrapped themselves around me to drag me back. By the time they dumped me in front of you I was crying pretty badly.

You looked sad, and that made me start apologizing. I wanted to tell you it was all an accident and that I would never try and throw a hat into your face after a dance. Someone pointed to your tears and I started saying that it looked pretty. That made you laugh and suddenly I was doing nothing but praising tears, holding each droplet up to the heavens as an example of perfection.

Next thing I knew we were perched on plastic chairs while customers bustled past us. I was still talking, still trying to keep the conversation afloat, and you were laughing so well that the conversation soared. I shared a

pocket of rat jerky with you, and when it started raining outside I showed you what it was like to pray. I tore the bitter end off of my jerky and told you to watch as I tossed it out of the stall and into the street. We watched the acid eat away at it, softening the meat until it broke down into fibers and flowed into the gutters. I told you about a country called America, where the skies were blue and spacious. Where the rain didn't burn your skin and the sun didn't look like a moldy piece of yolk. Where amber waves of grain met purple mountains. A land where cowboys and legends stretched from sea to shining sea. That's why we threw the bitter ends away. That was why we burned our money and vomited into drains. Why every night in Little Texas a thousand gunshots streaked into the sky.

Sweet land of liberty.

Land where my fathers died.

Land of the Pilgrim's pride.

You saw me sing. You saw me scratch beneath my overalls, ripping off layers of dead skin and lice. A cardboard hat lay in my lap, and when others passed I would clutch it up against my chest and raise my voice.

Let freedom ring.

You pushed yourself into me. Your hair tickled my nose. Pieces of lace brushed against my arms. Your skin pressed against mine.

I felt you.

You asked me to keep singing. I told you that you would catch lice.

Our first gun looked nice.

We had been playing for around a year at this point. I would watch you dance in the mornings and you would wander away with me after you finished. We stayed in the market at first, but eventually you let me lead you outside. We dropped rocks into canals, chased birds off of telephone poles, and climbed up fire escapes to see the city. When it was raining, we would hide under canvas sheets and toss scraps into acid puddles. When it wasn't raining, I would point my finger up at the sun and lower it until it reached the apartment blocks, waves of concrete that roiled and rolled with noise.

We told each other that we would rise with age, fly up from the slums into the aristolofts that stretched over our heads. There were only half a dozen of the monoliths within the city but each one eclipsed the horizon. They were mountains of industry, cliffs of steel and fiberglass that seemed so smooth that they were alien to our concrete. Half a million people lived inside each one. We made a game out of pretending we were part of them. We ordered imaginary servants to give us ice cream and made sunglasses out of each other's fingers. Sometimes we talked so fast that neither of us truly recognized which language we were speaking. You taught me how to curse in Punjabi. I taught you how to sing in English. We pooled our money to buy comics and learn Mandarin.

When I first brought you into Little Texas you were fascinated with my people. Everyone wore their wealth in leather. Fights happened every time someone raised their voice. Someone was always raising their voice. I took you into a bar and let you watch one of the fights, brass knuckles winking in the light as teeth were knocked out onto the counter. The winner offered to buy a round of drinks and everyone cheered.

When they sang, I was afraid that you would leave me. I thought that those words were the only things that made me worth staying with. They were my secret, my pride, and when I brought you out into that bar I thought those words would stop being a secret and I would stop being special. Instead, you turned to me and smiled.

My country 'tis of thee.

It's easy to rob drunk people, especially if they're looking somewhere else. Just as you were fascinated with my people, they were fascinated with you. Each time you took a step I could hear the metal jingle at your ankles and see heads snap to track you. It was like ripping a band-aid off to look away from you, but it was worth it when you saw the money afterwards. I would've robbed a thousand bars if I could see that smile. I handed you a nest of dollar bills and wrinkled yuan, punctuated by a single silver dollar in the middle. We spent the paper on snacks and soda. The silver dollar would have fetched us a bag of candy as tall as you were, but I convinced you to follow me. There was a stall behind the bar where an old man lived. He spent his days spitting on cartridges and polishing them against his jeans. When he grinned, a crescent slice of ivory split his face open. I held the silver dollar up towards him like a medal. He reached underneath the stall and brought the gun out.

It was a revolver. They were always revolvers in Little Texas. It was part of the reason so many of our people lay dead in alleyways, gunned down by Triad enforcers or Russian bandits with automatics. We hewed to tradition and died for an aesthetic. The wheelgun clicked as I turned it over in my hands, fingers tracing over each ridge of the cylinder. He had handed me a small gun, one typically used by assassins and the paranoid. The heft of

the weapon was heavy, but the recoil would not hurt me unduly. I readjusted my hands around the handle until I felt comfortable. Then I remembered.

"Bullets?"

The old man nodded and held out a plastic bag. Looking at me all the while, he reached down and dropped three handfuls of rimmed cartridges into the bag. When he spoke, his teeth seemed to vibrate.

"Lead."

The cartridges clinked against each other as I brought them out. They were handcrafted in the back of this alley, imperfections more mesmerizing than any printed bullet. I had watched people reload enough times to know the motions but not the specifics. The gun remained empty and the old man had to show me how to break the cylinder out. I watched him drop cartridges in quick succession before snapping the revolver back into shape. He handed it to me, handle first.

"Load," he said. "Or die." He looked at you behind me. "Both of you."

I knocked the bullets out and turned to show you how to reload the gun, but you shook your head. Not here. Not now. The old man hadn't moved. He was still staring at you as we left, the gun stuck into my jacket pocket. You were shaken. You weren't like me, who experienced attention through a drip-fed dose. You were used to being watched and seen, but from a distance. The man had looked at you and proclaimed death. Nothing I told you after this would let you forgive him, would convince you that what happened wasn't his fault.

We got back to the market as the sun was setting, drunk on corn syrup and food coloring. You were showing me dances along the sidewalk, making beats out

of shards of concrete and asphalt. The dark didn't scare us, because Shenzhen was never truly dark. Paper lamps were strung over the market and contrasted against the more colorful displays of street stalls. We made shadow puppets against their signs and giggled until the vendors chased us away. We had so much fun running that we didn't even notice them turning away, leaving us to return to our corner of the market.

It was the heat that we noticed first. Waves of it pushed against us. Someone had doused your stall in gasoline before setting it on fire. There must have been a few jugs of cooking oil inside, because as we turned something burst and spat embers at us. A body was sprawled on the counter, fat bubbling down its arms and hollowing its cheeks. I didn't recognize the body but I heard you whisper a name into the fire. I was hugging you then, trying to stop you from throwing pieces of concrete and glass into the flames. You were tearing your hands apart and crying at the body to move, to get out of there, to run away before they burned. Tendons were snapping and you screamed as the head started to detach itself.

An order, barked in Mandarin.

There was a trio of men in green jackets approaching us. The stench of gasoline stained their hands. They were asking us what to do with the runts. I blinked. They were asking each other what to do with us. You started moving.

I felt you take the gun out of my jacket. I definitely felt you headbutt me. A strand of your hair got caught in my teeth and tore out when you stood up. Like ripping off a band-aid. The shots echoed off of the walls. Half a dozen cracks that collapsed into a pitiful clicking sound. When I opened my eyes you were still pointing it at one of their bodies, arms shaking, fingers clasped around the

trigger. They were splayed out in front of us, a trio of corpses. One of their hands started burning as it fell into the fire. The alley was empty, anyone else with good sense having abandoned it hours ago. I took the gun out of your hands and showed you how to reload it. You looked up to me and your mouth cracked to show bare teeth.

Land of the free.

I hugged you. You hugged back. We sat together and watched the bitter ends burn.

The rain bleached my hair.

It had been an hour since my home was burned. We were still sitting. You had your head against my neck. Your arms cradled me. My arms were in my lap. I was looking down at the gun that lay in front of us. Rain had coated its frame, and I could see spots of rust begin to form across the barrel. I realized that it was raining on us as well, and I gave a hiss as my scalp started burning. You untangled yourself from me and began wiping me down with your sleeves, breathless pleas crowding me out. You were so worried back then. You had never known your parents, had been a foreigner to the very concept of a family. To you comfort lay within tradition, grief within digression. You came into my loss as a pilgrim, dedicated yourself to me like an artisan.

You saved me.

You convinced me to follow you out of that pyre, away from the men I had killed. Rainguards flanked either side of the alleyway, taut ceilings of canvas shielding us from the worst of the rain. You left me by a paper lamp and went back in to take their money. It was

easy to steal from drunk people, you explained. It was easier to steal from dead people.

I heard your voice waver. Felt your hand shake. They say that every orphan in Little Texas had seen a corpse before. Monsters and murderers, the lot of them. You walked away and I realized that I was larger than you. The boots added inches to your legs, the leathers broadened your shoulders, so many layers giving the illusion of growth.

I watched you work out in the rain, buffering the burn with your jacket. The corpses had kept rings stacked up on each finger, overlapping bands of gold and silver which still glimmered against the embers. You tried to tug them off, only to find the hands swollen after death. You found a knife on one of their bodies and used it to hack the rings off instead, slipping them into a wet pile. Then you went through their pockets and stuffed any wallets you found into your jacket. Their guns were left on the sidewalk, a tower of printed polymer and plastic. You came back to me scalded but smiling. You took me by the hand and led me into Little Texas.

There was food at first. So much food. You gave me hot dogs drenched in chili, funnel cakes coated with powdered sugar, and hash browns cooked over cast iron skillets, pockmarked with egg yolk and bits of bacon. An armada of marshmallows floated over hot chocolate. When I grew tired you served me coffee spooled with sugar and cream. We blew through half a dozen diners and cafes that night, all of them lit up under fluorescent lights and reflective counters. Everyone stared but when you flashed those rings across the counter they would start smiling and even laughing with us. It wasn’t until I

saw them pushing the rings back that I realized it wasn't money that they respected.

It was violence.

The three men I had shot were Triad enforcers. They were Chinese traditionalists, perpetually irked that they had to share the slums with other cultures and perpetually resentful that their countrymen had locked them down here on the basis of wealth. Consigned to being lords of the barrel, they took their frustration out on the rest of us. They would trawl throughout the enclaves and demand protection money to make sure we never got hurt. If we missed our protection money, they would make sure we got hurt. Everyone enjoyed seeing them taken down a peg.

No one seemed particularly concerned about us.

As we went to each restaurant you would take the seat next to me, closest to the window. Your hat would be placed onto the table and you would glance outside during each break in the conversation. Part of it was safety, of course, but you were scouting for a home as well. You wanted to find somewhere for us to settle down before the night ended. You would joke with me, pat my hair down, and teach me how to eat each new dish that was served in front of us. I'd finish the meal and you would hug me before hustling us over to the next block.

The last stop of the night was a pub whose owners were too tired to put up with the pretensions of Little Texas anymore. A pair of claymore mines were strapped to the entrance, green lights blinking down at us merrily as we pushed the door open to a jingle. The owners were cutting potatoes when we entered. A Kalashnikov was pinned up against the back wall, followed by a row of dried scalps. Both the owners were white, which didn't

make them stand out in Little Texas, but neither of them wore leathers, which absolutely did. All they had on was t-shirts and beaten jeans. Other than that neither of them looked very memorable. Both of them were old to my eyes, which meant that they were somewhere between 30 and 60. One of them was a woman with her hair tied into a ponytail. The other was a man who had shaved his head. They both looked tired. At that point of the night, it almost made them family to me. They watched you dump a pile of blood splattered rings onto the counter.

The man used one finger to root through the rings before picking two out. He spoke to you. “What do you want?”

I felt you relax and knew that this was where we were going to stay. “Food and information,” you said. The man nodded.

“We could do that.”

Another fifteen minutes and we were treated to a plate of fries and two mugs of root beer. You took a fry and pushed the rest towards me. “Other places gave us more.”

“Other places gave you less,” the man grumbled. “They just gave you more food to make up for it.”

“You know about us?”

“You’ve been hitting up half of Little Texas, kid.” The man nodded towards his partner. She lifted her hand up and set a pistol onto the counter.

Not a revolver, I noted. A semi-automatic. A clover had been carved into the handle.

You lifted your hands up. “I’m not going to hurt you guys.”

“Of course not,” the man said. “Not while she’s got a gun pointed at you.” He pushed your root beer towards you. “And we’re not going to hurt you, as long as you

don't hurt us. We're all very safe." He looked at the both of us. "What are you guys, siblings?"

I shook my head. "Do we look like siblings?"

"No," the man said. He picked up his knife and went back to cutting potatoes. The woman kept staring at us.

You swallowed and started speaking again. "You know what we've done?"

"You've killed three Triad men and desecrated their bodies." The woman's voice was deep and well-worn. It sounded like she was pronouncing our future rather than describing our past.

I thought about the gunmaker and shuddered. Had it really been just a few hours ago? He had spoken of death as well. Maybe Americans were so used to visiting death upon one another that they could see it in their words, woven into each syllable and sentence. The woman frowned.

"You're looking for safe harbor."

"No one would take my money." You looked pitiful, hands full of rings and eyes on the verge of tears. I was grieving and deprived but for you, this was a night of rejection. You had brought me into your neighborhood because you had thought you could keep us safe. Instead, you fed and hugged me while every friend and countryman patted you on the back and let you walk out to die. The fact that we were here, in a pub that could be barely considered to be part of Little Texas, meant that you were already exiled from your people.

Your voice was quiet. "No one wanted me."

"No one wanted your trouble." The man grunted. He bisected the eye of a potato and pulled out a squirming parasite. "Your leathers might get you a free round at the bar, but don't expect anyone to die for you."

You glared at the man. “Not die. Help.”

“Who would help a murderer?”

You stood up. The woman pointed her gun at you. You ignored it. “Not a murderer. Don’t say—”

“The truth?” The man asked. “You killed some pompous assholes, good for you. Every cowboy in the slums is dreaming of you.”

I raised my voice. “It was me.” Even then, I wasn’t sure if it was embarrassment or pride that I felt. Maybe you were rubbing off on me already. The two owners turned towards me. “You?”

I pulled the root beer over to wash the fries down. “They burned—” I swallowed. “They burned Bebe and Abba.”

“The stall,” you clarified. “They burned the stall.”

“They killed your family,” the woman said. “You okay, darling?”

I kept eating fries. The man grunted. “Well there’s a motive, at least from your side. Any idea why the fuckers burned you?”

I shook my head. Maybe Bebe or Abba had forgotten to set aside the money that week. Maybe they had set the money aside and it had been stolen. Maybe the enforcers would’ve forgiven them if only their darling dancer had been there.

Maybe I shouldn’t have left.

My head rested on your shoulder. You propped me back up. “We’re tired,” you said. “How many rings for help?”

The two owners looked at each other. The man coughed. “All,” he said.

"All?" You seemed to roll the word through your mouth, spitting it out with a frown. "No one else even asked for anything."

"No one else even offered anything," he said. "Taking you in is risking a fight with the Triad, and most of the folks here have nothing but peashooters and hats." He nodded towards the mass of cardboard on your head. "Nice one, by the way. Very cute. Ever seen a bullet shear through someone's skull?"

You pushed the rest of the rings towards the man.

He set his knife down and mopped the rings up with a rag before returning to his potatoes. He was arranging them into strips on a foil sheet. "You're lucky that I didn't ask for the wallets too."

You looked down. The man snickered. "Kids. That's what you are. Fucking kids."

"That's the only reason he's offering at all," the woman said. She threw her head back towards the scalps on the wall. "Guilty conscience. Too many dead ones in the past."

"Too many living ones in the present," the man dipped each strip into the fryer for a dozen seconds before dropping them back onto the sheet. "Can't do shit in this city without someone seeing you."

"It was empty," you said. "When we shot them."

"Just because you didn't see anyone doesn't mean they didn't see you," the man said. "Now, everyone hates the Triad, but someone's going to find the body and someone's gonna let them know that they've lost three of their men in the market. Add a couple of days for them to offer a reward, subtract whatever inaccuracies you get from eyewitness reports—" he grabbed a salt shaker and scattered the grains over his fries. "They're gonna know

you fled into Little Texas. It's your job to make sure they don't get to know anything else."

"I just gave you half my money."

"Then use the other half," the man said. "Rent out an apartment on the other side of this street. Owner's a drunkard, so maybe he won't know you by morning. Pick a room high and small, wait for us to come in each morning." He pointed towards the OPEN sign at the front. "You see that, you know that it's safe to come out."

"And if I don't?"

"Then we slept in late," the man looked towards his partner. "Or we're scared. Or we're dead. Either way, don't come down until you see the sign." He waved his hand. "Now get the fuck out of my bar, before someone else comes."

I didn't mind that the room was small. Our stall had always been cramped, and I had spent most of my nights sleeping with merchandise on one side and family on the other. It made me feel safe to be confined, aware of everything and everyone around me. So what if our living room was our bedroom and our kitchen was our bathroom? Those words meant nothing to me. We had two rooms. That had to be enough for the both of us.

I just couldn't stand the height. I looked outside the window and could barely see the city that I knew, roads reduced to nothing more than squiggles of asphalt. You had picked an apartment with a good angle towards the pub, and every morning you would wake me up so that we could both crowd around the window and peer at the light being turned on. The owners never acknowledged us, and it was a matter of faith on our part to believe that

they hadn't pocketed the rings and left us to fend for ourselves. Still, we breathed easier after seeing the sign light up. All I had were my sari and ghungroos from that night, and with my home reduced to ash, I had to ask you for new clothing. I couldn't leave the apartment by myself. It was for the same reason that our apartment was half a kilometer above the ground.

People would notice me.

The clothes you brought home were nothing more than worn denim, completely unsuited for the weather. Shenzhen was built on the southern coast of China, and while Hong Kong had been reduced and the sea levels had risen, it still remained one of the largest cities in the world. The collective body heat and pollution from 20 million souls merged with the tropical humidity and ruined your clothing. They chafed against my skin and grew sodden with smog. I looked into the bathroom mirror and nearly screamed as I saw the white streaks that wound through my hair. Was it from the leaks in the apartment? The streets you had led me through? The time you and I had shared in front of the fire? Whatever it was, patches of my hair had been burned to their roots. I picked a strand out and it disintegrated as I rubbed my fingers against it.

You must've noticed too, because you gave me your hat. Your hair was so tangled it was difficult to see if it had been damaged in the first place, a rat's nest of auburn strands. You didn't mention my hair when you gave it to me. You just held the hat out, smiling, and placed it onto my head. The hat jostled onto my head and scratched against my scalp. It fit wrong, like all of the clothes you bought for us.

That was the point, I knew. You and your people loved to make mistakes. You loved to speak the wrong language, wear the wrong clothes, live in the wrong nation. It was like watching someone bite through steel. But there was no winning with that struggle. You either broke your teeth or ruined the metal. There were times I was worried that I was more attracted to the idea than the person. That I was a moth, drawn to bright lights but little else.

But then you sang.

When you sang it was like you had stopped fighting for once in your life. That you had stopped jerking and twitching underneath an entire ecosystem of stressors and tensions. Your eyes closed and your hands came up to your chest, clasped together on top of whatever overalls and leathers you had buried yourself in. You opened your mouth and high, lilting tones soared out.

You sang of home.

And maybe it was stupid of me to believe in those words. To participate in a mutual delusion with you. I had watched the only people I loved burst open underneath a gas fire, and here you were promising me a land of the free. I don't think I ever stood a chance.

We had dinners, giggling concoctions made from whatever ingredients you could bring up. I couldn't remember the name of half the spices I wanted so I described them to you, and when I ran out of words for how they looked, I moved onto how they tasted. Cumin was like earth and wood, full-bodied and rooted. You asked me what the Hell that meant and I told you to imagine my wooden pallet, the noise it made when I stomped against it. Cumin tasted like that.

You made no objection.

Turmeric should be like pressing your tongue against that wood, sudden and yet not unpleasant. Smoked paprika was a teaspoon of smog that had been squeezed through pulped peppers. I would leave you with these riddles and you would race down to the market, dashing from sample to sample and hoping to discern the same memories I had once felt within the spices. You could barely read and were deathly terrified of asking the stall owners for help.

It was bad luck to steal from those you owed favors to.

When you did snatch a handful of bags and sprint up to our apartment, most of the spices were invariably incorrect. We would sit there and argue over powders that neither of us knew and debate the flavor. Did it taste like morning mist? Sawdust off a counter? Leather cuffs? You stood up and held your sleeve out towards me while I laughed.

C'mon. Gimme a taste.

I nipped at your sleeve. A flake of leather fell back onto my tongue. You fell back in mock agony and poked at my cheek.

Hey, give it back. Don't be greedy.

I stuck my tongue out. Here, you can have it. I don't know how much of that you understood with my tongue dangling out, but you reached over and I felt your finger press against me. I drew my tongue back. The taste of smog, sweat, and you spread through my mouth.

I smiled. You moved your finger and with complete poise laid the speck of leather back onto your jacket.

There, all better.

Every morning you would shake me awake. Every morning I would watch you climb down half a hundred

floors to disappear into the crowd and rummage through pockets and purses. There was little reason for anyone to notice you. You were nothing more than an urchin, one of a million other dirty kids who would scheme, squabble, and steal each day away. I watched you stride into an ocean of people, and then I would retreat back to bed and count out the seconds until you came home or I fell asleep. When I woke up it would be dark and you would be home, counting out cash on our plastic table. Sometimes you wouldn't be so lucky and I would come back to see bruises and cuts on your face. One time I came up and saw you trembling in the corner, a broken finger held up to the light. There had been a man, you said. One who had seized your finger and without waiting cracked it as casually as a walnut. You smiled.

He said it was a warning.

I helped you splint the finger and cradled your head that night, pretending that I did not feel you tremble. We shared a bed but you would never stay long. It would be 3 in the morning and I would wake up to find your impression next to me. It wasn't me, you said. It was the mattress. It was too cheap, too rough, too small. It was a treat to watch you, who had slept on concrete for most of your life, complain about a foam bed. I wasn't offended. How could I be? You did so much of your dreaming awake.

Months passed. Then a year. Maybe another. There were no seasons in Shenzhen. It was hot and muggy and it rained. My hair grew out long enough for you to cut it, and then long enough again where I couldn't see where you had messed up. The acid patches on my scalp disappeared under a new canopy of hair and although I was relieved to look at myself in the mirror, I found

myself missing the burns. Some morning I woke up and it seemed like that night had never happened. My dreams were endless amalgamations of shouting and lights. Sometimes I was back in the alley with the gun kicking into my palm. I smelled blood and when I closed my eyes I woke up to another silent morning.

I started going back to sleep earlier, my head hitting the pillow seconds after you shook me awake. I barely even paid attention to the city anymore. What did it matter when I was so far away from everything? I recited whatever I could remember in Punjabi. Every once in a while I would put my sari and ghungroos back on and force myself to dance. None of it felt right on the carpet. I did my best to remember my family. But when I cried now it was the loss, rather than the memory that caused my grief. I was losing my past and replacing it with a two-bedroom apartment.

I rededicated myself to cooking. I made dal. I made roghan ghosht. You never complained about either but I think you preferred the roghan ghosht. It was hard to tell if you disliked anything. Every time you ate it would be with a frenzied determination, a race to clean the plate. I had the feeling that I could have served you stale bread and you still would've dived into it. You always asked me what I needed after a meal. What kind of meat. What kind of rice. We spoke of spice and this time we argued. What's the point, I said. Why bother telling you anything when you never pay attention to what you eat.

You said that was unfair.

I said that you brought me chili powder instead of curry powder.

A pause.

You asked me what the difference was.

Another pause.

You asked me what I wanted.

You knew what I wanted. You knew what I needed. I wanted to leave this room. I wanted to go outside.

I wanted to walk in my city.

The denim you gave me buried my body. It rolled off of my limbs and transformed my stature from graceful to awkward, my height from imposing to gawky. The jacket sleeves bulged and wrinkled around my wrists. Patches of my jeans had been ripped off, and I was convinced you were teasing me when you told me it looked better that way. You opened the door for me and I stepped out of the apartment. My feet felt odd with boots on them. I looked around myself and for a moment I was afraid.

Then I was running down the hallway. I heard you yelp behind me, and you were sprinting after me. I jumped past the elevators (all of them broken, forever waiting for a repairman) and smashed into the stairwell like a comet. I felt my feet skid on the landing and couldn't help but laugh as I slammed into the wall. I shoved myself off and took the second flight of stairs in a single leap. I was about to get a running start for the third flight when you caught me around the shoulders.

Please.

You took my hand.

Let's slow down.

I saw the fire escape next to us, dozens of wrecked landings stretching away from the building. The windows in front of them were open. A little too much enthusiasm on my part and I would've thrown myself outside. I shrugged and we walked the rest of the way down. I could

see the sun rise as we went down each flight. I met our neighbors for the first time. Some were in leathers. Others were not. Half a dozen exiles from the Nigerian Enclaves were huddled with each other on one floor, muttering in Hausa. A street samurai perched on a set of concrete steps, her katana balanced between her knees and a cigarette dangling between her lips. A plastic bag full of milk cartons rested beside her. A shirtless man with a shotgun stood guard outside of an apartment. He gave you a friendly nod as you walked past.

You had told me about the apartment block before, hushed fairy tales as we both drifted off to sleep each night. A dozen local gangs fought for territory over our block, each given a crumb of legitimacy by a perpetually drunk landlord. The building was registered under his name, he took care of the bills, and no one knew what would happen after he died. Maybe the gangs would take over rent. Maybe the entire block would shut down and we'd be left without plumbing or air conditioning. Maybe someone new would come in and own the place. You never knew, and to be fair neither did I. We passed through the lobby, a dust-ridden room with a set of overflowing trash cans, and walked through the front door.

Then we were out.

I had forgotten how exhilarating it was to be with other people, the sheer press of humanity that was on the street. I was instantly lost. You tugged me forward, letting a joyous whoop out as we ran. My feet slapped against asphalt and it seemed fantastical that I was leaving the apartment behind, miraculous that I could look back and see it grow smaller. Something rattled

against my chest and I gave a sound that was half sob, half laugh.

You asked me if I was okay.

I said I was great.

We walked into the same market I had seen you filch from, your fingers drawing mine apart and forward. You leaned towards me and whispered.

Now, if you want to steal, you're gonna have to be quick.

You knew that this was going to be easy for me. The vendors had become used to you, had come to expect you. Every eye on the market was locked onto you while I drifted in a trance, savoring each sniff and plucking pouches as if I were dancing again. There was a rhythm to the day, a beat to our adventure that made our actions irresistible. By the time I left the market my pockets bulged with enough spices to cook meals for years to come. You came from somewhere and took my hand. You made a joke about chili powder and told me I was going to love what came next.

You led me towards a train station. The station, like most "public" buildings in Shenzhen, looked to be on the verge of collapse. We walked under jagged chasms in the glass ceiling, flakes of ash slipping through, and past tight clusters of bullet holes which sprouted from sheet metal walls. A row of horseshoes hung over the entrance to the station, amateur metalwork signifying them as Triad products. You told me to look down and pretend like nothing was happening. This was difficult, because something definitely was happening. This was the first time I had left home in a year and we were walking towards the men I had killed.

The men who had killed my family.

The enforcers were all wrapped in the same green jackets, bound so tight around their bodies it seemed to be throttling them when they stretched. They looked bored, self-content, and utterly blind as we walked by, only pausing to take a handful of yuan from you before directing us to wait on a platform. You kept an arm around me as we waited inside a crowd, but no one seemed particularly interested in us there either. I realized that this is what you must have always felt like, an urchin at the margins of attention. I also allowed myself to consider, for a moment, that maybe the enforcers didn't care about me anymore.

Another half sob, half laugh. You held me tighter. Some part of me wanted to run home. Another part of me wanted to shoot them. Instead, I let you hug me until the train pulled in.

The neighborhood looked like shit.

The train let us out near a set of warehouses, towers of corrugated metal and rust which seemed to lean over us as we walked by. None of them looked like places we would be allowed into, so I kept following and you kept leading me as the warehouses faded away to metal shacks, and those faded away into crumbling condos. Lake-sized potholes began appearing in the street, almost wiping out entire blocks. You kept a grip on my hand and led me around them, pausing to show me the more colorful examples. One crater was filled with fluorescent orange liquid, the smell of burnt rubber and licorice wafting up to our noses. You reached inside your pocket and gave me a handkerchief to hold over my nose.

It started raining. You stopped and pulled an umbrella out of your backpack, unfurling it with a grunt and a snap. The handle was steel and the cover was large enough that it could fit both of us underneath it. Each of us clasped the handle and we moved with the umbrella between us. Most other neighborhoods in Shenzhen would've had rain guards or tarps strung over the street. I looked around us and didn't see anything but rain. I asked you where we were and you gave an answer that sounded more like a groan than a word.

Longhua.

I had never heard of it before. You told me that no one lived here now. I asked you what that meant. You told me that everyone left when the rains got bad, when the gutters broke up and everything under this neighborhood started flooding up into its people. You told me that no one liked to be here anymore. You told me that meant it was ours now.

I saw the smile on your face. You were an American. Your bones were buried in half the trenches across Europe. Your boots conquered deserts and scaled mountains. Your footprints lay on the moon, and each night as we fell asleep in our apartment you would raise one finger above my head and level it at the sky. There, you would murmur. Do you see it?

We were there once.

The rain was a torrent now, heaven's kingdom collapsing above us. Each bolt of lightning was a slap across our retinas, each roar of thunder a warning through our bones. Waves of acid would lash across the umbrella and threaten to rip it out of our hands. The lakes around us were overflowing and as we walked through rising puddles you began to sing.

*He was just a rookie trooper and he surely shook with fright,*

*He checked off his equipment and made sure his pack was tight,*

*He had to sit and listen to that awful thunder roar,*

*He ain't gonna walk no more!*

A pop rang through the orange crater, some chemical reaction causing it to burst and shower the street with citrus droplets. A handful landed on the umbrella and exploded into puffs of smoke. I saw a hole emerge above us, a gap in the canvas the size of my fingernail. You shook your head from side to side as rain landed in your hair.

*He counted long, he counted loud, he waited for the shock,*

*He felt the wind, he felt the cold, he felt the awful drop,*

*The water from the sky spilled out and wrapped around his legs,*

*And he ain't gonna walk no more!*

My hands were gripped so tight I could feel them cramping. Each step forward threatened to tear the umbrella out from above us, land us in so much acid that neither of us would even be able to scream before we were boiled out. Rain drops landed against my fingers and I snapped my teeth together as my skin started to burn.

*The tarps swung around his neck, the handle cracked his dome,*

*His skin fell off and tied in knots around his skinny bones,*

*The canopy became his shroud, he tumbled to the ground.*

*And he ain't gonna walk no more!*

A flash of lightning passed above us, outlining the street through shades of bright light and refracted rain. We were marching towards a hunched over wreck of a building. The glass walls that made up its entrance were melting into slag, but the columns that supported it seemed stable. We stepped off of the street and onto stone that had once been polished flat but was now jagged with erosion. What must have once been benches were arrayed to either side of us, warped and bloated pieces of wood. A piece of sediment got flung across the courtyard and splattered onto your jeans. You ignored it and marched us into the building, letting loose with one final chorus.

*Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,*
*Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,*
*Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,*
*He ain't gonna walk no more!*

We passed into the building and you angled the umbrella behind us. I let go of the handle and rubbed at my fingers, trying to massage them back into working order. I had a constellation of circles burned into the back of one hand but nothing else in terms of exposure. My feet were still dry and by some miracle my jeans weren't soaked. I turned to see you limping deeper into the building.

Where are we going?

You laughed. Gory, gory.

I'm serious. You need help. I walked over and looked at your leg. The piece of sediment had smeared itself across your left thigh. Your jeans were soaked, the denim clinging to your skin. You're going to get burned, I told you. You're burned right now.

What a hell of a way to die.

We were passing a marble counter which had been smashed apart. Two monitors still stood upright on a desk, hundreds of little holes burned into the screens from acid. A thin layer of rainwater coated the floor and sloshed as we walked forward. The floor rose as we moved through a row of metal detectors. The entire building was pitch black. You rummaged through one of your pockets and brought a flashlight out. A click later and I saw what this place had been.

A museum.

A block of wood the size of a truck had been carved into a herd of horses, hooves cycling through the air as the moisture caused their features to molt. I stared at the closest mare, its nostrils collapsing inward to form a wet crater in the center of its face.

How did you find this?

I explored.

Wooden paneling rose around us. Most of the designs had been so damaged I couldn't recognize them, but I still spotted the occasional tiger or dragon, porcelain laid into the design to give them shining eyes or teeth. We turned as I saw lights reflecting off of the floor, a set of electric lamps in a clearing. You turned to me and bowed.

Tada.

Blankets had been piled and stretched out over the floor. You fell back onto them and started wiggling out of your pants. I looked around and saw that we were in the middle of an exhibition hall, glass display cases lining either side of the hallway. I took my boots off and stepped onto the blankets, wiggling my toes into the cotton. They were stained but soft, and I found myself taking my socks off as well. Water bottles were scattered over the blankets, and I saw chips and jerky stacked on one side

of the room. The closest display panel had a tree inside, leaves glimmering underneath the light. I blinked. The leaves were tinted glass, threaded onto cloth branches. The blossom buds were made out of pearls, and flowers were inlaid with yellow gemstones for pollen. I tapped at the glass.

You can touch it, you know.

Your jeans were off, revealing an ugly purple blotch over your thigh. I watched you splash water over your leg, wiping it down with a rag. I pulled your handkerchief out.

Here, let me.

I pressed it down against your leg, hands tracing the tendon that ran down the inside of your thigh and bisected the burn. Your skin was bright and blistered. I heard you hiss as I brought the handkerchief down.

I meant the tree. You can touch the tree.

I grabbed your canteen and splashed more water over your leg. I would break it, I murmured.

You wouldn't.

I narrowed the handkerchief down to a square inch of fabric, rounding the curve of your leg. I rested an elbow on your stomach for balance. I circumvented the rash, letting the water run over it instead of into the wound. I felt you vibrate as you spoke.

That's good.

Mhmm.

There's a surprise for you in my bag.

Hmm? I tilted my head, the lobe of my ear brushing against the crest of your belly, crossing over your navel. You giggled when my hair tickled you. I pressed my face into your body and gave a quick snort. You laughed and

wiggled as I started to pull your underwear down, working it between your knees.

Did that hurt?

No. You were breathless. It doesn't. Your hands cradled either side of my head and brought me forward. The taste of smog, sweat, and you spread through my mouth. I pressed forward as you spread your legs apart. Thunder rocked through the building and I could feel you push back against me with each rumble around us. Your fingers dug furrows through my hair, plowing through keratin and dead skin as you moaned.

Your leg shuddered and kicked out. You let a yelp out as a row of blisters scraped against my shoulder. I pulled back.

You okay?

Yeah. Your voice sounded hoarse. Just surprised me, that's all.

I perched myself onto my knees and grabbed another water bottle. The burns were still bright, but they hadn't gotten any larger. You told me not to worry and I asked you to lie back down. I dabbed at the blisters and sniffed.

Did you put on perfume?

Your elbow covered your face. Just in case.

I leaned down and sniffed again. You smelled like vanilla and saffron, with an edge of burnt skin and acid rain. How did you even afford this?

You looked down at me. Afford?

I laughed and rocked myself back so I could see you. Sprawled on the blankets like this, you reminded me of the cats that used to lounge around my stall. Eyes slitted and bodies sprawled, they came alive each dinner and purred around our legs. I hooked a finger around your shirt and started pulling it up.

The first tattoo was imprinted below your ribs, the surface of a moon pockmarked with old scars and patches of freckles across your chest. If I leaned in I could see the outline of a footprint against your sternum. I planted a kiss across it. You were slipping your jacket off, layers of leather folding as I kept pulling your shirt up. I found a family of rabbits that bounded over your shoulders. One of them sat on the moon.

Where's the woman? I traced the rabbit out with my finger. Where's the woman on the moon?

Oh I'm looking for her, you sighed. We were there once and we couldn't find her. We just left a flag and some footprints instead. You lifted your arms above your head and I slipped the shirt off. A pair of stars lay inside the hollow of your neck. I frowned. I hadn't ever noticed those before.

What are they?

Those? You smiled. Those are just freckles. You lifted one hand up and started to unbutton my shirt. I'm sure if we looked at you too, we could find some.

I pulled my arms through my sleeves and let the shirt and jacket drop away from me. The jeans came next, and although you told me again how the holes made me look better they still looked like trash to me, slipping off of my legs. I rolled into the carpet and laughed at how soft it felt. There was so much space. At home it always felt like I was pinned next to you, with your arm around my shoulder and our heads nearly butting together. This time when I went to you it was by choice, not necessity. My fingers hovered over the hollow of my neck. Well, I asked, do you see them?

I don't know. Your face hovered an inch above mine. Let me take a closer look.

We kissed, and I swore that I could taste vanilla and saffron on your lips. You rolled on top of me and inched down my body, lips brushing and pushing against my skin. Each time you spoke I could feel a pocket of warm air burst against my stomach.

Not yet. Not yet.

Your hair spanned the valley between my hips. I watched it dip lower and when I felt your tongue it was as if I were nailed to the spot, my body plucked into the moment. I felt resonant and fragile and when you raised your head to look at me I felt like my chest would burst open and I would hand you my heart, my life. Everything that was me, my entire memory set in print against that one horrible night, and I would surrender it all if you asked me to.

And I waited for you to speak, to brush more warm air across my body or lower your head down and climb with me. But I watched you reach over and flip your bag open, and when you spoke you said:

You never asked what the surprise was.

I heard metal clink. I saw my ghungroos in your hand.

What's that for?

Your grin pressed into my hip. Your sari's in here too.

Okay. What's that for?

You pushed yourself up and pointed one hand over my head. I turned and saw a wooden platform deeper into the room. A podium was tipped over behind it, followed by a pair of shattered vases. There, you murmured, do you see it?

The platform had been polished, I realized. Not a speck of dust lay on it. I looked back at you. You cleaned this?

Yeah, a smile plastered across your face.

My sari won't even fit me anymore.

I bought a new one! You reached inside your bag and started bringing out silk, silk I know you couldn't afford. How long had it taken you to steal this? To find the right place, clean and secure it so that you could watch me dance.

Alone.

I looked around me. A set of electric lamps cast shadows against the walls. The thunder had faded, now only followed by an irregular patter of rain. Cracks spread through the ceiling, sections of stained plaster and mold patterning the roof.

Alone.

Hmm? You looked up at me. What's that?

I asked you to let me walk in my city.

Yeah, you nodded. I should still have your spices in here as well.

I was thawing, a fire swirling through my chest. My neck was flushed and I felt like I was choking as I spoke. You thought I wanted spices.

Your eyes glimmered. Your mouth drifted open. I thought—

I would've been so happy, I realized. So happy here, alone, in a larger room. So happy to have your arm around me, to have your body against me, and pretend to give myself to you.

How much of myself did I have?

I wore your clothes, lay in your blankets, bathed myself in your light. I lived where I was allowed, cooked what you brought me, and when you wanted to I would stand and dance for you, my audience of one. And then I would go back.

And no one else would know.

I stood. I put on the clothes you had given me. The buttoned shirt, the ragged leather, and the torn jeans. The sari lay around you, the ghungroos still in your hands. I walked to the platform. My feet touched bare wood for the first time in years. I shuddered at the sound that my steps made. The sound that the ghungroos would have made. I turned to you and remembered what you had looked like, back when we met for the first time. Eyes wide open, shoulders set in. Like you were afraid of your interest. You came into my life as a pilgrim, dedicated yourself to me like an artisan.

You loved me.

I raised my voice and did my best to sing as you did.

Let freedom ring.

I didn't look at you as I walked away. I didn't turn when you called. I didn't flinch when I walked out of the museum and the last specks of rain from the storm hit me, pinprick burns peppering my cheeks. I kept moving and soon enough the pain was nothing more than a memory, a discomfort that faded with distance.

Like tearing off a band-aid.

You weren't there when I got home.

I knew you wouldn't be there. I knew when I left the museum, cradling the sari between my arms. Something had been broken between us, a measure of trust which could never be repaired. But force of habit demanded I be shocked by your absence. You *were* home. Every night I would return from scavenging, stealing, and begging for whatever I could and you would be waiting for me. To open the door and find the other side empty seemed terrifying to me. I put my thumb to my chest, rubbed the

patch that you had kissed. How had that only been an hour ago? You were here. We were together.

I made myself sit down on our bed. It was a chasm now, a canyon where your body should have been. Short and forceful breaths erupted from my nose. I pushed off and stalked the room, frustrated that there was so little space to move around. You had told me two rooms was enough for the both of us, but a hundred did not keep you from leaving me. I covered my eyes and tried to imagine what you had thought, what you had wanted when you left me.

Why had I not been enough?

My feet were moving again and before I knew it I was in the hallway. I padded down the stairs and past swarms of crickets that gathered around milk cartons. Ngozi had been scattering them earlier in the afternoon, distributing little cardboard houses full of spoiled fruit and soggy paper. She was a street samurai who had come here to pick up protection jobs from the Nigerian exiles, only to get saddled with cricket farming. A kilo of crickets could be deep fried in honey and feed a dozen people. I had once brought a bag home for you, but you had never gotten over the skin. Like peanut wrappings, you said.

I saw Ngozi on the next landing. She was pinching the cartons shut and placing them back into her plastic bag. I gave her a nod and she put her hand onto her katana. A reputation of pickpocketing never quite goes away. The city lights shed a hundred different colors across her eyes. I think you would've liked to see this. To appreciate the city, and to see how it fragmented onto us. How it made even the little things beautiful. I maintained my distance but called out to Ngozi.

"Do you find people?"

The street samurai didn't move. The crickets kept chirping. I ran a hand down the sari that was still slung over my shoulder. Your sari. "Like missing people, people that went away."

Ngozi looked at me and I caught that signature superiority, that look of arrogance that seemed to define so many of the Enclave's offspring. I would've thought exile to be a humbling experience, but she regarded me in the same vein as a disobedient child or a particularly stubborn pet.

"Some people don't want to be found."

I looked at her, unsure of where she was leading me. "I can pay."

Ngozi motioned to the bag around her arm. "One night of this gives me ten thousand yuan. I never have to draw on anyone but petty pickpockets." A pause meant for me. "You can't give me enough to outweigh that, and I don't think you'd want to if you could."

I must've looked odd, because she let a sigh out and unsheathed her katana completely. She let it rest against my boot and I found the sheen of the blade to be mesmerizing, the gentle pressure against my foot terrifying.

"If I wound this up I could gut you." She laid the katana flat. "If I swung this I could beat you." She paused. "Do you want your person gutted or beaten?"

"No." I swallowed. "But you don't have to hurt them, you just need to—"

"—watch them?" Ngozi cocked her head. "Keep them?"

"I didn't say that."

"You meant it," she said. "You thought it. But to see is not simple, and to be seen is not gentle." She sheathed her sword. "You want someone to solve your problems."

This seemed like a very reasonable statement to me. "Who wouldn't?"

Ngozi stared at me. Definitely a disobedient child. "You are convicted by your culture, ruined from birth. No sermon may save you now."

"You won't help me?"

"I cannot," she said. "Not when you are unable to help yourself."

"Asshole." I said. "Motherfucker. You're an exile. Not even your trash enclave wants you now. You collect insects for a paycheck."

"I collect insects for food." Ngozi said. "I use the paycheck to keep working, to keep feeding my people. You and your people live your lives for scraps of paper and slivers of metal."

"We live for America."

Ngozi barked out a laugh. "Even worse. You fight for a nation half a world away. You claim to live for something you have never touched, never even seen the edge of." She was grinning now, a lopsided affair that made her mouth seem too large. "Do you know why you call yourself Little Texas?"

"We're not little."

"You are," she said. "It's the only part of the name that's true. No other *wawa* lands in this Godforsaken city and pretends that they're somewhere else. You think I look around and call this—" she motioned towards the milk cartons around her "—Nigeria? Only idiots like you go on pretending to be cowboys and cowgirls, wearing

stupid hats and using broken guns." She pointed towards my holster. "When was the last time you shot that thing?"

Six clicks in an alley, the jackets slicked red with blood. You were outlined by the flame. I remembered the barrel's gleam. I looked up at Ngozi. "The last time I wanted someone dead. When's the last time you swung that sword?"

"Every night," she said. "And no one dies."

I frowned. "So what's the point?"

"That is the point," Ngozi shook her head. "No one dies. We all live."

"So y'all are cowards!" I laughed. That made sense. She wouldn't even take money to find someone, nevermind fight them. "No wonder you got thrown out. No wonder you hide from home, too ashamed to see your families—"

My head smashed into concrete, bile burning at the back of my throat. I couldn't breathe. I gurgled and Ngozi loosened her elbow, letting my head fall forward to meet her eyes. Her sword was still sheathed. Her hands were pinning me against the wall. When she spoke her words were neat.

"We came here for peace." Her forehead brushed against mine. "For silence. Can you imagine that? A world so loud that all you can do is hold your breath and dive into Hell? A world where it's easier to pretend to be dead than at war? Surely you can't, because you speak as if you want war."

"In America—"

She took a step back and slapped me. "Stupid," she said. "Stupid and crazy. Too delusional to realize where you are. You drink for America. You kill for America.

You die for America, and all the world sees is another tide of leather and liquor, bleeding for a dream."

I stared at her, stunned. I wasn't insulted by her words as much as I was surprised. She chose to attack us on the things we were most proud of. "Of course this isn't America. We know that." I looked into her eyes, straining to understand what she was trying to say here. "We don't live in America, we live for America."

"Then why aren't you there?"

"Because we're here." I cocked my head. Was she stupid or insane? "We can't be there."

Ngozi began to pick up the rest of the milk cartons. Her motions were staggered, hesitant. Her forehead was creased. "So you sit here and die instead? You don't even try to leave?"

"Why would I leave America?"

"You aren't in America!" She let out an explosive sigh. "Lord above, I should have known better to speak to idiots." She slung her plastic bag into the crook of the arm and walked down towards the next landing. "Go drink. Go die. Just don't bother me anymore."

I watched her walk down towards the next set of nests, and debated whether or not to go back to our—

My.

Room.

I kept following her. She paid me no mind, and when I drew level with her I felt tempted to stomp on one of the milk cartons littered on the floor. I may not have understood everything she was trying to tell me, but I heard more than enough to know I was being insulted. The katana was still at her waist, though, and she kept her body between me and any of her crickets on the floor. I passed her and padded down into the lobby.

I was walking during an intermediary period of the night, after people had finished their dinners but before they were fully making an effort to go out again. Bars were well lit but mostly empty, night clubs struggling to life as their employees began setting up. I passed through the front door of one and took a breath. Wet air and cigarettes. I turned my head from side to side, spotting nothing but a pair of dogs fighting around a trash can. It would only get busier from this point on.

I drifted to the first counter I saw and ordered something to drink. Alcohol was foreign to me, an expense that was out of bounds when I was trying to sustain the both of us off of petty theft. My eyes lingered on some of the wines on display, my mind considering which one you would've liked the most. What we could've described the flavors as.

The glass they set down in front of me was small and putrid. The liquor hit hard and fast. It burned like rain water and tasted like tar and licorice. I felt my tongue kick back in my throat and blinked as my eyelids hazed together with tears. I dropped a pocketful of coins onto the counter and went wandering to another bar.

Their alcohol wasn't any better.

Blurred lights danced across my eyes and loud noises deafened me. My feet walked their own rhythm. My lips pressed together after each drink and I could feel my stomach grow warm. The streets were filling fast and I pressed onwards towards a familiar sight.

I hadn't set foot in the pub for years. I saw the owners sometimes, when I was out and about. They would be haggling for prices at the market or smoking a Carroll's during their lunch break. They wouldn't exactly ignore me, but none of us were stupid enough to start a

conversation. I would nod and they would bob the cigarette up and down. The lady would grunt sometimes as I passed. Nothing more than an acknowledgement, but it was always enough for me to know I hadn't been sold out.

My boots scuffed against the entryway as I entered the pub, noting both the jingle and the claymores which remained above my head. The green lasers brushed across my hair and I saw to my relief that the building was empty. I got the feeling that this place didn't see much business, its customers isolated to the other exiles and misfits of the neighborhood.

The woman already had her gun out this time. She trained it on me as I approached the counter.

"Leave."

I collapsed onto the counter instead. My face was pressed into the lacquered wood, my hair growing wet from spilled beer and dew. The pub was cooled to near freezing and some distant part of my mind wondered how the owners could wear t-shirts without shivering. The man had come out from the kitchen and was speaking to the woman. Their words were terse. Your sari was still slung over my shoulder, and I imagine that the sight of me was odd enough to attract glances from outside. Glances meant attention, and attention stressed them out. So the next nudge was harder, more of a shove. I looked up and they witnessed my face.

"Jesus," the man said. "What happened?"

That's why I came here. That's why I trusted these two. The bartenders had pretended not to notice. Ngozi had been so caught up in her own superiority to care. But these strangers, these pub owners who had extorted my

money and told me to go away, they cared enough to be surprised. Cared enough to ask.

"Are you okay?"

In the right light I could've passed it off as a birthmark. In the wrong light it looked like someone had microwaved my face together. Burns splotched over the right side of my face, ranges of blisters and torn skin that ran over my jaw and onto my neck. It was my fault, really. The rain had stopped after you ran away, but I had been in such a hurry that I had tripped into one of the puddles I felt so confident in navigating earlier. The song was gone. The silence was painful. I was crying. Tears washed down my face and I had that vicious little satisfaction, that voice in my head that told me the burns couldn't be that bad if I was crying over them. I struggled when the woman approached me with her handkerchief. She grabbed me and began methodically stripping me down.

You—" she pressed the rag against my neck, "—need to find somewhere else to cry. People are noticing."

I shook my head. A handful of yuan made its way onto the countertop. "Food."

"Not here."

"Root beer."

"Not now."

I paused, blinking the tears away. "Information."

The woman sighed. "What?"

I looked up into her face, that broad span of weather-beaten skin and tired eyes. "Do you find people?"

She brought the rag down again. I groaned as she nearly broke skin. I was tender, burned and aching. She dunked the rag into the sink and dredged it back out for another pass over my shoulder. The man was walking out

to pull the shutters down. I watched as the “OPEN” sign was turned off.

“You’re going to have to pay for this, you know.” The woman wrung the rag out. She was careful to wash her hands off afterwards. “The lost business.”

There wasn’t another soul in the bar. I fumbled through my pockets for more yuan. My fingers were scabbed over and touched with acid burns. It made everything a little more numb and a little less real. I emptied my pockets out onto the counter and looked back up at the woman. Her eyes were pinned to my shoulder. A line of scalps hung behind her. A single nail had been driven through the thickest part of skin in each one, iron punctuating the callus. The back wall of the bar was paneled with wood and slats of iron. I began to realize how strange this place was. “Who are you guys?”

“Are you trying to ruin yourself tonight?”

“No one even goes here. You don’t even fit in.”

“Why do we want to fit in?” The man had a club dangling from his belt, notched iron with spiked nodules crowning its tip. They were speaking to each other now, communicating in a language that reminded me of the pidgin speak you and I lapsed into sometimes, the tide of shared homonyms and cognates we swirled into. Their voices were rocky and their words guttural. One of them grabbed me by the shoulder and eased me out of the chair. The other grabbed me by the hand and the next thing I knew I was being bundled off of my stool. The woman draped my leather jacket over me. I heard the door open and felt the humidity settle over me, a lukewarm carpeting of mist. My eyes were focused on the concrete below us. A thousand little cracks and shards torn out of

the ground. Splatters of beer, urine, and blood marked our path.

Ngozi was sitting in the lobby of the apartment when we entered. She had a book open between her knees and slapped it shut at the sight of us.

"No," she said. "Not here."

"I live here," I slurred. I did my best to stand up. The man and the woman kept their hold on me, kept me from pitching over and ruining what was left of my face. Ngozi blinked as she registered me.

"Yes," Ngozi nodded. "But these two do not."

"They're okay," I said. "The man and the woman, they're—"

"Hush," the man told me. He turned towards the street samurai. "We're just here to help the kid, we're locals—"

Ngozi laid a pair of fingers against the haft of her katana. The man paused.

"You know who we are?"

"Hmm." Ngozi scowled. "I keep thirty-seven exiles from the Nigerian Enclave safe within this apartment. You think I would not notice the strays across the street? The scalps on their walls? The mines across their doorstep?" She shook her head. "No. You stay within your building. Make life easier for the rest of us." She nodded towards me. "Leave the *kid*—" she spat the word out like a curse. "I will handle the rest."

The man and the woman exchanged looks. The man bit his cheek. "A guarantee would be appreciated?"

Ngozi cocked her head. "A professional guarantee?"

"Naturally," the man said. "One benefitting an exile."

"Very well," Ngozi sighed. "I give you my word as an exile, a brick which has been shattered from the road, a

soul which has been lost from home. For the mistakes of the past, the promise of the future. Your charge will be safe and well tonight."

The pair handed me over. I felt Ngozi's arms wrap around me, steel tendons clasping across my chest. They were firm, but not uncomfortable. The woman bent in front of me and cupped my chin with one hand, brushed my hair back with another. I met her eyes and she smiled.

"I'm Eithne, by the way."

"Huh?" I mumbled. The night had finally pressed down onto me, and I found it difficult to open my mouth as she leaned in.

"You don't have to call me 'the woman', although he—" she tossed her head back, "—might still prefer 'the man'. My name's Eithne," she said. I noticed that the man was already leaving, and Eithne began to step back. I reached out and patted my jacket.

"The sari. Where is it?"

"Oh." The smile on Eithne's face turned into a knot. "It's okay. We'll keep it for you. Come back tomorrow, okay?"

Ngozi hoisted me up the stairs as they left the building. I watched them walk into their pub. Neither of them looked back. Ngozi climbed at a steady pace, transferring me onto her back as she strode. The motion made me feel as if I were being rocked to sleep. I bent my face into the crease of her neck. I might have started crying, because Ngozi spoke.

"They're keeping you safe."

I didn't much feel like speaking to her, not after she had mocked me and I had called her a motherfucker. I kept my head down and my eyes closed. Ngozi kept speaking.

“That sari was a target on your back, a signpost that no one would’ve forgotten tonight. I don’t know what you’ve done, I don’t care who you are, but if someone’s looking for you then they found you tonight.”

I could see moonlight across her neck. A slice of silver reflecting off of her skin. There was an entire world rotating above us, speeding through failed hab stations and a network of corporate satellites. A set of footprints would still be imprinted on the dust, followed by an American flag. I thought of the moon and felt the tears dry against my eyes. Who could doubt us?

We owned the sky.

The rest of the night passed in a trance. I remember our front door opening. I remember being set down into our bed, Ngozi’s hands stripping my jacket off and pulling the blanket over me. I remember calling for you.

I remember rolling over and vomiting off of the bed, an entire night’s worth of bad decisions and liquor dripping out of my face. I remember Ngozi cleaning me. She washed my mouth out with water and wiped the vomit away. She replaced whatever I stained with new sheets and clothing. She complained about oaths, about promises. She cursed herself, for this is what the cost of herself was.

A promise kept. A life sustained.

And when I was done vomiting, when nothing but specks of bile stained my lip, when I laid back on the bed with my eyes scrunched together and my chest heaving, Ngozi took a seat and watched me. She pulled her knees up to her chest and as the moon spilled through our

slanted window, she pulled her book out and began to read me a story.

There were two brothers, she told me, who once left their house on a moonlit night. They went to the local pier and stole a canoe to go fishing. They dipped their oars into the water and pushed into the lake. As they rowed out further, the younger brother stopped and exclaimed.

My God, there's silver!

The older brother looked and saw it glittering below the surface. He set his oar down and dived in, only to surface and hear his sibling screaming no, no, you missed it. The younger brother would point and the older brother would dive, but each time they met each other they continued to shout.

You're pointing the wrong way!

You're not diving far enough!

And as they fought each other and the silver continued to glitter on the water, the younger brother grew impatient and decided to dive in on his own. A moment of silence passed before both brothers emerged, sputtering and accusatory.

You blocked me!

You weren't even looking at the right place!

And then their shouts became disjointed, their conversations fragmented by greed and frustration. When one would head back towards the canoe, the other would shout that there was a piece of silver, right there! And then they would both submerge. Their dives grew longer and further apart. And then the dives stopped. All that was left was a canoe bobbing in the lake and the moon shining across its surface. Silver ready for the taking.

Ngozi patted the book shut. She leaned over and whispered into my ear.

"Run."

My face felt glued together the next morning. Half the blisters had burst overnight. Scabs ran up and down my chin before forming bridges of coagulated blood over my lips. I tore open skin when I opened my mouth, and I knelt over the sink to first vomit and then wash my face. I swore in a low cadence as I tried to scrub the blood off without hurting myself. My eyes had puffed up overnight and the entire world seemed to pulse with my heartbeat. I was starving, I realized, and I spared your bed another glance. I would make breakfast for you in the morning, wake you up a second time with a dish of eggs and toast. I looked out the window and tried to spot you along the crowd that bustled below our apartment.

I frowned.

The "OPEN" sign wasn't on in the pub.

I looked up at the sky and noticed it was almost lunchtime.

A thunderclap split the street as the pub exploded. Rubble showered against my window, followed by a pair of blasting pins. I thought of those claymore mines, the green lights finally blinking red. I looked at the smoke-filled crater where the pub had once been and noticed something moving inside.

Another exit from the room, another dash down the stairs. People were gathering around and watching the street. Gunshots started echoing when I was halfway down and the stairwell emptied out as everyone ducked for cover. The crickets were still out.

Ngozi stood at the front door, a pair of bodies splayed out on the steps in front of her. I saw the green jackets

that bracketed them and knew that it was Triad. The sword in Ngozi's hand was shattered around halfway down. She held one hand up to the side of her face and blood was streaming down her arm, dripping onto the linoleum. She gurgled slightly as she spoke.

"I am a licensed associate, compliant with all fees and bylaws established in this neighborhood."

I had moved up closer to the door, and saw the mingqi that was speaking to her. Its body was styled in the manner of a warrior, layered plates of titanium and steel melding outwards into alloy fingers. Soot and dust had stained most of its body. A litany of hairline fractures moved up and down its torso. The other half of Ngozi's katana was stuck into its shoulder, creased into the joint of its armpit. The mingqi curled its arm back and slipped the blade out from its body. The blade was clean aside from a faint sheen of oil along its length. It gave a satisfied buzz.

*Hmmm.*

"I am prepared to provide monetary restitution," Ngozi shifted to let the blood drain out of her mouth. "My life should not be required, given that this was in self-defense. They drew their weapons on me."

The mingqi continued to examine the shard of steel, balancing between two of its fingers. I found myself mesmerized by the joints of its fingers, a hundred miniature cogs spinning in coordinated action. It traced the blade back up the groove of its arm and hummed. "That was a good slash."

Ngozi nodded.

"Why?" The mingqi asked.

Ngozi's cheek was crimson. Her fingers were glistening. She tightened her grip and when she spoke,

her words were neat. “They told me there was a man inside the suit.”

“Hmm.” The mingqi chirped. “Maybe.” It flicked its fingers and the blade landed against Ngozi’s boot. “I remember your license. The skeptic. The daughter of pariahs.”

“Hsiao-nü.” Ngozi dropped what remained of her sword. “To sacrifice is a privilege.”

“To serve is an honor.” The mingqi gave a short bow. “I am truly sorry to disturb such a diligent daughter in this manner, but one of your neighbors attacked us. They set an explosive off.”

“Outside of my scope,” Ngozi said. “I operate in the service of the Enclave exiles within this building. Only they are under my protection.” She paused before offering her own, much longer, bow. “Excepting, of course, those who would do harm to your venerable organization.”

The droid started using its fingers to scrape the dirtiest parts of itself clean. “We came here today after hearing reports last night from an individual who once murdered three of our members. Unlike you, they lacked the proper grounding for their actions and did not offer any restitution for their crimes. We believe that this individual may live here.”

Ngozi nodded. “It would be an honor to assist you in finding this criminal.”

The mingqi ignored the blood that splattered at its feet. “They were in leathers, and quite injured from what I heard.” The droid gave its best approximation of a shrug. “They had a sari.”

Ngozi didn’t hesitate. I watched her turn around and point directly at me. The droid bounded off of concrete

with a force that shattered the steps under its feet. One leap and it was in the foyer. I stared at Ngozi's finger, looking up to catch her gaze. She met me without reservation and gave the barest tilt of her head.

Run.

I know that's what she would've done. Smart as she was. She would've tried to find a way out. She would've started running before she had even seen the mingqi. Nevermind the steel hurtling at her. Nevermind the concrete around her. She would've run, bought herself a few previous extra seconds to feel good and useful. My hands looped around the handle in my pocket. It was made out of lacquered wood, the imprint of a star pressing against my skin. The barrel emerged as I took a step back to give myself a better shooting position. The revolver still shined. Five years and the barrel would not dull, would not let itself be silenced. I saw myself reflected in the mingqi's visor. Another street rat wrapped in shoddy leathers and denim. Another gunslinger with steel and intent in their palm. I raised my hand and saw the mingqi make its second bound, leaping up the flight of stairs. It didn't bother looking away. Why would it? It had survived a claymore to the scalp. A peashooter wouldn't do more than scuff it.

I smiled. The reflection of my teeth were caught against reinforced plexiglass, distorted by a set of fluorescent lights which had started to dim well before I was born. Flecks of ivory stained across the mingqi's forehead. I pulled the trigger.

I was glorious.

The bobbin thread had run out again.

I leaned back into my seat, sucking back a curse as the sewing machine stopped churning. The better half of a dress lay embroidered before me. I flipped a transparent pane of plastic at the bottom of the machine and pulled the empty bobbin out. Another waste of time. The entire point of the plastic window was to let me notice when I was going to run out of thread. Instead, my gaze had lingered somewhere between the dress and the ceiling.

I had gotten stuck thinking about you again.

It had been months since I had run away. It was hard to track time in a city with no seasons, but when I looked in the mirror I could still see the acid burns across my hair. Reminders of what I had run through to get away from the museum, the moats of acid and chemical waste that surrounded the neighborhood. Now they were nothing but a memory. Soon my hair would grow out again, and then I would wonder how long it had been since I had seen you.

The weeks after I left were too frantic to be fully conscious, a churn of hunger and desperation which turned me almost feral. First I had tried to filch my meals from the market stalls, but alleyway beatings had convinced me that I was not half the thief you were. So much of your talent had come from your ability to blend in, to lose yourself in that greater mass of humanity. I had spent years living a life that proved otherwise. I had spent so long inside of that apartment, so long with no one except you for company, that every part of me was noticeable. My posture, my stare, the very accent that tinged my words. I couldn't take a nickel without half the block noticing. Everyone seemed to know what I was, but none of the labels felt right. Street rat. Mongrel. Pickpocket.

Those were your names.

I despaired that this was my fate. To simply become a less successful version of you. That I would continue to steal out of desperation and wear your leathers out of poverty. I strove to find a version of myself outside of your image, beyond your imagination.

I respooled the bobbin, keeping my eyes on the thread as I looped it across the base of the sewing machine and moved it up towards the needle. A hundred other machines beat out a chorus in the room, my coworkers moving in tune to produce and pack dresses into boxes.

Leaving Little Texas was easy. It could be crossed within a day, the entire district nothing but packed gunpowder and booze. When I got to the border I bartered your leathers and replaced them with a set of beaten khakis that stank and itched against my skin. They were filthy, but at least no one would recognize them. I could wander through the city as a stranger.

I saw flags spray painted across dumpster barricades, nationalities fortified inside apartment blocks with automatic turrets and steel machetes. I passed through mazes of street vendors who hawked fried rice and skewered meat. I reached the edge of Enclave territory and witnessed the Tower, a behemoth of concrete and fertilizer. Tiered farms were etched around its exterior, thousands of tons of produce overflowing to dangle between smog clouds. Every morning a hundred thousand voices would echo forth from the neighborhood to give praise to God. Dead bodies littered the streets around the Tower, most of them Triad enforcers. Armored convoys circled the building and every once in a while I would hear a *ping* as one of the Enclave's snipers bounced a round off of a truck.

I kept my head down and moved on. I was tracing the outlines of an ecosystem, desperate to find some niche to survive in. Some role to call my own.

The sewing machine started once again. I perched myself against the table and fed the dress through, noting the stitching with satisfaction. Not perfect. Perhaps not even good. But even failure could be unique. The work itself was transient. I had learned through trial and error which of the districts across Shenzhen accepted newcomers, and which warehouses would keep to their word and pay. There were rumors of slave houses which lured prospective workers and chained them in place, charnel factories that gave forth more blood than sweat. Even when I found a safe one, the pay was meager at best. I remembered the pile of bills that you would smuggle inside of your jacket and realized for the first time what a nuisance we had been. How many people had we leeched off of for the sake of a spice rack?

A shrill horn went off to signal the end of the workday. I folded the dress over my arms and walked it to the nearest bin, pressing the fabric down before sealing the box. My coworkers were already forming lines around the exit. I loitered near the box and shifted from one foot to the other. As the minutes passed I tightened my movements, reducing each step sideways into a more efficient pirouette. I felt my foot slap against concrete.

I smiled.

# Limue's Alphabet

## Eleanor Glewwe



In the dappled shade of a stand of bamboo, an old woman takes a stick and scratches two curved lines in the dusty yellow earth.

*"Pai is for pera*
*Limue's plucked eye"*

Her grandson, squatting beside her, repeats the couplet with lusty emphasis on the strong syllables. The old woman shushes him, nodding toward the house where his parents are napping. She passes him the stick. Her hand is bent, papery skin straining over swollen knuckles. His is dimpled and unpracticed with writing instruments. Next to her letter pai, he traces his own: a swooping curve for the upper eyelid, a dipping one for the lower.

"Granny, what's *pluckt*?"

"*Pluck* means to pick, like a fruit or a flower." The old woman holds out her hand for the stick, but her grandson doesn't give it back.

"How can you pluck an eye?"

"Aiya!" The grandmother shudders. "That's just how the rhyme goes. So the words fit nicely."

"Why not *Limue's brown eye*?" The child frowns. "What color are Limue's eyes?"

The old woman clucks at his foolishness. "Brown, of course. Who doesn't have brown eyes?"

"The foreigners don't," the boy points out wisely.

"That's because they're foreigners," his grandmother says tartly. "Keep asking so many questions, and we'll never reach the end of the alphabet." She takes the writing stick back.

*"Tai is for tepun*
*The goddess's hand…"*

I first laid eyes on my poet at a village festival on a warm spring evening. I had taken a nightjar's form and was flitting across the darkening sky, snatching the

occasional insect out of the air. It was the sparks from the bonfire in the village square that drew me first. As I darted closer, a figure broke free from the crowd, approaching the fire. A hush rolled across the square. Who was this person who commanded such attention? I alighted on a thatched roof to observe them.

It was a young woman. Her golden skin glowed ruddy in the firelight, and she carried herself with dignity. The throng collectively leaned in, waiting.

She began to recite a poem. I have forgotten what it was about, or perhaps I never really attended. Her beauty, after all, was arresting. But even if I cannot recall the words she spoke, I remember how they felt: like water dancing over mountain rapids, like sunlight shattering on a wind-ridged sea.

When she finished, the villagers roared. She blushed at their acclamation and smiled, her neat teeth resting endearingly on her lip.

The festival fragmented into drinking, dancing, and carousing. The young woman retreated into the background, joining two or three friends in a quiet spot away from the fire. I flew up into the night sky to harry the moon, but my heart wasn't in it. Mischief had lost some of its luster.

I, who was so given to roam, stayed near that village for days, spying on the poet. She was a daydreamer, as all poets are. When she was alone, she conceived new verses and tinkered with them, pondering different turns of phrase. In the shape of a bee, I crept along her windowsill, watching her lips move as she tumbled words in her mouth.

She was not a slothful girl, though. She spent her days hauling water, collecting firewood, tending stews over

the hearth, mending her younger siblings' clothes, weaving reed baskets. Often, in communal labor, she devised short poems to entertain her companions. She had no pretentions: her subject was whatever humble work they were engaged in, and she didn't hesitate to discard the classical meters for shorter lines. But the artistry of her words was still breathtaking.

At last, I could no longer resist: I had to meet her. I hovered near her family's house, restlessly shifting forms, until I heard her mother tell her to go to the forest to gather fiddleheads. The poet slipped out, wearing a secret smile I already recognized. As long as she returned with a satisfactory harvest, she could linger a while in the woods. Now a blue dragonfly, I followed her.

She collected the young coiled ferns as quickly as she could and then settled down on a bed of moss beside a creek. Hidden behind a nearby tree, I assumed my true form. She was already murmuring verses. When I stepped out into the open, though, she broke off, startled.

"Older sister," she began. Then she was at a loss, so unexpected was my appearance.

"Greetings, poet," I said, drawing closer, though not too close. It had been some time since I had had dealings with humans, and I didn't want her to bolt like a frightened animal. Already I could tell my first words had been too direct.

"Who are you? How do you know I'm a poet?" She was afraid, but she still spoke bravely. I liked that.

"I am Limue."

Her face betrayed no recognition, but I could not take offense. Back then, I was hardly even a minor deity, and the poet's village was a long way from my home valley, where a few faithful honored me.

"Are you a traveler?" the poet asked. "My village isn't far. If you are looking for a place to spend the night, we would offer you hospitality."

"Thank you, but I do not need a place to stay," I answered. "I wanted to meet you."

"Why?" she said bluntly. "That is, how did you know there was anyone to meet?"

"I've heard you share your verses. I've been in the area a little while."

I watched her solemn face as she considered the implications of what I'd said. One of her hands gripped the shaggy moss on which she sat. At last, she lifted her basket of fiddleheads.

"Would you like these, honored guest?"

I was pleased that she had so quickly deduced my nature. She was being very polite, trying to appease me without even knowing what I wanted. I wasn't yet sure myself.

"I don't wish to take your fiddleheads," I said. "I know your mother expects them."

If she'd held on to any remaining doubt, it was gone now. "You are very gracious."

"There's no need to be so formal." I stepped closer, my skirt shushing through the carpet of ferns and bamboo. "I'm really no one very important." I'd almost reached the mossy bank of the creek. "May I join you?"

"With respect," she said, "you still haven't told me why you wanted to meet me."

"I'm an admirer." I approached no further. "Of your poetry."

"There are many of those."

In her village, they would have decried this as arrogance, but I liked her matter-of-factness. "And they've all met you, haven't they?"

She let out a barking laugh. "Very well. You may join me."

I sat on the moss and dangled my bare feet in the cool water. The poet wore old sandals that were almost hidden by the embroidered hem of her skirt.

"I told you my name," I said. "What is yours?" In some places I have wandered, it is dangerous to reveal your name to spirits and divinities. In other regions, the gods seem to know all the humans' names already. In our country, neither is true, and so the poet did not hesitate, especially since it was she who still owed me in this exchange.

"I'm Rusena." A breath. "I'm surprised you did not already know it."

It was my turn to laugh, and I could not help kicking my feet in the water. These flashes of boldness delighted me. "You're right. I was not attentive to all I should have been."

"We don't know you in these parts," Rusena said, all respect once more. "Will you tell me where you come from and what it's like there?"

Willingly, I told her.

A pigtailed child writes clumsy letters in black ink on the back of a cast-off practice essay.

*"Kai is for ki'ai*

*Her third knucklebone"*

Her singsong voice accompanies the flick of her brush.

*"Bai is for buet*
*Limue's left—"*

"Will you stop chanting? You know it by heart already." A young woman looks up, exasperated, from where she kneels at a desk in the corner of the room.

"But I like it," her little sister says plaintively.

"If you like it so much, you can come with me to Limue's temple." The older girl rises, beckoning the child, who scampers past her out of the room, clutching her practice sheet.

The sisters walk through the streets of their town, the elder holding the younger by the hand so she can't dart into the path of a cart or linger at the stalls selling roasted sweet potatoes. When they reach my temple, they leave their shoes in the vestibule and step over the threshold into the main hall. The haze of incense emanating from the sand-filled vessel in the middle of the room makes the younger sister sneeze. Other visitors, most around the same age as the elder sister, mill around the hall.

The girls approach my altar. A gray cat lies sprawled beneath it, asleep. This temple has a fairly old idol of me, a carved wooden figure with remnants of paint in the folds of its robe. The young woman bows toward this statue. She doesn't know that I observe her not from the altar but from the octagonal wooden dome centered over it, on whose inside surface the letters of the alphabet are rendered in exquisite calligraphy. From there, and from the sheet of paper half crumpled in her sister's hand.

"Limue," she murmurs, palms joined, "thank you for watching over me in my studies. Please help me pass the civil service examination next week. Please give me a calm heart and a clear mind on the day of the exam.

Please let me win a post so I may help support my siblings."

The sibling who is here with her has knelt down to cheep at the cat under the altar.

"And Limue," the scholar sister continues, "forgive me for studying the foreigners' tongue and sitting the foreign section of the exam. So many government posts require knowledge of the serpent boat people's language now, but I will always remember and venerate you."

I hear and appreciate her prayers, as I do those of the countless students who make up a not insignificant share of my devotees. But I have no power to grant their requests. I accept their adulation, but I cannot act, and they pass or fail by the strength of their own intellect and fortitude.

"Are you going to pray to Rusena too?" asks the pigtailed girl as she bounds down the temple steps ahead of her sister.

"Why not," the scholar says grimly. "At this point, I should be petitioning all the gods."

I accompany the sisters to a neighboring temple dedicated to my poet. It is more crowded than mine was, but I am not jealous. My poet is a more popular deity among civil service candidates than I am, given how crucial familiarity with her works is to success on the exam. The sisters wriggle their way toward the altar, on which stands a golden figure of Rusena holding a pen and a scroll. The scroll is anachronistic.

The elder sister offers hastier prayers to my poet and then drags her sibling away, anxious to return to her studies. As they head home, I hear her muttering under her breath: not lines of Rusena's poetry, but conjugations of the foreigners' verbs.

I invented the alphabet, but it was my poet who taught our people to read and write. She told them how the alphabet had come to be, though she glossed over the details, making it sound more mystical and less visceral. And so my name spread far and wide as writing rapidly caught on. A minor divinity in life, honored only in one valley, I now became a household name. Had I still been a deity, I would have become one of the strongest in the land, sustained by the praise and prayers of devotees in every town and hamlet. As it was, this veneration had no real effect.

Rusena decided on the letters' ultimate order, which was not the haphazard one I had scrawled in the cave. She did it so cleverly, according to logical principles: first the consonants without voice, starting at the lips… She wasn't the one to devise the mnemonic rhyme, though; it sprang up in her wake. As a poem, it showed none of her signature artistry. But because of its structure, it introduced rhymed verse into the poetic tradition of our country. That was not a result I had anticipated.

Rusena recorded all her poems on strips of bamboo. It took her a long time to finish because she had an extensive oeuvre. By then, reading and writing were commonplace. People revered me as the creator of the letters—after all, my name was right there in the rhyme—but for the most part, they had forgotten the original story. The alphabet became something I had given, not something I had become. Only Rusena and the initiates of the new cult of Limue remembered the truth. Not that Rusena had anything to do with the cult. She had no interest in honoring my memory through ritual,

abstinence, and chant. She was a poet, and her business was writing poetry.

So it was that she hid from my cult a secret which she alone had divined. If the initiates thought I was dead, beyond consciousness, she would not enlighten them. She probably thought it served me right. Nor did she go around correcting the ordinary people who told their children about me or petitioned me for inspiration or a clever mind. She saw no reason to puncture their illusions. Instead, in the quiet, she spoke to me.

The first time was late one evening in the upper room of a house in the capital. Its wealthy owner had secured himself the privilege of hosting her during her visit for a festival where she would perform. She must have excused herself from the feast downstairs because as she began to scratch out lines on a leaf she was using for drafting, I could hear a distant hubbub and the clink of earthenware. A gibbous moon shone through the open window, bathing Rusena in silver light and accentuating the whiteness of her hair.

She often paused in composing her verses, mulling over the next word or image, but this time when she stopped writing, her stillness was unusually complete, and there was something different about her gaze. Instead of going soft and unfocused, it bored into the letters carved into the leaf.

"I know you're there," she said, her voice too quiet to carry beyond the room. "I can feel your presence."

I could not react or reply. I was the alphabet. I was the pen strokes forming her half-grown poem.

"In case you're wondering," my poet went on, "no, I haven't forgiven you." While there wasn't much heat in her voice, I didn't think she was jesting either.

After that night, she would occasionally address me as she wrote new poems. She spoke to me of the way the country had transformed, though she seemed to understand I was observing these changes for myself too. I looked up from every merchant's accounts, gazed out from every grave marker, watched the faces of the new palace historians as they recorded the first royal annals.

"You changed everything," Rusena told me one day as she contemplated a copy of one of her epics, the bamboo strips bound together with hemp flowing across her hands. "I wonder if you predicted it. I wonder if you even thought about that at all. Siwan is long dead, and his former apprentice has her own apprentice now, but how long will we have storytellers like them? I think I'm glad I won't live to find out."

She paused, as though listening to the reply she imagined me making.

"Don't think me ungrateful. Writing is a wondrous thing. I'm happy I have these." She lifted the section of linked strips in her hands. "Would I give it back, though, if…?" She let the strips drop, and they struck the layer below with a dry crack. "I don't know. I don't know. I don't forgive you."

I did not yearn for her forgiveness. It would have made me happy if she had come around, but I already had what I wanted.

When Rusena died, the entire country mourned her. She was buried near her village, but funerary ceremonies were held for her all over, with days of reciting her verses to honor her. Her deification was rapid. Within months of her death, aspiring poets began murmuring prayers to her spirit, asking for talent, recognition, and success. It only took a few years for the first temple dedicated to her to

be built. Her name and epithets were inscribed inside the dome, giving me a fine view of the worshippers below. And as her cult grew, she attained godhood.

It happened in the dead of night. When I saw the human figure shimmer into being beside the altar in one of her temples, I recognized my poet immediately. Her hair was black again, her face barely lined. She looked exactly as old as she'd been the day I had led her to the cave.

She looked down at herself in confusion, then extended her arms in dismay. She touched the polished wood of the altar and gazed at the carved figure there, but it was not a good likeness, and even in daylight she wouldn't have recognized herself. When she peered up into the dome, though, she made out her own name there.

Her first cry was wordless, and then she said, "Limue!" All accusation and rancor. Another inarticulate exclamation of rage. "They have—why did they—"

At least she understood I was not responsible. The deification of mortals is done by mortals, through their adoration and assiduity in prayer. I could not have raised her even if I had still been a goddess.

"Was the rest of my life without you not enough?" she demanded, face still upturned. "Now it is to be an eternity?" She looked around, eager for something to rip or smash. But there weren't even any flower garlands to fling off the altar. I thought she might knock the figure down, but she restrained herself and looked up at me again.

"Now I am made like you when it doesn't even profit me?" The grief in her voice surprised me. I thought it would have been worn smooth by now, or been choked by anger and bitterness. Maybe it had something to do

with her being a new deity. Not quite set yet and therefore still vulnerable.

That was the last time she spoke to me. I glimpsed her again a few times, and those few sightings showed me she was already strengthening, the people's love for her and the ever-growing popularity of her cult lending her power. But each time I saw her, she was farther from the heart of the country, until at last she disappeared from my view. I surmised that she had gone to wander the world, as I had so liked doing before I met her. But she never came back. Poets and teachers, students and scholars continued to pay their respects at her temples, not knowing that they fueled her with the vitality to walk through other lands.

The red-bearded priest stands at a lectern in a cluttered office, dips his quill, and writes letters from memory on a blank page.

"*Dai is for duwi*

*Her eyelashes three"*

Another priest, this one's beard yellow streaked with gray, appears in the doorway and frowns.

"Why are you speaking that uncivilized tongue?"

The writer jumps, and his sleeve narrowly misses dashing his inkpot to the floor.

"My apologies," he says, nodding to the newcomer. "The locals have a rhyme they use to teach their children their alphabet. It's a helpful mnemonic for the letter shapes, though most of them are quite stylized—"

"I don't care." The older priest pushes into the office like a boar spoiling for a fight. In three strides, he's at the lectern and glaring down at his colleague's work.

"This is the letter dai." The redheaded priest doesn't seem unaware of the other's mood, but he still can't quite help himself. "The word *duwi*, the plural of 'eyelash,' starts with dai, and these three strokes do look more or less like eyelashes. This letter reminds me of a character they use in the Emerald Isles that represents the word for 'hair.'"

His expression slips into dreaminess. I suspect he wishes he were still posted to the Emerald Isles. I didn't know the foreigners and their serpent-prowed ships had taken that land too.

"Hozor." The priest with the yellow beard practically vibrates with fury at his companion's failure to appear intimidated. "*Nobody* cares about any of the natives' languages. Aren't you supposed to be preparing for an audience with the governor?"

"That's just it," says Hozor, excitement seeping through his deliberate calm. "I have a proposal for the governor. A way to impose our language much more quickly. It involves a concession on our part, but I think it stands to be so effective that—"

"A concession?" the senior priest says icily.

"We teach them to use their own writing for our language. Funnily enough, both our languages have twenty-one sounds. They have an alphabet, with twenty-one letters. We use a syllabary, so there are many more characters to learn. It's no trouble for us, naturally, but it is a barrier for the locals. If we make a simpler system for them, I'm confident they will adopt our language rapidly."

He replenishes his quill and writes out the five letters Rusena placed at the end of the alphabet.

"They have four vowels, you see, whereas we have five. But their alphabet includes a letter for the diphthong ai. If we simply switch its value to o—"

"Stop your blather." The other priest doesn't even raise his voice, but his tone couldn't be shorter. "If you think the governor will approve this bastardization of our language, you're more of a fool than I thought."

"Don't be dramatic," Hozor says, but his shoulders slump ever so slightly.

"Come on. The head priest has some other matters he wishes you to raise to the governor."

After our first meeting, Rusena and I met often, first in the forest near her village and then openly in the village itself. She told me she could not keep me a secret from her family and friends forever, and I did not object to her telling them who I was. Her people were humble, sensible folk who took my identity in stride. No one was as bold with me as Rusena could be—they were wary of offending a deity—but neither were they paralyzed with awe. I was a small divinity, after all, and not local.

I liked to question Rusena about how she conceived her verses, and she would beg me for stories from distant lands. She took me to meet the old village storyteller who knew, in addition to folktales and legends, many of the famous poems of our country, passed down from generation to generation. It was he who had taught her the different meters and their proper uses, the notions of caesura and enjambment. He was not a poet himself, but he was fiercely proud of her and had added many of her poems to his repertoire, which he would bequeath to his apprentice.

I told Rusena that I knew some of the storyteller's poems from other towns and cities. In each place, they were a little bit different: a word changed here, two verses swapped there. Sometimes a whole stanza was missing, or existed in only one village.

"I know poems change from being constantly passed down," Rusena said, up to her forearms in a basin of water as she washed bamboo leaves for wrapping rice dumplings. "Wandering poets come through our village, and we recognize the verses they recite and notice the differences from the way Siwan recites them."

"And this doesn't bother you?" I asked with honest curiosity. Our country had only oral traditions; our language was not written. But with my peripatetic ways, I had encountered writing before. I had seen royal stelae with their grandiose inscriptions, clay tablets recording court proceedings, gravestones carved with the names of the dead.

Rusena considered a while before replying, "I know this will happen to my poems someday. I don't think I mind. I'll be happy if people who don't know me find my poems worth remembering and passing on." She paused in her scrubbing of the leaves. "But it would be nice if at least here where I'm from, people remembered my verses as I composed them."

"But even Siwan changes the old poems sometimes," I said.

She looked up from the basin. "How do you know that?"

It was in fact a guess, but from Rusena's expression, I thought I had jogged a memory. "Am I wrong?"

"No," she said grudgingly. "I remember when I was around eleven, he changed *the trailing clouds* to *the*

*dwindling clouds* in A'iduk's poem about migratory birds. It's been *dwindling* ever since."

I laughed at the double meaning, and she glanced heavenward in exasperation.

"I don't think he knows he did it," she added. "If I told him it used to be *the trailing clouds*, I don't know if he'd believe me."

"How do you know you won't do the same to your own poems?" I teased. "After all, you have more and more of them. Mightn't a petal become a blossom?"

She splashed water at me. "A petal and a blossom are not the same! And anyway, *you* could remember them for me. You will outlive me by a thousand lifetimes."

Her voice caught then, and I felt a thrill. I knew Rusena cared for me, but I wasn't always sure how much. I couldn't help a stirring of triumph, followed by a rush of tenderness.

"I will outlive you," I said, no longer playful, "but that does not mean I can preserve all your poems for you. Our memories are no better than mortals', for all we live a long time."

"Are you saying you'll forget me?" Rusena looked straight at me, with that directness I found so appealing. "Forget… this?"

I could have told her the truth: *No, I could never forget you*. Instead I said, daring, "What is this *this* you would not wish me to forget?"

A teacher picks up a stick of chalk and makes swift, clean strokes on the blackboard of a village schoolhouse.

"*Gai is for gingaq*
*The goddess's ear*"

As the students chant from their benches, the breeze carries their voices out the open windows. The older ones could recite the rhyme in their sleep, but it is tradition for them to join in with the youngest. Besides, the school has only one room, so it isn't as though they could concentrate on other lessons while the little ones are shouting the alphabet.

The teacher dismisses the students for the midday recess but leaves the letters up on the board. So it is that I am watching when a priest and two district officials walk into the school and stride down the aisle to the teacher's desk. The younger official is not a foreigner; he is one of our people.

The teacher rubs his chalky palms together nervously. He greets the visitors, first in our language, then in the serpent boat people's tongue.

"We understand this school still operates in the local language," says the priest, speaking in his own native tongue. His baleful gaze lingers on the letters on the blackboard.

"It does," the teacher says cautiously.

"The governor has issued a new edict." The priest glances at the district officials, who nod. "All instruction must be given in the official language, as of this month. Perhaps you hadn't heard yet."

He pauses. The teacher works his jaw, as though he wants to say something but knows better. Perhaps, like me, he objects to the foreigners calling their tongue the official language of our land.

"Schools that do not comply will be closed," the priest says, "and teachers that flout the edict will be dismissed."

"I understand," the teacher says, in the official language.

The priest turns to the officials, points to the one who is from here, and then flicks his finger toward the board. "Go on. Do our friend here a favor and erase all this."

The teacher stands straighter. "The children will still have to learn these letters—"

"They're in the wrong order," the priest says derisively.

They are. To the serpent boat people, at least. Hozor changed the names of my letters and the order they went in to better match his native syllabary. *Pa*, *ba*, *ma*, *va*… There was no va in my alphabet. Our language had no such sound. Or at least my poet's dialect didn't, and that was all I'd cared about. Meanwhile, the foreigners' language lacked the more liquid wai, so Hozor took that letter (*Wai is for welu / Limue's liver*) and gave it to a harsher sound. It's not the only such case.

Hozor was clever. Despite his brethren's contempt for his proposal, he persuaded the governor that his plan would help cement their people's conquest of our land. Now half the country uses me to write a foreign language. I am an ill-fitting skin stretched across unwanted sounds. It's like having an itch I can't find no matter where my fingers reach.

"Go on," the priest in the school repeats.

The district official, the one who is of our people, walks slowly forward. He takes a rag from the ledge of the chalkboard, and letter by letter, he erases me.

As Rusena's reputation as a poet spread, she began to receive invitations to perform in other towns and villages. What finally catapulted her to universal fame was her composition of a new epic recounting the creation of the

world and the great gods' genealogy. Many famous poems describing these events already existed, but Rusena's work was monumental, and she had a knack for gazing upon the familiar from a new angle and evoking that novelty with deft turns of phrase.

This epic earned her an invitation to the royal palace. We traveled to the capital together, sleeping side by side on our bedrolls under the stars. When we arrived, the king hosted a banquet in Rusena's honor. Her much-anticipated recital took place the following day, outdoors in the central courtyard of the palace, as dusk drew its veil across the sky. The audience stood rapt for three and a half hours.

The king kept her at court for weeks, only reluctantly letting her depart when she pleaded homesickness. But after that, she was the most celebrated poet in the country. There was no one who didn't know her name.

Meanwhile, I was still an insignificant goddess, known only in Rusena's village and in the valley I had come from. And there, less and less. I seldom went back home, so my cult, small to start with, was eroding. As my worshippers' numbers declined, I began to fade. Not enough for Rusena to perceive, but I felt it. I didn't tell her, of course. She would think it was her fault for keeping me from my valley, when in fact I didn't want to be anywhere but by her side. Eventually, if I did nothing, I would dwindle to a shade, but not before my poet reached the end of her days.

One day, years after I had teased her about petals and blossoms, Rusena turned to me and said, "I wish my poems could live forever."

We were sitting close together on a riverbank, bathing our aching feet in the rushing water.

"How so?" I asked.

"I know I won't live forever," she said, gazing down into the brown river. "But I wish my poems could. I wish there was a way to preserve them as I intended. People recite them all over now. In the capital, in the countryside. And I know the way of poems once they belong to everyone."

"We spoke of this once before," I said slowly. On the opposite bank, a monkey bounded out along a limb overhanging the river. "If you like, I will promise to remember each one of your poems exactly as you composed it, not a word out of place."

She pulled away from the shelter of my body and twisted to face me. "Last time, you said you couldn't. You said your memories were no better than ours. And I…" Dread shadowed her face. "Even I can't be sure all my poems are still the same in my own head."

"They are," I assured her, and I wasn't lying. I had never heard her change a word of a poem after she had decided on its final form. Though doubts might creep in, she did have a prodigious memory. "And as for what I said before, I would do it for you. I would make the effort."

She didn't look entirely convinced. I didn't tell her I had a trick up my sleeve: I could adopt one of the many systems I had encountered in the wide world and write her verses down somewhere safe so that I wouldn't forget them.

"Don't you trust me?" I wanted the gap between our bodies closed, but I wanted her to be the one to close it.

"I do," she said. Now *I* was not entirely convinced. "But… you also told me once that it is possible for divinities to die."

I had told her that, in a conversation on another subject entirely. I'd just said we could be killed, not that we could wither.

"Nothing is eternal," I said, a little piqued. Did she have some inkling of how diminished I was? But that was impossible.

My poet laughed ruefully. "I know. Of course you're right, Limue. I'm being greedy and vain."

It was this self-deprecatory admission—not even true—that made me soften.

"There is a way," I said, deliberately quiet, so that she had to lean closer to hear me over the voice of the river. "A way to preserve your poems exactly as you conceived them."

Her dark gaze was sharp with the knowledge that I was alluding to something new. "What is it?"

"Writing."

She frowned, not understanding. The word I had used in our language referred to scratching tally marks into a hard surface to count pigs or jars of oil.

"I don't mean keeping accounts," I said. "Let me show you." I swung my legs out of the river, trying not to drip on the edge of her skirt. I brushed my hand across the sandy soil on the bank to make a flat surface.

"Writing is a way to mark language on a physical object, so it can be seen. You can write words down so that someone else can read them." Here I used a word for interpreting signs in nature: the shape of a storm cloud, the tracks of a tiger.

"How does that work?" Rusena pulled her feet out of the water too and folded her legs under herself.

"I'll give you an example." I cast about for a twig or even a reed, but in the end, I used my finger. "In the Emerald Isles, they write in characters."

"You never mentioned that before," Rusena said, accusatory. The Emerald Isles had figured in many tales I'd told her of the distant lands I'd seen, lands most of our people didn't know existed.

"I'm mentioning it now." I made a stroke in the dirt. "This is 'one.'" Next to the first character, I traced two strokes, one on top of the other. "This is 'two.'" Three strokes, still stacked. "And 'three.'"

"This is just counting," Rusena protested. "I can see that these mean one, two, and three."

"No," I said. "It *looks* that way. But these are not meanings, or not just meanings. These are words, made up of sounds. And look, here is 'four.'" I wrote another character, this one consisting of five strokes, not arranged in a stack. Rusena stared at it, her mind turning like a waterwheel. "Any literate person in the Emerald Isles could look at this character and instantly read the word 'four,' which in their language is *hli*. *That* is what this written form represents. *Hli*."

Rusena contemplated the four words a while longer, still thinking hard.

"But if every word has its own character," she said finally, "you must need so many."

"That's true," I said, "though it's not actually *every* word, since some words are compounds of… Maybe I began with the wrong example." I rubbed out the characters. "There is another country, a cold and windy land, where they write differently. Each sign represents a syllable." Rusena could count those in her sleep. "This is

lu." I wrote the sign from the syllabary of the serpent boat people.

"Lu," Rusena repeated doubtfully.

"Now, it so happens that in this language, *lu* is actually a word. It means 'if.'"

"So this sign means 'if.'"

"No," I said patiently. Overhead, the sun passed behind a cloud, and my calves were cold where the water was still evaporating off of them. "This sign represents the syllable lu. If I wrote nothing else, then the message would say *lu*, and yes, that would be the word for 'if.' But say I added another sign, the one for ti." I drew my finger through the soil. "Now I have written *luti*. And *luti* means 'frog.' There is no 'if' in this word."

My poet sat back and drew her knees up under her chin. I waited, letting her absorb all I had told her.

At last she said, "Does this…writing have a symbol that would be said ya?"

"Yes," I answered, though I was not sure I could remember it. Back then, I did not know the whole syllabary by heart.

"So if I were to put this sign"—she pointed to lu—"before the sign for ya, that would make luya." She gestured at the sky.

"Yes!" I said, delighted. "They made the syllabary for their language, but it represents sounds, so if those sounds exist in our language too, then the signs can be used to write our language. It wouldn't work for everything; they have no w, no—"

"You never told me." Her voice was hushed. "You knew about writing all this time and you never mentioned such a thing was possible."

For a moment, I was speechless. I didn't feel guilty—it is not in our nature—but I could tell she was hurt and I would have to tread carefully. I disliked fighting with my poet; it was not harmonious.

"I didn't want to interfere," I said finally. "Mortals invent writing for themselves or learn of it through trade or migration. It was not for me to introduce it."

"You just did!" Rusena burst out. She was no longer curled up tight: she had unfolded her body to sit cross-legged, and her arms were flung wide.

"You asked," I said. "Or rather, you expressed a wish. I can grant you this wish. And I want you to have what you desire. Maybe it's interfering, but we can give gifts to mortals, on occasion."

"All right." Rusena seemed calmer, overtaken by a newfound focus. "This is the solution, then. I need to learn to write. If you teach me all the signs from this northern people…"

"I don't know them all," I admitted. "And actually, I think we can do better. The serpent boat people's writing takes many fewer signs than the writing of the Emerald Isles. But there's a way to take even fewer."

Rusena waited, attentive.

"Take the syllable lu." I pointed at the sign in the earth. "It actually has two parts, the lll and the uuu."

"What?" Rusena seemed amused by my exaggerated sounds. "What do you mean? Lu is a whole. It just is."

"You think that because you're used to thinking in syllables. But feel it in your mouth. Lu. There are two sounds."

"Lu," she repeated dutifully. "It feels like one sound to me. If you say it's two, what's to stop you from saying

it's three or four? Llluuu." She dragged it out to a comical degree.

I was surprised by her stubbornness. To me, it was obvious that a syllable could be further broken down into individual sounds. Had my passing acquaintance with two or three alphabets so altered my perception of the language I shared with my poet?

"Think of it this way," I said. "Luya begins with the same sound as my name, doesn't it? Limue. Luya."

Rusena's lips moved silently. "Maybe?"

"It does. But my name doesn't start with lu. It starts with li. So there is a part these two syllables have in common, and a part that is different. The part in common is l. Just that much."

She was nodding now, and smiling with that wondering delight that came over her when she'd hit upon the version of a new verse that felt exactly right. "I see. I mean, I feel it!"

"So," I said, "a writing system that uses one sign for each sound requires the smallest number of symbols. It would be easiest to learn. Then you could write down all your poems and teach others to read them."

"Yes," she said, a fierce light in her eyes. "This is what I want. But…I don't know if I can do it. I don't even trust myself to know how many sounds our language has. It's all so—"

"Rusena," I said. "I will make you an alphabet. This will be my gift."

The aspirants' voices rise alongside those of the initiates through the incense-laden air.

"*Mai is for matuk*

*Limue's own heart*"

They are not writing the alphabet as they recite it, but I watch them from the letters carved inside the dome of the monastery's main hall. When the chanting ends, the aspirants spill out into the yard. Some sneak off to the dormitory for a nap; others head to the kitchens to wheedle a snack from the cooks. Even out here, I can observe them. Brightly painted letters adorn the round ends of the roof tiles on the eaves of all the buildings.

Two aspirants, both scrawny in their gray robes, walk through the monastery garden.

"I can't believe they make us recite that stupid alphabet rhyme so much," the boy grouses, speaking the serpent boat people's tongue. "Everyone here's known it forever."

"Don't let the preceptor catch you speaking that language." The girl says it in our tongue, but her syntax is ever so slightly clumsy.

"All right, all right," the boy says, switching over grudgingly.

"Anyway, I don't think it's about remembering the alphabet," says his companion. "It's about honoring the goddess."

"It's babyish." He glares at an ornamental stone lantern next to an osmanthus tree. "I thought we'd be taught, I don't know, hymns or something."

"I bet there's a reason they consider the rhyme so important." The girl lowers her voice. "Want to find out what it is?"

The boy narrows his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"It's the senior aspirants' initiation ceremony this afternoon. Don't you want to know what secrets they're told?"

"Doesn't everyone?" the boy says. "But we're forbidden from attending."

The girl grins. "I have a plan."

After the noon meal, the preceptor assigns afternoon chores to the younger aspirants. The girl volunteers herself and her friend to sweep pine needles off the roof of the main hall. The preceptor gives her a look of disapprobation—it is not for aspirants to choose which tasks they are given—but she grants the request. If she assumes the children will drag out the job admiring the view from the rooftop, she doesn't think it will do much harm.

Along the back wall of the main hall, the girl steadies the ladder for the boy and then scampers up behind him. Though the slope of the roof isn't steep, the boy presses his belly to the tiles.

"Did you forget your broom?" the girl exclaims, peering over the eaves.

The boy clings to the roof tiles. "Just show me why we came up here."

The girl purses her lips at him, warning him to keep silent. Brandishing her short-handled broom, she makes an energetic show of sweeping a few needles onto the ground. Then, flattening herself like the boy, she creeps toward the cupola at the peak of the roof. It is the exterior counterpart of the dome above the altar inside the hall. The cupola has its own small tiled roof, but its sides are wooden, and the girl points out a hole gnawed into one panel.

The boy goggles at her. "How did you know this was here?" he mouths.

"You mean you haven't climbed all the monastery roofs?" the girl says in mock surprise. But then she purses

her lips again and presses her ear to the hole, leaving room as best she can for her companion to do the same.

They are fortunate in the main hall's acoustics and blessed with the sharp ears of the young. Floorboards creak and robes whisper as the aspirants deemed worthy to take their new vows find their places.

"I swear, if they chant the alphabet rhyme *again*—"

The girl shoves her hand over the boy's mouth.

The ceremony begins with the presentation of the prospective initiates. The children's expressions shift as they recognize the names of certain aspirants, both beloved and hated. Their attention wanders during the administering of the vows. But their patience is rewarded when the abbot, in a solemn voice that happily carries up to the dome, begins to reveal the mysteries reserved for initiates of Limue.

"The holy truth at the heart of our cult is this: the alphabet rhyme is not a metaphor or a mnemonic. It is literal. It is a vessel of memory. The goddess Limue gave her body piece by piece to make our alphabet. It is her flesh, sacrificed for our people."

Silence reigns in the main hall, weightier than the usual respectful quiet observed between chants and instruction. On the roof, the children stare wide-eyed at each other.

"What this means," the abbot pursues, "is that Limue is dead. She gave her life to create the alphabet. The cult of Limue is not the cult of a living deity. As new initiates of Limue, you are now keepers of this knowledge too."

The boy's expression is more horrified than before, but the girl's brow is knitted. Just then, footsteps sound on a nearby path, and the preceptor calls the children's names. The girl signals urgently to her companion and

shimmies down the slope of the roof, toward the eaves. She attacks a pile of needles with her broom, and they shower over the edge.

The preceptor stops by the ladder. "Haven't you finished yet?"

"Almost done!" the girl sings.

When the preceptor has hurried off to chivy other derelict children, the boy joins the girl sweeping diligently along the eaves.

"The goddess is *dead*?" He sounds angry, but his ashen complexion reveals how shaken he is. "This whole monastery is for a dead divinity? The people who pray to Limue in her temples aren't talking to anyone?"

The girl's movements falter, as though she hadn't thought of that. Before she can respond, a commotion at the monastery gates diverts my attention. A party of soldiers, priests, and officials has come up the road to the main entrance and is demanding admittance. The initiate on gatekeeping duty argues with them through the gatehouse window while a couple of aspirants stop in the yard to gawk. With the abbot and most of the initiates still at the ceremony, it is the preceptor who finally comes running to see what the disturbance is about.

"Your people have no right of entry to our monasteries," she tells the priest and the commander at the head of the company.

"We *had* no right," the priest corrects her. "But the new governor has changed all that. We're shutting down the monasteries. On his orders."

"You…what?" The preceptor's face is gray.

Inside the main hall, the freshly minted initiates of my cult listen still as the abbot impresses upon them the importance of their new responsibilities.

When I was ready, I led my poet into the forest where we had first met. We climbed up into the hills until we reached a shallow cave whose entrance was hidden by a curtain of thick vines. Inside, it was cool and humid, and green light filtered in through the vines. I set down the bag I had been carrying and turned to Rusena.

"I will show you how to write, and your poetry will endure forever."

She smiled, her eyes lit with excitement and perhaps some amusement at my solemnity.

"I used a principle I have known other alphabets to follow," I said, rooting around in my bag for the first tools I would need. "Let me show you."

I took a paring knife and trimmed my left thumbnail, in one piece. I could have pulled the whole nail out, but I'd thought the shape of it would be less memorable. Besides, it wouldn't do to start off with anything too frightening.

I sat down cross-legged so Rusena would join me and laid my fingernail carefully on the packed earth. "Imin. The word starts with i. So the letter will look like this, a crescent facing down."

I picked up the piece of charcoal I'd taken out of my bag and stood to scrape the letter i on the cave wall.

"I is for imin," I said. "But this is the letter for the sound i in every word. Like in my name."

"Limue," Rusena said, drawing the sounds out. "Yes, I see. And the letter looks like an imin."

She understood. The rest would be easier. Maybe.

I reached up and pinched at my eyelashes. Three came away in my fingers.

"Du." It was hard to place such tiny, light things exactly where I wanted them, but I managed to arrange my lashes parallel to one another on the ground.

"Duwi," said Rusena. "There are three."

I laughed. "Either way, this letter is dai, for du." I made three strokes on the cave wall to write the letter.

Settling back onto the earth, I slid my hand into my bag and clasped the handle of the cleaver hidden inside. I'd have to do this next part quickly.

I laid my left hand flat on the ground, splayed out the little finger, drew the cleaver from my bag, and chopped off the last phalanx.

"Limue!" Rusena cried.

Unattached to my body, the tip of my finger looked strange. I wrapped a strip of cloth around the bleeding. The wound was painful, but it did not hurt. My heart swelled with a savage gladness.

"What are you doing?" Rusena shouted. "Can you heal yourself?"

I ignored her questions. "It's not obvious right now, but this is kai for ki'ai." I wrote the new letter on the rugged stone, a stylized squiggle meant to evoke the contour of a finger bone.

"What are you doing?" my poet repeated. "You don't need to do this. The fingernail and the eyelashes were one thing, but you can't *cut off your*—"

"I'm making the alphabet," I said, implacable.

"What are you talking about?" Rusena kept staring at my fingertip and then away. "I understand the principle. All you have to do is teach me the letters. Are they all body parts?"

"Yes. The next one is gai." This time I wrote it in charcoal first. A misshapen spiral, elongated and wider at the top than at the bottom.

"Gai for…" Rusena looked at the newest letter. Her gaze slid to me as I drew my hair back to expose my ear.

"No!" She caught my wrist. "This isn't what I asked for. I don't want you to do this!"

"I know," I said, "but this is what I choose to do."

"You can't!" Her whole body was tense with denial. "If you keep going, you'll die. Won't you?" She looked at me, begging me to tell her she was wrong.

This time, I wasn't sure how to respond. To her, I supposed, it would almost be no different than if I were dead, so I replied, "Yes, I will."

"No." She was trembling, her fingers still encircling my wrist. "This isn't what we—I won't let you. Why? It's not necessary!"

"You want people to remember your poems perfectly forever. And I want—"

"I don't care!" She threw up her hands. "Forget about my poems. They'll be remembered. So what if they change? And besides, you don't even—you said mortals usually invent writing. You've told me all I need to know. We don't need you for this now."

All at once, I was furious. How dare she refuse the greatest gift I would ever give her? Give *us*? What ingratitude was this? I had meant to explain, to try to make her understand why I wished to do it this way, but now I didn't want to, and my rage billowed like a wildfire, fueling a power I had thought was almost extinguished. My divine strength rose up in me, and I wasn't sure how to direct it, but instinct kept me from harming Rusena. My vision wavered for an instant, and

when it settled, my poet had crumpled to the ground. I hadn't hurt her; she was sleeping, so soundly her brow was clear, no trace remaining of her distress of moments ago.

My anger subsided, but its embers still smoldered. It was her own fault she wouldn't get to hear my explanation. If she'd listened, I would have told her the truth: I wanted to live forever too. But not as a goddess, bereft of my poet. I had no desire to revive my cult to save myself from oblivion.

As it was, Rusena and I were mismatched. She would turn to dust while I lived more mortal lifetimes. At the same time, I would eventually fade to nothing while her poetry lived on. But if I was the alphabet and it was me, we could be together forever: her words written in letters imbued with my spirit. I would be the embodied record of her poetry. Our two immortalities inextricably bound up, for as long as her poems weren't lost and my letters weren't forgotten.

Without Rusena's protests, the rest of the alphabet went quickly. It got harder as I went along—the blood, the insistent pain, the piecemeal mangling of my body as I carved it apart—but this was my final act as a goddess, and I poured every drop of my will into seeing it through. Letter by letter, I became something other than I had been. When I was done, I was divided, incorporeal, a more fleeting consciousness than before. But I was still here, in twenty-one charcoal letters on rough stone. The remains of my physical shape lay scattered on the cave floor: an eye here, a hand there, assorted viscera toward the end.

I was there when Rusena awoke and discovered my handiwork, of course. From the cave wall, I bore witness

to her horror and anguish. And to her rage. I regretted that I could no longer do anything to comfort her or explain myself, but I didn't regret what I had done. There was a moment—after she had stumbled out of the cavern to vomit, after she had bent double heaving groans that sounded too deep for her body—when I feared she would reject my gift. That she would smear the letters to unrecognizable smudges, bury the pieces of me, and curse the ground where they lay.

But that's not what she did. Was a readymade alphabet too great a temptation to refuse, however much she hated me in the end? Or did she feel duty-bound to honor my gift even if she had tried to prevent me from giving it? Either way, she learned the alphabet I had left for her. And she began to write.

Our temples are quiet nowadays, mine and Rusena's. Some are abandoned or only swept now and then by one lone caretaker. Others have long since been repurposed, converted to stables or warehouses or even schools where the conquerors' tongue is taught. And while I no longer rely on prayers for my continued existence, my poet-goddess does. She must feel what I felt centuries ago now: the drought of worshippers, the creeping gray of a new kind of tiredness. Does she understand, though? Does she know what it means?

One day, Rusena steps through the doorway of a temple in the borderlands. I recognize her instantly, and for the first time since that day in the cave I wish for a physical body again. I am nothing but paint on wood, yet from the inner surface of the dome I feel irresistibly drawn toward my poet.

She shuffles through the dust toward the altar and stops beneath the dome.

"Did you miss me?" she asks. As though we are resuming a conversation from only a moment ago.

*Yes*. I am burning with this answer, and somehow the dome does not catch fire.

"I came back to find out why I was dying," she says. "Were you already dying too? Is that why you…?" She doesn't look up at my vantage point as she speaks to me. "Out there"—she gestures toward the entrance—"they don't speak our language anymore. They write another language with your body. It's like this all the way to the coast, isn't it?" She sighs. "In the end, it's like you said: nothing is eternal. And maybe I'm ready to be done." She looks up at last. "What do you think?"

*No, no, no*.

Rusena waits expectantly, but there is no message to receive. I cannot reach her. After a while, she turns and walks out of the temple.

*"Pai is for pera*
*Limue's plucked eye"*

My eye opens, and I stare up at my poet's face. She sits on a bench in a dim room, surrounded by people, mostly toothless elders and children too young for school.

She hands the pen to a girl with teeth like tiny pearls, and the child writes her own pai next to Rusena's. A wizened old woman hovering behind her beams, and in her smile I recognize a pigtailed child whose boisterous chanting annoyed her studious older sister.

"*Tai is for tepun / The goddess's hand*," she warbles now.

Next to the old woman is an even older man who once learned his letters as his grandmother wrote them in the yellow earth.

"*Kai is for ki'ai / Her third knucklebone*," he says, voice gravelly with age.

On the bench beside Rusena sit two more elders whose families once entrusted them to a monastery. In a gesture that belies her age, the woman elbows her companion, and he lifts his gaze heavenward. But he can't help grinning as the words come back to him.

*"Bai is for buet*
*Limue's left foot"*

Outside in the evening sky, a nightjar calls.

# The Void Is in a Playful Mood Tonight

**Naomi Simone Borwein**

This is your fault, witch.
It had a voice like rusty chains.
And cracking joints.
    The black cloud of wings
dancing in the spindrift.
    The silhouette  Shoving me
Towards the hole  that opened up
to receive  at dusk.
    *Let time concede to you…*
    In parting
Like the vast milk hairs
Around glass cauls
Pouring hot sheen sheer resin—
Along with me—
Into the pit of the sea.
    Hungry waves eddy and roil.
Finger tendrils of surf gesture
the ocean spits and croons.
    Above the vaulted cage of the vortex.
    I stumble at the lip,
my toe snagging on  something.
And looking down the shaft,
The time flux-resin
filling the pits and grooves of starflesh
left to cosmic carrion
oxygen starved or waterlogged and the rich weave of
red scraps corded nests in

bedding
at the bottom.
Howled.
    The voice was giddy
*Ohhh the water is in a playful mood today!*
    *What is this?*
Globes of my eyes cracked
by spider webs of silver veins.
    *Your new home.* The sneer.
The voice—the sound of fingers
rubbing against a taut balloon.
    Ooooooph
My knees kicked out beneath me.
And spiralling.
Down the force of a hard
thrust against my scalloped back.
Blue Bones irradiated.
    *May this be you final resting place!*
    And nose diving,
tail spinning
cork screwed—down—
met the force of…
in the walls
in the vortex of currents.
Cracking against my skull
and shoulder cracks.
Sound of lips beneath me
Bbbbbbb bbbbbb bbbbb
like an engine seizing
as it fills with fluid.
A flash of eel-like lips
and fanning limbs
the bbb bbb bbb echoing

between the rocky up-thrusts
in this void.
    Pressure
Tightening
Like a clamp
a zip tie
around my ankles and wrists
crawling over my body bind
Red cords of living things
Nesting around me.
    Two giant lanterns
hazy light gobbled up
by dark murky fluid
slide past the vitreous surface
of the wall.
    Staring into the pit—It reeks
and shafts of sky spot lighting
the alien-looking ground scattered
beyond the blood nest
black shadows in the corners of my eyes.
Shifting
before a red cord loops around my eyes
like a blindfold.
The wind dead inside the pit.
Only the soft skittering shuffles
dragging sounds.
Landing next to a harpy's head and torso
aware of
the right side of my tongue,
swollen
scraps of palette.
Of the limbs
numb constriction

Settling
    Nesting
Culling
the spackled gaze of a knife
across a braided surface
of seaweed and starflowers
anemones
and white ridges of tiny pentagons
And microbes dusting
the inside of my throat,
nostrils,
the ringing in my ears
drowning out the shuffle of feet or fins or tentacles
pairs of—wings—surely more than one?
    The debris under my nails aching
crawling, and icy fingers
tickling my jointed spine.
Vents bubbling—in time—
beneath the seal
Of this void
is in a playful mood
tonight.

Art © 2025, Carmen Moran.

# Guidelines for submissions

*The Future Fire* welcomes submissions of speculative fiction and poetry with progressive, inclusive and socially aware disposition. We are particularly interested in feminist, queer, postcolonial and ecological themes, and writing by under-represented voices.

- Fiction (up to 1000 words): pay $10 per story
- Fiction (up to 17500 words): pay $20 per story
- Poetry: pay $10 per poem
- Art: pay $10 per story illustrated (+$10 for the image we use as cover art).

Submissions by email. Responses within 6 weeks. No multiple or simultaneous submissions, please.

All guidelines at http://futurefire.net/guidelines/