

the quiet Lones annual

two-time Printz Award winner

A.S. King



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to help protect
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Fear The Wolf

goes hunting with

**THE FERAL
FEMALE**

plus...

12 new works of
haunting fiction
and poetry
from rising genre stars

including:

**Tashi
Saheb-Ettaba**

and

**Katherine
Kerestman**



2024



2024 Edition

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BLOODLETTERS

from the editors

Everything ends. Last year, we closed our second anniversary with a massive double-issue that, as we were putting it together, we thought would be our swan song. But like some of the most famous horror franchises out there, "The End" wasn't really the end. If we've learned anything from Friday The 13th's "Final Chapter" and "Final Friday," or A Nightmare on Elm Street's "Final Nightmare," it's that the monsters always find a way to bring the scares again and again.

Our annual issues will launch every last Thursday of October. Between now and October 2025, we'll be revamping our website with a new design and new features that will allow us to interact throughout the year. We'll still offer our zine for free - including our entire back catalog - and keep you up-to-date on our Open Submission periods, which you can expect in the midsummer. No themes. Just spooky stories and incredible nonfiction features, like this year's "The Feral Female" by Stefanie Gilmour and "What to Do with Something You Can't Hold by Yourself" by A.S. King.

We will also be announcing new editors in the new year as we bid farewell to our Co-Founder and original Final Girl, Emily Young. Emily has been the heart of our zine since its beginning. The care, empathy, and hard work she put into every issue laid the foundation for so much of what The Quiet Ones has become known and respected for within the writing community. She leaves a creative legacy with us that will happily haunt our halls for all time.

...or perhaps she'll be brought back in a new form, just like Jason and Freddy before her. Time will tell. One thing we know is: 2025 will be full of surprises. So, leave your lights on.

Annually Yours,
DM Hoffman
Co-Executive Editor of *The Quiet Ones*



SKIN TO SKIN

by: Mary Neville

LOOKING FOR YOUR SOULMATE?

Are you between the ages of 21 and 35? Are you sad, lonely, and wish your life had meaning? Does your skin lack the natural glow that comes with new romance? Because, of course, life only means something if someone loves you. *Love loves you.* Well, you're in luck! The hit new dating show, *Skin to Skin*, is looking for contestants! You'll meet a number* of other singles and jet set off to exotic lush destinations.**

The premise of *Skin to Skin* is about fostering honest, genuine love connections. But of course, nothing in love comes easy. At the end of the show the winners will have to choose between \$50,000 or a relationship with one another. Never fear! We have a 100% success rate so far. Not one of the individuals have been able to choose the money. They have steadfastly elected to peel off their skin rather than abandon their love. That's what love is about, right? Finding someone who would be willing to give up the very skin they walk in. For you, of course. For love.*** Plus, we all know you're more likely to find love if you have skin in the game.

In order to qualify please call Dr. Olga Meadowlark, distinguished dermatologist, for an interview and standard health screening.

*Numbers may vary from 9 to 0.

**Including Dr. Meadowlark's laboratory.

****Skin to Skin* is not responsible for damages emotional or physical, actual or in the contestant's mind. Potential damages include but are not limited to: heartbreak, fear, and psychological distress.

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MIRRORED SELF

by: Tashi Saheb-Ettaba

My Self locks me up in her mirror because she knows I want to kill her husband.

Stuck inside this vast, cold darkness, the mirror is unbreakable no matter how hard I've pounded my fists against it. Throwing my bony weight at it is useless. My claws hurt from piercing into the glass. I've wandered through this abyss, but no matter where I turn, the glass always materializes in front of me as if to taunt me with their dining room view. I can't make this thing disappear, so I give up.

Day by day, I hunch in front of the mirror, chewing the ends of my greasy hair as I watch my Self being infatuated with her Husband as he showers her with roses, sparkling jewels, and beautiful gifts. My Self takes numerous selfies with him with her phone and shows them off on her social media.

At dinners, they'd sit so close as they indulge in rich meals and wine. Or each other. Their laughter and moans open an aching pit in my stomach. I breathe in my own decaying flesh as I tear off the hanging skin from my thumb, but my own distractions neither block their noises nor ease my ache.

My wildness would have tainted this "perfect" image.

But shiny things tarnish over time.

One night, the Husband demands a dinner party for his colleagues to celebrate his promotion. Not once does he help my Self with any of the dinner preparations. He sits at the opposite end of the table, next to a woman from his work. My Self sits on the other end with a plastered smile. Everyone drowns themselves in wine; their voices boom across the space.

I scan across the room, drumming my claws against the glass. My attention lands on the Husband. There, his hand strokes the woman's thigh underneath the table. The woman smirks as she returns the favor.

Hot sensation coils in my chest. My body tenses. Veins throb across my clenched fists. I want to lunge at him, but instead I hit my fists against the mirror. The glass tilts forward slightly.

My Self turns to me with wide eyes.

I gently press the glass. Is this thing about to fall?

An idea flutters in my mind.

I raise both fists and strike the glass. It tilts at an angle that reminds me of a table. My Self rushes over and grabs the frame.

I push the glass down.

She glares, fighting back.

I shove against the mirror, angling towards the Husband's direction until I capture a full reflection of his sinful hand.

My Self's face blanches; her fingers redden from squeezing the frame. Her eyes turn glassy as she quickly adjusts the mirror and returns to her seat.

No one turns in her direction as she cries silently.

Night after night, my Self visits me while the Husband sleeps. She stands in front of me, her hand against the mirror. Here she is, crying her heart out and I'm useless on my side, so I align my hand with hers.

I can almost taste her tears.

One night, when the Husband is home, the two of them sit in the complete opposite ends of their dining table. Silence is as oppressive as their bitterness. The Husband barely touches his dinner. Instead, he's smiling at his phone as if being fed with the love and attention he deserves.

He hasn't smiled like that since they married.

My Self's gaze never leaves the Husband as she cuts up her chicken thigh. "So, how's work?"

"Fine," the Husband answers, scrolling on his phone.

My nails scratch across the mirror. Its horrid screech causes my Self to stir uncomfortably in her seat. Glass snaps underneath my claws as the cracks appear. I lean forward and my breath fogs up the surface.

My Self loses her grip on the knife. The blade scrapes into the China dish. It's hard to tell if she's left any marks or not. I hope so.

The Husband startles from the noise. "What the hell—"

"I know."

The Husband frowns, pushing his phone aside. "What?"

"I saw what you did at the dinner party." My Self shoves her dinner. "Right in front of everyone! What is wrong with you?!"

"Don't you think you're being delusional?"

"I know what I saw!"

"You were drunk, just like everyone else—"

"Bullshit!"

I back up several steps, tighten my muscles and sprint. My body slams against the glass. More cracks transpire. One more push is all I need, but my body shudders from the pain and dizziness.

"I'm not staying." My Self's voice shakes as she lifts her chin up.

A menacing glint stirs in the Husband's eyes. "You're not going anywhere."

"You don't tell me what to do. Not anymore."

My Self bolts towards me. The Husband pursues. She's so close to me, but the Husband grabs her wrist and twists it in a weird angle. She wails and she falls to her knees. Her hand thumps against the mirror.

Her hand against mine.

A shriek emerges from the depth of my heart. Glass shards explode. I fall forward. My vision blurs. I pin the Husband to the floor as the shards hail down on us. I sink my claws into his stomach, pouring all my weight into it. He screams and writhes. He tries to push me off until I grab the nearest shard and stab his neck.

My Self shrieks.

He remains still with his glazed eyes. My Self stands there, her jaw stuck wide open. I remove the bloody shard from the Husband's neck and toss it aside. Pain courses in my body so fast, I can't tell if it's from my adrenaline or the fragments stuck in my skin. Blood scent permeates my chest.

His blood.

My Self's paralyzed on the spot, lost in her trembles and sobs. I stretch out my hands against the floor, ignoring the glass fragments' sting in my palms. I'm waiting for her to lunge at me. Attack. Something.

Instead, she bends down next to me and pulls me close to her. My head against her chest, her heart beats fast and wild like mine.

"I'm sorry," she whispers as she tightens her grip. "I'm so sorry."

I don't know what to do or say. All I can do is wrap my gangly arms around her.

My Self kisses my forehead. "Never again."

I burst into tears as I cling onto her shoulders, careful not to poke my long nails into her skin. I'm not crying because of what happened. I'm crying because I've assumed my wildness has been extinguished in the abyss. But now, it's ignited by her love.

A gurgle stirs from below. The Husband's hand twitches as he gasps. At first, his gaze lands on my Self, but catches me in his periphery.

My Self and I look into each other's eyes. A tiny spark dances in her dark eyes. We smile in unison and slowly turn back to the Husband. We pick out the sharpest shard piece and hover over him.

Our shards up high.

His eyes bulge.

And we plunge.

Right over his heart.



SEASHELLS

by: Marianne Murphy

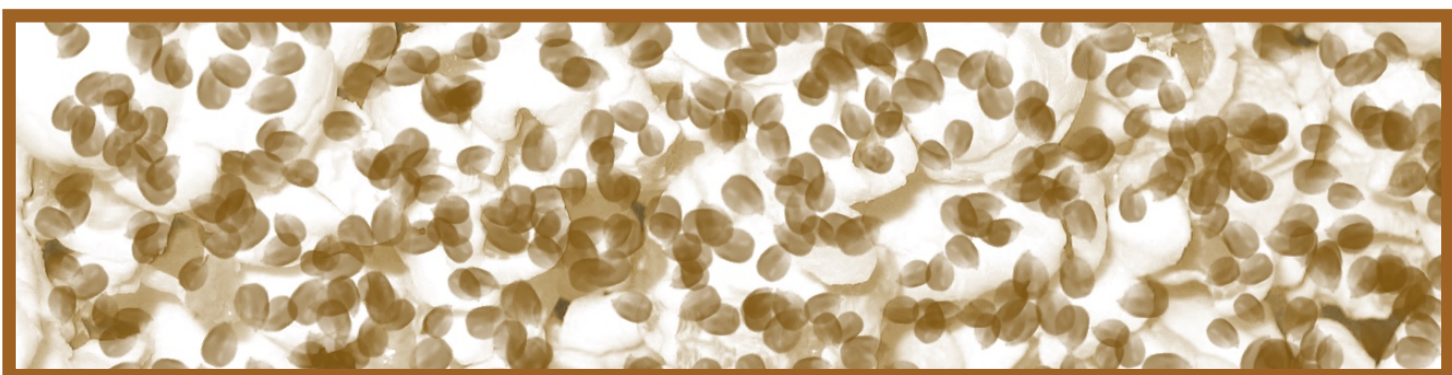
I don't notice until we're at the front of the line. Un-popped brown kernels are pressing against the front of the popcorn machine, very clearly spelling his name:



I'm sure that I'm completely done for, but when I look up at Ben, he's just staring ahead with his pleasant eyebrows and his bright blue *Awesomenautical* hat, probably deciding whether he's more in the mood for Sno-Caps or M&M's.

I know it has to be chocolate, because we're going to see *The Awesomenautical Adventure*, and Ben always chooses chocolate for action movies. I'm well-versed in his candy habits. Fruit candy for romantic comedies, licorice for documentaries, and popcorn for horror, because he likes to throw fistfuls of it into the air when he's pretending to be scared, which I used to think was funny, but not now that I'm working at the Cineplex. I definitely won't ever take him to a horror movie when he gets back from San Francisco.

I look back at the popcorn machine and blink several times, shaking the kernels like an Etch-a-Sketch until they spell nothing.



Ben doesn't seem to notice. "Decision made," he finally says, with a nod that makes his glasses slip down his nose. "Hershey Bar."

I root my feet, stare at the empty space behind the counter, and conjure up Kayla, the blue-haired girl who usually covers the snack bar during my shift. I didn't want to throw her into the dream before Ben made his decision. I would've been stuck conjuring my memory of her for ages.

Here's how I know. For our first month anniversary, I spent all week mapping out a good dream to share with Ben. I made a whole fancy restaurant with his favorite foods, and I prepared full character designs, dialogue trees, and backstories for every customer in the restaurant, just in case he wanted to talk to them. I'd never had an anniversary with anyone before and I was so excited. But all he did was spend fifteen dream minutes looking wildly between the waitress and the menu, trying to decide what to order. I shouldn't have given him so much choice. He doesn't do well with choice. It wasn't a great night, or a great month, but now here we are, almost six months later, functioning just fine.

Fine enough.

Apart from the popcorn kernels.

"One Hershey Bar, please," Ben tells Dream Kayla.

"That'll be two million dollars," I make her say.

Ben looks in his wallet. He finds the two million dollar bill I put in there, with a logo of Dolly Parton doing a huge wink. I love small details.

Ben smiles at me and I kind of smile back.

Maya always warns us against creating too many small details, because she thinks it splits the dreamer's focus too much. She thinks it might be dangerous. Last time she mentioned it, Ben told her that's why the dreams she hosts are always so boring. Since we started dating, he likes to act like he's sticking up for me in every situation, even when I'm clearly wrong. I probably could've conjured a Dream version of him easily. "Yes, Ellie," Dream Ben would say, over and over. "You're right, Ellie."

"Ellie?" he says.

Ben is staring behind the counter. Dream Kayla's gone and Dream Floyd is standing there, doing that impossible smile, wearing the seashell necklace he wears every day. I know it's not the real Floyd, but my face feels hot.

"Sorry! Distracted. They both work at the snack bar on my shift," I explain. "Just a mix-up. I need to cut back on the small details."

"See? I'm always right," says Maya, finally popping up in line behind me. Two *Awesomenautical* plastic hearts are bobbling around on her headband. She looks at Dream Floyd and scrutinizes him. I want to replace him with Dream Kayla immediately, but that would look suspicious as hell.

"Is this one of your new snack friends?" Ziggy asks. He's standing beside Maya now and glowing brighter than his *Awesomenautical* light-up shoes.

"Just a coworker," I answer, too quickly. "That's Floyd, he just graduated from Temple. He's, like, way older than us, but he's cool." I know about a thousand other things about him, but I don't mention them. I blink him away to bring Kayla back.

"And this is Kayla. She's...at culinary school," I say, which probably isn't true. I think I said that because she works at the snack bar. I don't really know a thing about her, even though she's constantly talking to me during our lunch break. I tend to spend our conversations nodding in her direction while watching the break room door to see if Floyd's coming to join us. Her conjured face is even a little blurry because I can't quite picture it.

It's weird introducing my friends to my coworkers this way. I got this job after the summer separation of Team Dream, which is the fairly straightforward name Maya, Ziggy, Ben and I came up with. Ben's off in San Francisco visiting his family, Maya's up in Oregon for the Advanced Path to Science Pre-College Program her mom found online, and Ziggy's down in Australia doing some weird self-guided tour of the mountains. I'm sticking around here visiting nobody, studying nothing, and touring the moldy gum under the seats of the Cineplex. And, of course, creating weekly dream reunions for us. We've spent every summer together since third grade and I'm not letting the distance stop us.

"Nice to meet you, Kayla," Ben says, polite even to an imaginary person, even as her blurry facial features are shifting. "One Hershey Bar, please."

"Actually, one Hershey Bar for each of us, four medium sodas, and an extra-large popcorn to share," Maya says, pushing to the front of the line. "We don't have a lot of time. Ziggy has to wake up soon."

"I've still got an hour and a half, but look at this!" Ziggy says, and then starts shooting sparks out of his fingers. He's the only one in a dramatically different time-zone, but he managed to sneak away for a nap before dinner. This is the first time we've attempted to bring a napper into a Dream Meet. Usually, you need to be in a deep sleep to be able to access a Host's dream. But it actually seems to be working quite well. Ziggy is half-transparent and there are obviously some other weird side effects, but he's clearly here.

Everyone else watches Ziggy shoot sparks, but I watch Kayla to make sure that she stays Kayla.

Kayla piles the popcorn into our bucket without any mishaps, but as I focus on keeping the kernels still, I catch the soda cups filling with mini seashells. I blink to grind the sodas back to liquid, but focusing on that for too long causes the kernels to start jumping again, and then the HERSHEY labels of the chocolate bars start to shift, spelling new, dangerous words. I try to scramble their titles before anyone gets a look at them.

Ben slips his sweaty hand in mine and all the Hershey Bars go blank. Dream Kayla freezes.

"I have something I want to tell you later," Ben says.

"Cool. Hold on, lemme, uh..." I say, then carefully drop his hand and start distributing all the snacks. "Just gotta focus a little. Details."

"Looks delicious," Ben says. He's clueless. We head for the theater. I don't risk conjuring up tickets, since the ticket booth is where my most embarrassing fantasy takes place.

We are actually pretty chill, generally, about weird fantasies. When we were just starting out, that's pretty much all our dreams were. Maya was the host of our very first Dream Meet when we were thirteen, though we didn't know we were having one. Her dream was full of dragons and flowers and her pre-Algebra teacher dressed as a knight, and it was strangely vivid. We didn't even realize we'd all had the same dream until lunch the next day. Then, that night, we all had Ben's dream, which seemed like it was about a very tall cat wearing a bikini, but I think it was about me, based on how much he would not look at me the next day. Then we all had Ziggy's dream, which was more of a nightmare. We don't talk about it.

Anyway, after a couple months of practicing our lucid dreaming and avoiding the more sensitive areas of our psyches during Dream Meets (or at least avoiding each other's eyes the next day) we were soon able to consciously create and host our own dreams for each other. That's when Team Dream officially formed.

But I don't need Ben analyzing this particular fantasy, so I skip the tickets and replace the door to the ticket booth with the Dream Exit Point, where we can go to wake up when the movie's over.

"I've been thinking a lot about something," Ben says, once he's sitting next to me in the theater. His face is too close. "Something interesting."

"Hold on, let me get the movie going," I say.

I inch away from him and look at the screen. I stare for a long time, a very long time, before I realize I don't actually remember what happens in *The Awesomenautical Adventure*.

"Ellie?" Maya asks.

"One second...trying to remember the beginning..." I say.

"Take your time," Ben says. He puts his arm around me and his fingers spread out over my shoulder.

"You'll do great," he whispers in my ear. "Don't worry."

I slip my hand between Ben's hand and my shoulder. I don't flick his hand off or anything. I just don't want his skin on mine. That happens sometimes. Moreso lately. His fingers curl around the back of my hand instead. I let that happen and just sit in the dark, scraping for a memory. But the movie still feels completely out of my reach.

I know I could show another movie. But I've been bragging for weeks about getting to see *The Awesomenautical Adventure* before the rest of Team Dream. It's the one perk of working at this damn movie theater. Last night, there was a Cineplex Employee Early Release Party, where they lock the theater at midnight and you get to see a new movie, like this one, early and for free. Free stale popcorn, too. It almost made us forget that we're making minimum wage, which, I think, was the point of the party.

"Ellie?" Maya asks, still softly.

"She's working on it," Ben says. His voice is like wet shoes squeaking on a tile floor.

I didn't think conjuring up a movie would be so hard. The brain has a powerful storage capacity, and it really isn't that hard to recreate an exact memory of something you've seen and heard if you let your subconscious take over. But you definitely have to relax, because once you start actually *trying* to remember details, that's when the trouble starts.

"Ellie? Ziggy has to leave soon," Maya whispers.

"Leave her alone, she's almost getting it!" Ben snaps.

I'm not almost getting it. The only thing I remember, it turns out, is where Floyd was sitting at the party: one row in front of me, far enough to the right that I could see most of his face when the screen lit up. In the dark, I had finally been safe to stare at him as much as I wanted to.

I can't think about it now. He can't pop up now, in front of them. In front of Ben. I zap his seat away, just in case.

"Ellie? Are you getting it?" Maya asks.

I shake my head. "Sorry, guys. It's a lot."

"You can just put up whatever you remember," Maya says. "It's cool."

Ziggy shoots a couple sparks toward the ceiling. "Yeah, do you remember any Moon Man stuff? I gotta see Moon Man."

When he says this, I do suddenly half-remember a Moon Man musical number. There were cats in astronaut costumes, I think, because I remember thinking a lot about how Floyd has two cats at home, and then wondering if he misses them, and if he takes care of them well, and whether they sleep in his bed and what that must be like.

"Yeah, I remember some Moon Man stuff," I say. I close my eyes.

When I open them, the screen is full of tap-dancing cats, all meowing in unison, skittering around a platform where a moon-headed knight is wielding a longsword. It's turning out far creepier than the real version of *The Awesomenautical Adventure*. I start throwing in anything I can remember. The violins. The trumpets. The cat tap shoes. I try to make up lyrics to the song they're singing, but they all come out as mumbles. I throw in some acrobats. I don't know. It's an insane cacophony, but I can't exactly trust my subconscious to take over so I just grip my seat with both hands and try to focus. I hear Maya snort beside me.

Ben's nails splay out over my shoulder again. "This is so beautiful," he whispers. "So, about that thing I wanted to tell you."

"What?"

"I realized it while I was on the Golden Gate Bridge."

"What, Ben? What?"

"Well...I love you?"

The cats stop. I feel something sharp in the space around my heart. My mind starts unwinding. I feel the dollar in Ben's wallet disappear. I feel the floor roll like a tidal wave.

I try to get the cats moving again, but the screen flickers with an image of the Cineplex theater lobby. Three Floyds are wearing space suits, without helmets. I try to zap in some Kaylas around him and blame it on a memory glitch, but the Floyds quickly outnumber the Kaylas and soon even the Kaylas are wearing seashell necklaces.

I feel Ben's hand leave my shoulder.

"How's it going, Ellie?" a 20-foot-tall Floyd asks from the screen, staring directly out at us. The background fades away behind him. I squeeze my eyes shut but the screen won't darken.

"Great!" my voice answers, thundering from the speakers around us. "Ellie?" Ben says.

There's a sudden creaking above, and then it starts.

Seashells are pouring from the rafters.

Ziggy yells and Maya jumps out of her seat. The giant Floyd keeps speaking but I can't hear him over the crashing sounds as more and more seashells pile around the theater. I try to tear the movie screen down, but Floyd's voice keeps pounding through the walls. I can't make out a single word, but I still recognize the conversation. The conversation I've run over in my head so many times. The Ticket Booth Fantasy.

Maya snaps a huge beach umbrella over our heads, and Ziggy starts shooting bright green sparks at the stray seashells as they bounce off. The shells stop just as Floyd says, "Meet me in the ticket booth tonight."

The speakers burst.

"Ellie, be careful!" Maya shrieks, dodging shrapnel. But I know the speakers aren't my fault.

"It wasn't her."

Ben's voice is cold. I touch his arm but he yanks it away.

"Ben?" I say. He won't look at me. "Ben, it's just a dream."

Ziggy steps between us and he's trying to catch his breath. "Dude. Man-to-man for a second. Listen. It's obviously just a dream. We all have weird stuff like that in our dreams," he says.

"Ben," I say again, but he's still staring past me. He's shaking, hard. "Ben, listen to me, I need you to believe what I'm saying."

He still won't look at me.

I clear my throat. "It's just because I miss you-"

"So you had to cheat on me? You miss me so you had to cheat on me? That's what you need me to believe?" He's looking at me now.

The piles of shells around us part suddenly. That wasn't me, either. Ben gets up and walks out of the theater with such purpose that it feels like he's running. He's headed for the Dream Exit Point. He's going to wake up.

"Ben! Come back!" I try to yell, but my voice comes out as a whisper. I hiss and try to scream through it, but my throat holds tight. That happens in my normal dreams, too. I know there's no fighting it. I chase him into the hallway.

He goes for the handle of the ticket booth door, but I lock it.

"Can we at least talk about this? Turn around!" I rasp, choking now.

He yanks on the door, but it won't budge. It's so hard to breathe and I'm losing focus and I can see the hinges of the ticket booth door twisting and melting. He slams a fist against the door, hard. I can feel it.

I need more time. I reach out and freeze him with his fist still in the air. I wait until I can catch my breath.

"Listen to me!" I yell, my voice finally breaking through.

I turn him towards me, I stand right in front of him, and I keep him frozen.

"It's just a dream, and it's just a stupid crush. I didn't cheat. He barely knows who I am. He has a girlfriend. He's super old. It's not anything," I say, and it feels like I'm lying even though I'm not.

He blinks and then points his gaze down at the floor. Seashells have gathered around my feet.

I don't move. I don't look.

A cold rage pumps through Ben's eyes, and then suddenly, somehow, he's gone. He hasn't gone out the exit point. How can he be gone?

I only have a second to think about it before the pain hits, all at once. It feels like I'm being unzipped. My bones smash together. I scream. My heart is thrashing in my chest and I feel myself sitting straight up, even though I'm still standing.

For a few seconds I see an unfamiliar room. There are photos of Ben's cousins on the bright blue walls. I can see dark water through the window. Then, with a blinding burst of light, I'm back in the theater. The afterimage of the blue room is burned firmly in my eyes. I feel like I'm standing and sitting at the same time. I feel Ben's quilt on top of me, scratching my skin. I feel him wondering if he's awake. Our thoughts feel like they've been braided together.

"What the hell happened?" Ziggy gasps. I squint and see him stumbling into the lobby, holding Maya up.

"Ellie, what happened?" Maya asks, doubled over in pain, her voice weak. "I'm so dizzy."

I step toward them and the seashells clatter against my shoes. "Ben ripped himself out of the Meet. I don't know how. He didn't go through the Exit Point," I say. My voice feels far away. I can still see the blue room. "I don't know how he left."

"Man, I gotta wake up and vomit," Ziggy says, and stumbles with Maya towards the ticket booth door. "I'm sorry, Ellie."

Maya grabs the handle. She turns to look at me. "Are you coming?"

"In a minute," I say. I unlock the door for them.

Once they're gone, I feel a little less dizzy. I stagger back into the theater and sit in the back row. Slowly, the image of Ben's room fades. I feel most of his presence leave my body. Not all.

I zap the piles of shells away. I breathe. I sit. Then I turn to the empty seat next to me.

I start filling in the basic shapes, then move onto the smaller details and shadows. It feels like I'm painting. I fill in a soft scent of sandalwood and worn leather, and I leave the seashell necklace for last. When I make him smile, it feels so real that I smile, too. It feels so, so real.

"Meet me in the ticket booth tonight, beautiful Ellie," Floyd says.

"I'll be there," I say, and when he reaches out to take my hand, his fingers pass straight through me like a warm breeze.



LAST ONES OUT

by: Tamsin Bloom

There was a new player in the Departureton Village Square when Mica stepped out of Delphyra's Arcanial Armory. It was the second-to-last stop on her daily rounds through the shops and stands, but she paused before proceeding on to the bank to stash her newly acquired Void Gems and Fairy's Favor Emblems with the collection she'd gained in these daily afterschool rounds during her years prior. The end of her ritual could wait. Mica would recognize anyone who still played this game, and a new face was an event worth relishing on such a decrepit, dying platform, the new blood well-worth savoring. She opened the chat.

* * *

> hello! are you new?

No <

> oh

> i havent seen you around!

I don't typically come through this area <

> so why are you here?

I found a way out <

* * *

There was a crack in the wall at the edge of the world. That was what Alison told her as they galloped through the Southeastern Hinterlands, Alison being the name the new player had given under questioning, along with her grade (one above Mica's) and her favorite part of the game (exploring). The textures of grassy plains gave way to speckles then copses of trees until their avatars, *Transformed* into the true natures their human defaults belied (Rainbow Tiger for Mica and Crystal Colt for Alison,) reached the edge of the Saffryine Forest whereupon the Elfin Caravan waited to bear them onwards.

There was a crack in the wall at the edge of the world. You weren't supposed to pass through it. That was part of the contract for a game like this, not the *Terms & Conditions*TM but the cost of doing business, going something like: we the developers are mortal creators, we have finite time and little

money, so don't press too hard on the gaps in the story, the seams in the textures, everything we never got to finish, just play along with what we've made and we'll give you something to play. Something to believe in.

Without that contract years of work became shapes and simulacra on the screen. But Mica had seen everything the game had to offer within those bounds, and nothing new was coming. She had never destroyed anything she loved before, so the possibility didn't scare her. She Transformed back into her avatar, clad in resplendent Amaranthine Armor, and watched as Alison's, in a simple Dress of Wight, pressed itself firmly against an unbroken, impassable wall of trees and shadow, lifeless as a mural, working itself back and forth with delicate keyboard strokes until two polygons found purchase and Alison was no more.

Mica was a fast learner. And she didn't like being alone. Her avatar followed close behind.

The screen in front of Mica shattered into color and then went black. She was worried the game had crashed until she looked closer and saw the darkness was alive, undulating and shot through with static, artifacted colors and far away features. Everything was still and alive as her hand found its way back to the mouse. As it moved over the neoprene it spun the squirming void and there was her character, locked in the motion of falling, arms wheeling, with an angle on the waking world the awake would never see: the reverse of the ground, the insides of empty unenterable buildings, meshed and overlapping in defiance of scale and architectural principle, flickering and uneasy and angry, embarrassed to be seen this way and growing pale and small as the gravity well of unintended consequences swallowed Mica down and down and down.

And below her as she turned was the growing bright speck that was she who'd heralded her here, beckoning like a drowned angel from below, ringed in the astigmatic glow of light on dark. She was the embodiment of the way out she'd promised. Mica pushed her face up to the screen and saw her reflection superimposed therein, and for a while there was nothing but she and her and their characters and the eternal homeostatic embrace suspended around them in unbroken amniotic silence.

Then there were footsteps on the stairs. Mica jolted from her reverie. She knew what would happen if He caught her up past her bedtime. She would rather it not happen. The computer was off before she could say goodbye.

At school the next day Mica used every gap in her schedule to steal away to inconspicuous corners with her school-apportioned laptop, a cheap plasticky locked-down thing with every subroutine approved by the county. Though she searched, it held no way back to the land where she was a

powerful bounding beast nor any way to its quieting forums; no way to call out to her friend or scroll through long threads in search of anyone who'd seen what they had, who knew what the world looked like in reverse.

Instead, she spent her time gazing at an impassive screen, wishing she could break something again.

* * *

- > its weird
- > but in a pretty way
- > you know
- > like its all the same buildings and zones
- > but theyre messed up
- > and in a different order
- > and when im in it its so big
- > and even flying itd be
- > hours to get across
- > but it all fits on one screen now

It makes it manageable <

- > i never realized how the world is
- > a bowl
- > and it holds you
- > and the walls rise up
- > but down here
- > it curves away
- > and it cant hold me
- > down here
- > or maybe up here?
- > maybe were rising
- > or its falling
- > instead of us

We're flying <

- > yeah!
- > i think so too
- > and maybe itll reach the bottom

> but well never reach the top

We're free <

> yeah

> i never wouldve thought id like being free

> i had so much fun in there

> but

> now im having trouble remembering what was so fun

> its so small

> what was i doing in there?

Waiting <

> for what?

Until you were ready <

So was I <

> huh?

I'm sorry <

* * *

From downstairs the sound of metal on metal, wood on wood. Her mother's voice. Then His. Loud. Home early, for a school night. He usually stayed out longer after work. Mica looked to the window. Dark. Too late. She'd made a mistake. She had to hurry. Yelling from downstairs. Worse tonight. She flipped the lamplight off. The only light left was the glowing darkness in front of her. Her screen was empty now. No Alison. But still too bright. She pressed the monitor dead and the void turned pallid. Would have to leave the rest on. Would have to hope its whirring stayed silent. Would have to hope she was quiet enough.

She waited for the noise from below to grow sharp. She slipped into bed just before it bottomed out silent. Silent was bad. Silent was better. If she could not hear Him then He was not here.

Mica stayed quiet. She did not move. She strained to hear but did not. She stayed alert. She stayed alert. She faltered.

She fell asleep.

When she awoke it was darker. Noise outside. Could only be Him. Mica closed her eyes. She'd failed. Or it would always have gone this way.

She heard her door open and couldn't help but peek. The soft insistent glow of torchlight filled the room, red tinged mottled gray as it bounced off the stone walls and stone floors and through it stepped

His unmistakable silhouette: the King of Daemonia, He who stood in opposition to the life and love of the forests and land, He whose castle stood dead centre of the realm and whose oppressive spires pierced the horizon view from all zones from the Storming Vale to the cliffs of Obstaffare, whose minions spread blight and the law of their god, the NecroSoul.

Mica gripped the crystal manifestation of her Spirit Beast to initiate her Transformation but none occurred. Of course it didn't, how could she be so stupid, everyone knew the Castle of Bygones sealed the souls of any Animal Scouts imprisoned therein, better to keep captive the ones who'd disobeyed the King's law. And though Mica had committed no wrong she knew her existence to be a sin in His eyes and so she braced herself to once again do battle.

Remember! chirped the Tutorial Fairy, sprouting from the corner of the screen, *Don't fight it! It will only hurt worse if you fight it.*

A useless reminder of something Mica had learned too many times already. It was just like the raid on the pirate's den in Pinksalt Port: the one where you equipped your Orb of Disguise and you hid in plain view and you couldn't move until they left so you took your hands off the keyboard and you waited for them to leave and waited for them to leave and waited for them to leave and waited for them to leave and the right side of her screen flashed red with each attack and she watched her life bar drop with a notification under it saying her cherished Amaranthine Armor had run out of durability and was thus unequipped, leaving her avatar in the barest clothes of its default state.

Another box of of dialogue: *Remember! If you make a sound someone might hear. And you wouldn't want that-* and so Mica bit her tongue and tasted blood instead of crying and instead she imagined the scene that would come after she'd conquered the Trial of Endurance where the castle would crumble and the land would emerge from the clutches of tyranny and all the cute creatures the budget could bear would emerge like spring and she'd be taken to the centre of the forest village built atop woven treetops and her screen would be deluged with flowers in soft pastels and her speakers would blast a garbled sound that almost sounded like cheering.

An impact jolted Mica's head to the side and there beyond the King's putrid form stood the hazy human avatar of Alison. Mica wondered why she was here. This was supposed to be a solo fight. When she looked closer it looked like Alison was mouthing something.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

But if there was sound produced it was drowned in speaker static, and if more words were to follow they were awash in a fecund green because the battle was won and the land was free and its creatures were adorning Mica in wreaths and medallions and there was nothing left in all the world to do but bask in the cries of adulation that grew louder and louder into screams as every living thing threw itself atop her and crushed her flat and her vision cut black as everything in her broke under the weight of their love their love their love their love their love their love their love their love their love.

* * *

Mica was back in her empty room. She lay still. Then wiped her tears. Then found where her clothes had fallen and redressed herself. Her ears were ringing but under the tinnitus was the sea-sound of static, the speakers on her desk turned down near silent but still beckoning.

She turned the monitor back on and again was the void, flecked with motion, lines of unused geometry and untrimmed edges, stars and discard. Cold comfort. It wanted to be louder. Mica leaned against the volume dial and eased it higher. She wanted to hear it. She didn't like being alone.

"I've found another way out," it said, voice crushed and warm with algorithmic sincerity.

Mica wanted to say that it didn't have to be sorry. It wasn't its fault.

"Would you like to come with me?" it asked.

Mica looked down at her hands. They felt bare.

"Yes."

The static sound lost its coherence then swelled, and the humming vacuum on the screen jerked and folded in on itself, pattern sliding across pattern finding form in interference. Noise grabbed against noise and pulled closer towards the screen. It found a gap between plastic and plasma screen and dripped through, effervescent oil running down in streaks and dripping onto the desk, spilling forwards. The screen bulged in the middle and reached out towards Mica like a cat pawing at a curtain. An arm. The sleeve of a dress. The outline of a face. It swelled. It brought its eyes to Mica's. She hadn't noticed it in the graphics of an outdated game, but this close Mica could tell that the face looked just like her own.

The form within did not emerge from the static, it emerged static and all, like a fetus still trapped in its sac, flowing forwards onto and over Mica, wrapping around then flopping wetly to the floor. It doubled in on itself and slithered away on waves of limbs: up, around, and out the door. The trail it left singed the ground and when Mica ran her finger across the residue it burned, not like fire but like a fork in a socket, like being vibrated apart. Below her decohering fingertip in the voidlight she could see the rest of her hand coated in blood, both of them dripping with it. She found more spilled across the hallway

outside when she followed the negative space. She wondered whose it could be. On her way down the stairs she stepped over another unrecognizable body. She couldn't remember if anyone else lived here.

When Mica exited through the back of the house it triggered spotlights on the yard, and on its edge where it gave way to trees was Alison, waiting, dress blinding in the overpowering light. Mica watched her step forward and find purchase where there should have been no purchase and disappear just as she'd promised. There was a wall at the edge of the world, nearer than Mica could ever have dreamed, and it was broken. And she could break it still.

Mica stepped forwards, dew stinging her blistering feet, eyes fuzzing over with sparks in the harsh contrast and windchill. There was a boundless world on the other side of this finite space, and in it was someone waiting for her. Her hand reached out and hit air. Then tree. Then it passed into something that was neither. It was warm. She stepped in.



What to Do with Something *You Can't Hold by Yourself*

by: A.S. King

It's still a really foreign sentence to say. "My daughter Gracie died six years ago." Like—that's impossible, right? There's no way I'm still breathing or moving or driving or writing on this computer—there's no way I am still alive and she is not. It feels all wrong. It's no longer a horror story, though the first years were. Now it's something else. A resilience story. The comeback. The bounce. It's what happens after.

She'll be 22 in November, but she won't be here to celebrate it. It's a very weird relationship we have—I buy her presents and she can't receive them. You don't understand it unless you do, and I'm not here to foist my weird spirituality on anyone. But she's with me every day, that I know, and I'm with her.

Gracie was one of the most badass humans ever. She loved with wild abandon. She cared about everyone intensely. She was a great friend, a great daughter, a great sister, a jazz prodigy on the alto saxophone, a marching band queen, a great artist, and even a great writer, though she wouldn't admit it. One time in tenth grade, she had an assignment to write an essay; she wrote a poem instead and it was as good as any I'd ever read. She was a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and very proud of it. She was advocacy and empathy. She struggled for her art. Her surrealist painting "Our Blood Is in the Water" hangs on my study wall as a reminder of what's in my glass. She was talent and love. So much love, she couldn't contain it for herself. Sometimes that's how the world is—those who are so loveable can't see themselves quite right. She fought hard against depression and other diagnoses, but she did not win.

Friends, it's impossible to tell you how the world treats families who lose people to suicide and how it feels to face the depths of ignorance and judgement—that's where the horror compounds. If I can ask anything of you, it's: stop asking us why, stop making wild guesses, stop the whispers, the avoidance, and try to understand the actual battle. When you lose a person to suicide, your hearing becomes

superhuman. We know what you say. And we are sorry for your confusion, but really, this happens every day. There are hundreds of millions of us who lost family members, friends, and classmates. You treat it like a crime because you were taught all wrong / you weren't taught at all / this world made you think this was preventable with a quick chat on a hotline. You have no idea. I'm sorry your educators dodged the subject.

If you know me, you know I don't dodge subjects in my writing or in my life.

I dive right in.

My first dive after Gracie died was into suicide education, to help educate people who need it, which is everybody. My next dive was running suicide loss survivor groups in my nearest city, which has saved my ass week after week. But I had a bigger dive in me.

Last year, on the fifth anniversary of Gracie's death, her brother and I launched a nonprofit. Gracie's House (www.gracieshouse.com) is a 501(c)(3) and we're about to do some great work making safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth in rural areas.

Our work is threefold:

1. Give grants to LGBTQ+ organizations in rural areas to help open and maintain safe spaces for LGBTQ+ kids, their families, and found families.
2. Run PRIDE Camp, an annual summer camp for LGBTQ+ youth in rural Pennsylvania, as well as FOUND family camps and adult camps over weekends in fall and spring.
3. Offer arts initiatives in pop-up safe spaces, including artists-in-residence, slam poetry nights, and music performances.

We can't wait to get started and thank you to everyone who has donated or spread the word. And thank you to Emily and David who asked me to write about Gracie's House for their final issue of *The Quiet Ones* together.

This is a literary mag that kept a lot of people creating and inspired more creation. Art is a sort of reciprocal healing, and running a lit mag is a beautiful way to be part of that exchange. For Emily, it's hard to say goodbye to something you love, but it's also harder to keep doing it when your life has asked you to move on to different things. What matters is: you dive. You keep diving. You keep creating, and you keep honoring those who struggled for art, yourself included, and you make more art.

That's the trick, isn't it? To keep making art and more art and more art until I am dead.

Yes, I'm talking about death again.

This is now my life, talking about death. Until I die, I will talk about death because I am leading by example. They say the only thing you can't avoid is death and taxes. Not true. You can choose not to pay your taxes. (Ask the billionaires!) But death—it's the only promise anyone keeps.

Darkness is part of the light. You can't have one without the other. We live in a shadow world filled with energy we don't understand.

We live in a culture that continually

bends us to its will. I am a surrealist. Not by choice, but by circumstance. Surrealism was baked in an oven of shock and horror, war and tragedy. Those of us who have been through trauma know the near-psychedelic experience of shock. The stretching of time when PTSD rules the clock. The smell of fear. The pull of instinct. We know there is more to life than what we can see. Death and surrealism have a lot in common. Death keeps happening and surrealism keeps helping people understand that life is fucked up.

My body always wrote surreal things because it was in a state of shock pretty much all the time—this is why I started writing novels in 1994. I lived inside a war that was supposed to be a marriage. I didn't know how to make it stop. I didn't know how to walk away. No one tells you the truth about that stuff either. More judgement. More superhuman hearing. More wrong questions. *Why doesn't she leave?* Here's my answer: *If you're so smart, why don't you make him stop?*

In 2020, I walked my son and I toward the light. Like any good surrealist, I had no idea where the path would lead. I simply walked and did what came to me. Automatism in life, automatism in deed. In word. I started writing a novel about women shuttled around in pneumatic tubes. A year later, I became a



A.S. King and her daughter, Gracie.

doctoral candidate and started writing my dissertation. Then came Gracie's House. And here I am, a juggler. Doing all three at the same time.

Pick the Lock released in September, part surreal, part horror, part comedy just like life. The dissertation is about trauma and surrealism and is getting there. And Gracie's House, made with love and hope, is starting its first camp in July 2025. All three balls in the air, the light that came from the darkness. I am Gracie's hands now, because she can't use hers anymore. We are all Gracie's hands now. This is what to do with something you can't hold by yourself.

We share our story. We acknowledge the war. We opt for peace. We share our love for those no longer here by saying their name. We do impossible things every single day.

We make more art.

We dive in.



Find more at www.gracieshouse.com. Donate today and spread the word.

REDUCTION

by: Alexis Powell

Histic Cemetery is the most beautiful during the beginning of winter. Trees are newly barren, and their fallen leaves speckle the winding pathways. Light snow dusts the tombstones as a solitary deer nibbles away at the dying grass.

You pass beneath the stone arch marking the cemetery entrance and head up the hill with flowers for your beloved's grave caressed in the crook of your arm. It isn't until the graveyard has successfully lulled you into a state of serenity with its silence that you chance upon the body.

Someone or something exhumed a corpse and left it behind to lay three feet away from the open maw of its grave. The neck is a fresh, angry wound from where a serrated item or a saw-toothed set of jaws shredded through the soft flesh.

And the head is missing.

Time slows as you stand rooted in place, spellbound by the weeping, red O of the neck. Your mind tells you it's anything except for what you're seeing because this only happens in horror movies. It doesn't happen in *real* life. It wouldn't ever happen to you. So perhaps it is a mannequin? Yes, it's just a prank local teenagers staged.

But the way the blood pools, giving off a familiar, poignant, coppery stench is far too real. You know this from the time you worked as an assistant to a body broker dismembering cadavers donated to science. After you two spent hours cutting, hacking, and sawing to reduce a body into parts, you packaged the soft flesh of a foot, an arm, or a torso in multiple layers of doggy pee pads to soak up the excess blood before vigorously taping the bits, placing them into a cooler, and shipping them off to research labs all over the country.

When you've been that close to death, you don't forget what it's like. You remember the smell of blood as it splashed across your goggles and the feeling of sinew as it slipped between your fingers.

One of the worst parts about remembrance is the nightmares. Images you can't escape. They're imprinted on your mind and branded onto the back of your eyelids. Even after the hundredth time of doing it all, you never stopped being afraid.

The flowers you picked now lie abandoned in the dirty snow. You've yet to notice or care because truth has begun to fester in your mind and swallow the importance of all else. You concede because it's unbearable to pretend any longer. The body is real and you're a witness to something horrific.

So, you open your mouth, fill your lungs, and shatter the silence.



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THE THREE-EYED TREE

by: Jay Whistler

The first time I saw the Three-Eyed Tree, I screamed.

My family had just arrived at our vacation rental, a “rustic retreat tucked away from it all,” which is web-speak for “hasn’t been maintained and has no cell service or Wi-Fi.” In that regard, it did not disappoint.

After several hours on the road, we found the two-mile gravel drive. The thick forest blocked the sun to make it feel like dusk, though it was only late afternoon. At the cabin, the shadows intensified the dingy brown paint, sagging front porch, and grimy double-hung windows set like eyes on either side of the front door.

Mom carried in groceries and our drive-through dinner while Dad, my two younger brothers, and I formed a human conveyor belt to unload duffles, hiking boots, and swim bags. It didn’t take long to pile everything onto the porch next to the disintegrating wicker rocker that was probably white at one point but had decayed to resemble the bottom of my brothers’ socks, even after a wash.

Task complete, we left to choose our rooms. There was a bunk room (obviously the boys’), a primary bedroom (Mom and Dad), and up steep rickety stairs, a meager attic room with a rusty metal twin bed, wobbly nightstand, bare-bulbed lamp, and all the charm of a prison cell. Lucky me.

The single window faced west, so theoretically air could occasionally flow through. When I opened the moth-eaten curtains, that’s when I screamed.

The family came running, which happens when you are fresh out of a thirty-day involuntary psychiatric hold. Even a loud sneeze triggers panic.

“Lucy?” My dad barged in ready to tackle a bear, a real possibility in this part of Michigan.

Mom was immediately in front of my face, her hands on either side. “What is it? What’s wrong?” The fear in her eyes cut through me like a villain’s knife in a slasher movie. Deep guilt gnawed at my gut. I’d put my family through so much that they didn’t deserve.

“Sorry,” I said, embarrassed more than apologetic, gently removing Mom’s hands from my cheeks. “The tree startled me.”

I gestured to the knothole of a forty-foot oak directly outside the window, yawning like a massive maw, charred inside as if it swallowed all the light in the forest. Above the mouth were three “eyes,” smaller knots, not hollow, more like closed. No, not closed—blinded, shuttered, veiled.

The top of the tree, right above the three eyes, was gone, only a jagged singed edge remaining, probably the victim of lightning. Splintered wood mimicked spiky hair. On either side of the main trunk, large limbs soared, leaves casting shadows on the house as the sun set behind the tree. The entire package had the effect of a face. A three-eyed, blind, howling face.

“Chill out, Luce,” Liam said. My brothers, only eleven and twelve, don’t understand how anxiety robs you of all chill.

Leo, the youngest, whispered under his breath, “Loony Lucy strikes again.” Liam failed to stifle his chuckle. Realizing there was no emergency, they both slouched against the door jamb as if disappointed that I was not having another breakdown.

“We do not say loony in this house,” Mom said. “And your sister is fine.”

Yeah, sure. Fine. Everything’s fine.

Mom hesitated, but apparently satisfied that I wasn’t in imminent danger, she headed downstairs and called out from the staircase, “Wash up. Dinner in fifteen.”

* * *

Now unpacked, I wait for dinner. Why does the tree unsettle me? My symptoms have been mild, and Mom doles out meds on schedule.

Maybe it’s the new environment. Dr. Stoker, my psychiatrist, explained that sometimes going home leads to symptoms returning. She probably meant the home environment needs adjustment. But Mom took it to mean a change of scenery, though no Wi-Fi means no sessions with my new therapist.

Without my routine, without my therapy, I’ve got to find a way to show my family I’m okay. No more freaking out about a tree, even if we’re staying in a cabin that’s straight out of a horror movie. I am okay. I. Am. Normal.

But am I? As I stare at the three-eyed tree, a low-pitched hum drifts across the air to my window, as if the tree is sending me a message. I yank the dusty curtains closed and head downstairs.

Whatever the message, I don’t want to hear it.

* * *

Dinner is a typical family affair. Liam and Leo bicker over who got the bigger piece of takeout chicken, I pick at plastic-flavored mac-and-cheese, everyone ignores the salad, and my parents make sure I don't collapse into another breakdown, pretending they're not eyeballing me.

But I feel it, the way my neck tingles as if the wind has blown a tiny feather across the nape. I always know when they are watching me.

Dad gets up to put dishes on the counter. "Great dinner, Linda."

Yes, all our names start with L, and yes, I hate it. I wonder if people compare us to that creepy family with 27 kids or whatever, all with the same first initial, and then a couple of them turned out to be bank robbers or drug dealers or something. No one in my family is a drug dealer (that I know of), but eventually Leo and Liam will raise holy hell, I'm sure. They're only eleven and twelve, after all. Plenty of time to become criminals.

* * *

After dinner, Leo whines about having no internet for online gaming. Liam mopes about the lack of Netflix. Mom douses furniture with Lysol, then brings out the Uno deck, urging us all to play. As usual, Liam cheats, and as usual, Mom and Dad pretend otherwise.

At bedtime, Mom follows me upstairs with a glass of water and my meds, which I dutifully swallow. She kisses my cheek but lingers. I may be five years older than Liam, but she treats me as if I am younger than the boys.

When she leaves, I work up a sweat pulling on a t-shirt and boxers. Craving airflow, I reach for the curtain but stop myself. If they are open, the tree can watch me sleep. Prickles on my scalp spread to the soles of my feet. I can outlast the stuffiness.

Thirty minutes later, sweat pooling between my breasts, in the crooks of my elbows, and behind my knees, the heat wins. Let the stupid tree watch me.

The yellow light from my parents' bedroom below bathes the tree's face in a ghostly glow. The convex knots-slash-eyes shine as if they can scan my face. I scramble into bed, my spine to the window.

No good. Everyone knows that monsters attack from behind, so I flip over to monitor the monstrosity, willing it not to blink.

As a kid, I could never sleep with my back facing the closet or the bedroom door. No matter the weather, I bundled up under a sheet at a minimum, with no limbs hanging over the edge of the mattress so ogres couldn't drag me into their lair. It was as if cloth made a forcefield against evil.

I am not that little girl anymore. At least according to Dr. Stoker. Seventeen is too old to see demons behind every corner. But I know what I saw the night I was admitted, and for weeks before. I know what made my parents agree with the ER attending that I needed a psych hold "for my own safety." I know it was all real. And I know you sometimes have to tell people what they want to hear.

Len and Linda finally kill the light, plunging the tree into darkness at last. Though faint, a blessed breeze floats in the window, carrying the scent of woody pine. Maybe I can finally sleep. But a little voice tells me I need to keep watch.

With a new moon in the sky and no ambient light outside, the tree's eyes can't gaze into my room, thank goodness. But I can't keep tabs on it, either. So I have to be on guard, have to stay awake.

The moment I'm about to doze off, it happens.

Something in the dark whispers into my ear, its warm breath caressing my cheek.

Welcome home, Lucy...

It's just a tree it's just a tree it's just a tree.

* * *

In the morning, I rise before my brothers, take my meds, and help Mom with breakfast. By the time the cretins stumble in, we've stacked the table with pancakes and bacon. Without an acknowledgment that anyone else is in the room, they shovel down food like a pair of lost hikers after three days with no grub.

"Good morning to you, too," Mom tries. "I slept great, thanks. And eat at the table, please. You aren't animals."

I beg to differ.

They briefly look up like they are surprised the food didn't appear by magic and then plop down at the rustic pine table, with its permanent coating of grease, food crumbs, and botulism. I skip breakfast.

"Speaking of sleep, I tossed and turned all night," I tell Mom as she makes a plate for Dad, who is on the front porch organizing gear and a cooler for a day on the lakeshore. "I can stay here and have dinner ready when you get back."

What Mom says, as she carries Dad's plate to him: "Nap on the beach with the family. It'll be fun!"

What she means: *If you're alone, you're not safe.*

So much for a day without *Rick and Morty*.

* * *

Near the beach trail behind the house, I spy something in the grass near the Three-Eyed Tree. I let the others walk ahead as I investigate, like an itch I can't ignore.

It's a black squirrel, curled in on itself like a comma, the oddly reddish tail pointing straight down. Dead. Maybe it fell off a branch? I force myself not to react. I can't show my family I'm okay if I come unglued over a dead animal. And Liam will taunt me all day if he sees a speck of vulnerability.

Even though I don't want to, I arc my neck to gaze up. The face is impassive in daylight, but the limbs on either side wave down at me. The rustle of wind through the branches whispers over and over.

I knew you would come...

I tear along the path to catch up to my family, gulping lungs full of air.

"You look like someone just walked over your grave," Mom says.

Not the right day to pack Stephen King for the beach.

* * *

When we trudge back from the beach around dinner time, the first thing I do is check for the squirrel.

It's gone.

Shitshitshitshit!

Stop panicking, Lucy. Some scavenger took it, that's all. What else makes sense, that the tree fiend scooped up a dead rodent and crammed the critter into the hollow?

A scrabbling noise above drags my attention skyward. The mouth is moving. But it can't be. No, it is. The inky onyx of the fissure undulates, reminding me of dropping food coloring into water, a sluggish billowing that tugs my shoulder blades back, the muscles rippling like the ebony of the mouth.

When the movement drifts out of the cavity, my shoulders relax.

It's only a black squirrel...with a reddish tail.

* * *

Memories of the no-longer-dead squirrel destroys my appetite, but skipping dinner and hiding in my room isn't an option, so I nibble on my veggie burger and move red-skin potato salad around my plate.

Afterward, I debate whether to stay downstairs with the family and play our Betrayal at House on the Hill board game or feign exhaustion from the beach and read in bed. With Stephen King on the nightstand and The Dementor outside, I choose the board game, Liam's favorite.

During the game, he keeps side-eyeing me, as if he is waiting for something. Maybe he expects me to mention the tree again? I'm determined to show him, and the whole family, that I am normal, whatever normal means. And I do feel that way, despite what happened with the squirrel today.

Finally, the game ends and everyone guesses I'm the traitor, but they're wrong. Liam is scary-good at lying. Like I said, hoodlum in training. Mom claps her hands and says, "Tomorrow is the lighthouse circle tour, so off to bed." She shoos the boys upstairs. "We leave at nine sharp."

In my stuffy attic room, I keep the curtains closed for now and tuck the e-reader in the nightstand drawer. Not the best reading material after seeing a rodent resurrection today. No cell signal or Wi-Fi equals no alternative reading material.

The "dead" squirrel image won't leave my head, the way the breeze fluttered through the tail fur, how the reincarnated animal's eyes shimmered like jet buttons, making me think of Other Mother from *Coraline*, still one of the most terrifying books I've ever read.

Are the hallucinations starting again? Was the squirrel truly dead? It couldn't be, because my brain is a liar. That's what the doctors say. The voices in my head aren't sending messages. Flickers of light are only reflections. Mist drifting under my bedroom door is dust. Silhouettes hovering outside my window are shadows.

I want to believe because the alternative terrifies me, and I want to prove to my parents that I'm okay. On the other hand, having a mental illness that makes me imagine things is preferable to proof of phantoms. The first can be treated. The second...let's just say reading Neil Gaiman is one thing, but living in his world is another.

These thoughts make me claustrophobic, and I need a breeze. I check behind the curtain to see if my parents have turned off their light yet. No ghostly yellow glow. I breathe a little easier now.

* * *

Lucyyyyy...

I jolt awake, facing the window. I have no idea when I fell asleep or what time it is, but the murky sky tells me it's not morning yet.

I hear it again, distant like it's outside.

Lucyyyyy...

I must be dreaming. But my fingernails gouging the flesh of my crossed arms prove otherwise. The whisper is behind me now. Was it ever outside? Is the voice human? I can't tell.

A floorboard behind me creaks, and I flip over in time to see a pale white arm slither out of my room as the door latches without a sound.

* * *

At breakfast, I glare at Liam, but he ignores me. I refuse to be intimidated by a twelve-year-old middle-school miscreant. What I hope appears like a stern grimace is probably closer to a constipated muppet.

"What's with your face?" Leo asks.

Okay, so constipated muppet.

I stack my dishes in the sink, breakfast only half eaten, and Mom hands me a glass of water with my morning dose. I toss it back like a shot of whiskey and slam the glass on the counter.

I get why she hovers. She has always watched all of us for signs that we inherited what her brother had. All the scrutiny made me question my sanity, and I believed my mother and the doctors.

When I left the hospital, they warned me that the meds don't always stop the visual or auditory hallucinations but help make them less intrusive. But the symptoms didn't disappear, and I tried to ignore them. I can't believe it took almost three months and a hospital stay to figure it out. I've always been sane. Liam was behind it all.

Up in my room, I spit out the pill.

* * *

During the lighthouse tour, lunch at the state park, and dinner back at the cabin, I don't take my eyes off the little thug. It all makes perfect sense. Liam found out about...well, let's not go into detail. But he saw an opportunity to take advantage of my trauma. So the shadows outside my window at night, the flickering lights, the disembodied murmurs, and the mist seeping under my bedroom door? Everything that made me, and my parents, believe I was "loony Lucy?" All him.

It would be simple to put some listening device in my room, maybe our old baby monitor, or the Nest cam from outside. Liam probably moved it around so the voice didn't always come from the same spot.

Leo's room is right next to mine. Easy to make a cardboard cutout on a stick, staple wispy fabric to it, and bribe Leo into waving it in front of my window.

Flickering lights? Bluetooth lightbulb.

Mist under the door? The vaporizer Mom uses for our chest colds.

* * *

Over the last few days, now that I know none of it was real and I don't need meds anymore, I've gotten good at tossing pills from my window into the gullet of the three-eyed tree. I need to be clear and stay awake to catch Liam in the act. Any time I think I've got him, there's only darkness under my creaky bed. If there's ever a job listing for psychopath-ninja, he's a shoo-in.

I'm exhausted after several nights of not sleeping, but tomorrow morning we head home after breakfast. So it all ends tonight, no matter what. Tonight, I prove that I am fine, that I was never like Uncle Ryan.

I sit in the dark, staring at the Three-Eyed Tree, but it no longer terrifies me. It's almost comforting. The murmuring leaves sigh a lullaby.

I'm here for you...

This voice is not Liam. This is the soothing sound of sanity, something my family has never given me since it all began.

Soon...very soon...

"Tonight he won't get away," I promise the tree. The leaves ripple and murmur in approval, the limbs waving at me.

The moment his warm breath skims my ear, I spin from my side and seize his arm.

But it isn't Liam.

* * *

"Leo?" For a split second, he smirks, but it must be a trick of the light. This is my innocent little brother, far enough from puberty that I still see the babyface. "What are you doing here?" I ask.

His big eyes well up until a few tears escape. He points to the door. I put my finger to my lips in a shushing gesture, then creep across the floor, hoping no boards creak. When I whip the door open, I snatch Liam's t-shirt, jerk him into the room, and turn on the lamp, the sad bulb barely illuminating anything.

"How could you make Leo a pawn in this sick game?" I say, my voice oozing with scorn.

"What game?" Liam says, pretending not to understand.

"Leo." I kneel next to him as he cowers on the floor. His hands are folded in his lap, fresh blood around the cuticles where he's been picking at them. "Whatever he's done, I know it wasn't your idea. He's been in my room the last few nights trying to scare me, right?"

He doesn't answer. Not that I expect him to.

Liam shakes his head. "It wasn't me, I swear."

I look from one to the other. Liam could always lie his way out of anything. But not this time. Leo's tears fall so rapidly that they wash away the blood specks. "Liam said he wanted to tease you because you were so afraid of that." He points out the window, then wipes his snot-covered nose on his arm, leaving a slick slug trail behind.

Liam's bewildered scowl surprises me. I know better, but it almost seems...real. That's when my parents crash through the door.

"What's happening?" Dad shouts, Mom on his heels.

"Don't tell them, Lucy," Leo whispers. "I'll be in so much trouble."

You can end it all...

"Lucy, it's not me," Liam says.

"What's not you?" Mom asks.

"Leo snuck out of our room, so I followed him—" Liam starts.

"Bullshit," I say, stopping him. "It's been you for months." I struggle to keep in the rage, wanting to strangle him.

"What's been him?" Mom is as clueless as ever.

"Your son is gaslighting me and roped your other son into helping."

"Hold on," Dad says, pretending to take control. But the train has left the station, and he's not on it.

"No one here is accusing Liam of anything. Son, it's been a stressful few weeks for your sister."

Mom clings to the life raft Dad tossed out. "I'm sure you did nothing wrong, Liam. Right, Lucy?"

I gawk at her. "Are you fucking kidding me, Linda?"

"Language," she says, like that's the takeaway here.

It won't be long now...

The message sends electric currents of courage through my spine, and I stand up taller. "It's him. Plus he hacked my socials and sent threatening messages."

"I wouldn't know how!" Liam says. "Leo's the computer geek."

Dad cuts him off. "Show me."

"Liam deleted them as soon as she read them," Leo says, finally calm enough to speak. I couldn't show them even if I still had them. No Wi-Fi.

"Why are you lying, Leo?" Liam says, his eyes glassy with unshed tears. Oh, he knows how to play this just right. I almost believe him.

"Is this true?" Dad turns to Liam.

"Len, he couldn't," Mom says. "He would never hurt a fly."

That's what they said about Norman Bates, I think. Look how that turned out.

And there it is. The malicious smirk. Only it's on Leo's face. My gut churns like the lake during a storm, gray clouds swirling in my brain. Moments ago, he sobbed in my arms, but now everything is funny?

You already know...

The tree understands. As I look at their faces, all with grooved foreheads and open mouths, the puzzle pieces form a picture. Of my brothers huddled together, with only Leo speaking, not Liam. Of Leo's bedroom next to mine, not Liam's. Of Leo the computer geek, not Liam. All this time, I was wrong. It was never Liam.

My baby brother is the sociopath.

The truth at last...

"What have you done?" Dad asks Leo.

"And you thought I was sick!" I shout at my parents.

How did they never notice? What signs did we all miss? Why did they automatically think I was the one with a mental illness? It doesn't matter anymore. My whole family has shown me that they will never be there for me. I may not be crazy, but I will always be broken to them.

It will be over soon...

A crackle of adrenalin flows from the tree and I am invincible. I charge at Leo. He struggles, but I am stronger tonight, forcing him to the open window. The limbs reach down to snatch him, plunging him into the gaping jaws, swallowing him whole.

Yessss...

My parents shriek and rush to search for my brother, but his body isn't on the ground. A gentle tug from the tree as they lean out the window and they follow their son into the void.

Without watching him leave, I know Liam is already down the steps, fleeing the tree, his wails receding as he goes.

You are safe with me...

The tree smiles, its three eyes crinkling like a grandmother asking for a hug. The limbs stretch toward the house.

Time to come home...

So I fly

into

waiting

a

r

m

s.



ECHOES

by: A.M. Strohman

Ronny pulled his battered Subaru up to the stone fountain at the center of the circular gravel drive. The mansion rose up, its facade darkened as the sun set behind it. When he was here last week to wash the windows, the drive had been littered with cars. Rolls Royces, Audis, a Bugatti. Now it was empty, the fountain dry.

He'd heard the house manager organizing the staff to decamp for the beach house. The house would be empty for a week. He'd decided then to come back. He delayed night after night, doubting his plan. Tonight, he'd run out of nights. He'd left his poodle, Barfy, watching a long YouTube video of Jetsons episodes.

Now, he collected the bottle of whiskey, tumbler, and cloth napkin from the passenger's seat, and wished he brought Barfy with him.

He stepped around the corner of the mansion into the backyard. The yard was large, unfenced, empty, and it unfurled into a dense wood. The watercolor sky shone through the tops of the trees, their branches and twigs reaching long fingers upward, as if gripping the ether. The closest trees had leaves, but as the forest deepened, the trees got taller, their branches bare, as if the warmth of summer had already given way to the bright fall colors, then desiccated leaves. A cricket whirred. A dog barked once, sharp and loud.

He turned toward the house. No lights in the spotless windows, or on the wide veranda. Not even motion sensor floodlights catching his presence. He felt invisible.

He took the cover off a veranda chair, and another off a low table. He spread the napkin and positioned the whiskey and glass just so. He sat down and surveyed the yard. When he had washed the windows of his first mansion—he had worked his way up from nice houses to very nice houses to estates, word of mouth about his professionalism and skills spreading quickly—he had wondered what it would be like to own one. Now, as he poured himself a drink, he pretended the veranda, the yard, the forest, even the darkening sky were all his.

Ronny watched as the colors faded, and the crooked branches blended into the night sky. If anyone comes, he thought, I'll tell them I came for a barbecue, but I got the date wrong.

* * *

Marjorie held a leash as she exited the woods. "Help," she called, her voice strangled. "Help."

A light clicked on and pointed toward her, and she was blinded. She held her arm up to protect her eyes. She must look a sight, straggly gray hair, ripped clothes, no shoes.

"What's wrong?" a man called out. "Who are you?"

Who am I? she thought. Who *am* I? "My dog ran away, in the woods. I haven't been able to find him. Please help me." She didn't remember this house, these woods, anything about how she had gotten here. All she had for certain was the leash and a warm feeling in the center of her chest when she pictured her dog, a long, lean mutt.

Another bark.

"There! Do you hear him? I keep hearing him, but every time I follow his bark, it echoes around me and I don't know which way to go." Marjorie held the leash out in her left hand.

The man made his way down from the veranda, the light still interrogating her. "I'm just here for the barbecue," he said, even though there was no barbecue.

"Me too," she said. "But my dog ran away, in the woods. I haven't been able to find him. Please help me."

The cricket song whirred in her ears. This was all so confusing. She took a step toward the man. Then another. "I can't see you," she said. "Your light's in my eyes."

She stepped toward him, but his light didn't waver. She closed the distance between them, shading her eyes all the while, then put her right hand over his light. Her hand glowed, translucent, as if she were a ghost.

* * *

"I can't help you," Ronny said.

"Please," the woman said, holding out the leash. Her hand still glowed with the light of his phone, and her eyes protruded, dark circles etched under them.

The dog barked again. Then again. Then again. Maybe it was another dog, and another. The barks became deafening, then turned to baying, their calls echoing through the woods, filling the wide yard with yowls. The woman covered her ears, her mouth a wide O. She shrunk from his light.

"What's the dog's name?" he asked.

She blinked up at him. "Barfy. I know it's a strange name, but I've always called him Barfy."

He dropped his phone, the light glancing up at the house, then illuminating his face from below. He pictured his own Barfy, lost, alone, shivering.

He raised his hands to his mouth. "Barfy," he yelled. "Barfy!" He howled, his voice setting off another cascade of baying.

* * *

The man looked haunted, lit from below, and Marjorie shrunk back even further. He sounded just like her Barfy when he howled, the sound forced out from deep inside. She felt the leather of the leash in her hand.

Her Barfy was probably long gone, drowned in the creek or attacked by wolves, destroyed by whatever monsters lived in these woods.

She stood up straighter and weighed the leash.

"Barfy," he called. "Barfy."

In one motion, she reached up and clamped the leash around his neck. His face twisted, then stilled. He whined in protest, cowed.

"Come," she said. She led him toward the woods.

He followed, walking at first, then sinking down to all fours. She slowed her pace. Ruffled the hair on the back of his head, too fine for a dog, but it would do. She scratched behind his ears, too low, but satisfying nonetheless.

"I'm so glad I found you."

He whined again. The trees closed in around them.

"I think I'll call you Barfy."



CANVASES

by: Agnes Parker

"We just need to unplug, honey. That's all."

The roar of Reid's blender punctuates his declaration. It sounds like dread.

When he's finished, I ask, "Will we quit the smoothies?"

Reid stares blankly at me.

"You know, to unplug? Get it?"

"Oh." There's a delay, but Reid chuckles as he pours forest green sludge into two matching glasses.

He passes one to me. "Adorable, sweetheart."

Old scabs along my lower lip threaten to reopen under the stretch of my smile.

It's not convincing enough.

Instead of downing his glass and heading for the door, Reid downs his glass and watches me stir my sludge around with a wide straw.

"Your body is begging for nutrients," he says. "Drink up. I think you'll like today's blend."

Sure, what's not to like? An entire bag of spinach, a heaping helping of kale, half an avocado, a spoonful of seeds Reid swears have superpowers, ice, and nine blueberries blended into a sensory wasteland sounds divine.

Don't choke.

Don't gag.

Swallow.

Smile again.

"It's good." How does he chug these so quickly? "Thanks for making it."

Reid beams.

Guilt tightens my gut. Despite the Lovecraftian horror Reid poured into this glass, he's trying to take care of me—of us—the only way he can. If taking care of your spouse doesn't revolve around calories, macronutrients, and micronutrients, that's news to him. As I suck through the straw, I imagine the smoothie is Reid's love.

But it's viscous and bitter. Seed shards lodge themselves between my teeth.

When I finish the glass, he plants a kiss on the crown of my head and prepares to leave for his jog.

"You sure you don't want to come?"

"Tomorrow," I lie. "Gotta take it slow. Ease in."

Disappointment settles into the lines of his face, but only for a moment. Positive, happy, grateful Reid returns before I know it, and he leaves with a nod.

As soon as the door closes behind him, I bolt up the stairs, refusing to waste the hour his jog will take. My plans for his absence include a clandestine mental breakdown in the shower, and my puffy, bloodshot eyes will need time to return to their usual size and color.

In the shower, I run the water at the highest temperature possible.

Weep until I can't tell the difference between the various fluids dribbling down my chin.

Three nights ago, I snapped.

I didn't expect the conversation to go well. How could it? I asked for a divorce anyway, steeling myself for a bitter argument or tear-filled discussion.

Reid was more talented than I'd anticipated, kneading my words over themselves like soft dough. My reasons and defenses were wrenched apart, twisted, and turned until even I couldn't comprehend how I'd ever blamed him.

I knelt at his feet and begged for forgiveness.

"I never should've said that," I told him. "I just haven't been feeling like myself lately, but that's not your fault."

"I've been trying to help you," he said, yanking on fistfuls of his blonde hair. "Your lifestyle is sabotaging everything. And you know what? It's one thing if you want to destroy your mind and body. You're entitled to that choice, but if you can't see that you're sabotaging our marriage, too, I don't know what to tell you. I love you, but I don't know if that's enough at this point. I know my worth, and I deserve better."

We'd ended the night when Reid accepted my apology and made plans to go on a detox together.

"To remove the toxins from our bodies, minds, and spirits," he'd said with a gleam of determination in his eye. I pretended not to know what else he implied with those words.

In the days since, he's converted me to his grueling diet, introduced me to pre-sunrise yoga practice, and booked a vacation at a rental villa on the bay.

One week in the brine-soaked air will fix our marriage.

A tactical error—my failure to account for the way violent crying upsets my stomach—brings my shower to a premature end. That's how I end up naked, wet, and shivering, clutching the toilet bowl for stability as my knees slip on the cold tile.

The smoothie looks no different the second time.

* * *

I'm afraid to touch the white furniture in the rental villa.

To Reid's credit, it's lovely. The villa offers natural light in spades, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the bay and the city, making both appear deceptively serene. I almost don't mind that it's a cage or that Reid likely picked it solely based on its content-creation potential.

It's the first thing he does when we arrive.

"I'm going to film a healthy dinner recipe video." Reid's announcement draws the air from the room, even though it's redundant, as he's already setting up a mini tripod on the marble countertop.

"Awesome," I say without much spirit. Thankfully, he doesn't notice, but I feel guilty anyway. "What are you making?"

"Zucchini boats!" Reid's delighted expression tells me I'm supposed to know what a zucchini boat is. "And cabbage soup on the side, but don't worry your pretty little head about that yet. You'll get to eat it soon enough."

"Oh, cool." My fingers still clutch my duffel bag tightly between my fingers, turning the skin shades of pink and white around the strap. "I guess I'll go unpack and leave you to it."

"Once you go upstairs, it's the first door on the right." Noticing my furrowed brow, he clarifies, "There's a video tour on the website."

"Got it." I nod uselessly, knowing he's dismissed me by how he darts around the tripod.

The sterile bedroom is a nightmare for someone with limited internet or television access. If I wanted, I could extract my phone from my bag, turn it on, and scroll through social media to stave off the impending boredom. But if Reid caught wind of that, he'd accuse me of taking shortcuts, of neglecting our digital detox, my body, and our marriage. It's not worth the argument, even if the digital detox only applies to me.

Like the rest of the house, the bedroom's theme is white and gray. Focusing on one object at a time requires great restraint, but it quells the restless droning in the back of my mind. I start with the white vase on the gray end table. Ceramic. Uninspired.

Would smashing it inspire a surge of adrenaline or madness?

I consider it but do the sensible thing instead and scowl at it before turning to the triptych of charcoal illustrations on the wall opposite the bed.

The pieces are white canvas, of course, but the black charcoal outline of the woman in the middle frame is stark enough to soothe my under-stimulated brain. Rendered in bold strokes and light shading, the woman faces away from me, her arms extended such that her fingertips barely stretch past the inner edges of the two outside canvases. It should be underwhelming and boring, but I'm starved for any image that isn't Reid posing with the bowl of aesthetically pleasing food.

I'm transfixed. It takes a significant effort for me to tear my gaze away.

I need to look at anything else.

Then, I notice the window overlooking the bay. Perfect.

I study it.

Approach it.

The bay is breathtaking, glittering cerulean waves carrying sailboats across its vast expanse.

Directly beneath my window, rocks separate land from the sea. At least one looks particularly sharp.

How sharp?

It's only a two-story house but sits on an elevated foundation.

If I were better at math, at judging the distance between my body and an object below me, I could effectively take advantage of my lack of supervision.

A sharp hiss rips me from my reverie.

I don't know why I glance over my shoulder at the canvases first, but I do.

Nothing. I'm not sure what I expected.

Instead of painting the rocks, I assess the rest of my cell.

It takes roughly thirty seconds to inspect every item in the barren room. Despite my best efforts, I can't ignore the canvases. Can't ignore her.

It's unclear whether seconds or hours pass as I stare at her. Eventually, Reid opens the door, startling me.

"There you are," he says like he didn't send me to this room. The comment is asinine enough to distract my attention from the canvas and the woman inside it. When he notices my puzzled expression, he scoffs as if I've inconvenienced him terribly. "I've been calling your name for the last few minutes."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I was distracted looking at the drawing." I tilt my head toward the triptych. Reed's eyebrows knit together as he follows my gaze.

"What is it?" Then, he steps closer, inspecting the piece. A primal, animalistic surge of protectiveness rises within me so quickly I nearly fail to suppress it. What would I even do? Tell him not to get closer to her? I know it's absurd; the lack of calories must be getting to my brain. "Abstract art is so weird."

"A woman. She's facing away from us." Looking between him and the woman several times, I try to understand what he's not seeing.

Oh.

The drawing is an optical illusion.

Now, the woman appears in profile. I can't configure the features in my mind to see her the way I initially saw her, no matter how much I squint or tilt my head. "I don't see it," Reid says. "Anyway, dinner is ready."

Dinner is an abomination.

Mutilated zucchini stuffed with vegetables and a poorly executed lentil meat substitute stares back at me. Where did its innards end up? Cheese obscures the vegetables, but it's cooled into a gelatinous caricature of itself.

The worst part of the meal is the potential it lost in the half-hour Reid spent photographing it.

Anxiety curdles in my belly when I feel eyes on me.

"How does it look?" Reid isn't the only one watching me. The dead eye of his camera lens is trained on my face, which contorts into my best impression of a smile.

Dinner becomes a performance, and I sink into the role of a doting and enthusiastic wife. Fantasizing about fast food burritos helps.

It's too effective.

While I wash dishes, imagining the sweet, turquoise soft drink I'd sip with my burrito, Reid's hands settle over my hips.

"You seem good. I feel like this little detox is working so well already," he rumbles against the side of my throat.

I hum noncommittally.

It gives me time to crunch the numbers. After determining I'm in the clear, I follow Reid to our bedroom.

Don't look at the woman in the drawing.

This is nice.

Reid loves me. Craves me.

Once, before his desire became a harbinger and my flesh a prison, I craved him, too.

Focus on that.

The woman moves.

Another optical illusion.

What did the artist do to make her appear to turn and wink at me?

"You all good?" Reid pants above me. Evidently, I've stiffened.

"Yeah, sorry."

Focusing on him is futile, but I can pretend.

Thread my fingers through his hair. Pull his face to mine. Close my eyes for a while.

Every time I open them, the woman looks back at me.

When Reid grunts, I release a perfunctory sigh, praying he takes that as a sign of a job well done. He does.

Except, when he slides out of me, softening and sated, electricity courses through my body. It's been so long that it takes me a moment to recognize the sensation as desire.

The object?

Not him. Not anymore. My body doesn't crave what it had not five minutes ago, but someone different. Something different.

I don't look at the canvas for the rest of the evening.

* * *

That night, Reid holds me down in my dreams.

Forces pills in my mouth.

Pushes a needle into my glute.

Reaches into my body and tugs until he feels the strings go taut.

It hurts, but I'm frozen. Silence takes the place of my screams.

He says, "Five minutes apart. You're doing so good."

I wake with a sheen of sweat coating my skin and the distinct sensation of being watched.

Don't look at the canvases.

As the shadows of clouds in front of the moon creep along the walls, her form moves along the canvases in a dance. My eyes betray me, following her figure on their own, so I give in. Watching the oddly soothing motion is better than tossing and turning in my own sweat, anyway.

I don't recall falling asleep, but I wake to the soft pressure of a person's thumb against my lower lip. It's still dark, too dark for me to see, but Reid's hands are calloused, so I know it's not him, which fills me with relief rather than fear.

So very pretty, the rustle of my hair against the sheets whispers. I try to recreate the sound, moving my head and brushing my hair and skin against the pillowcase. No more whispering sounds.

When I lie perfectly still, I hear it again.

Funny, too, it says.

Invisible fingertips trail down the sides of my throat, raising goosebumps along my arms, but I don't open my eyes to confirm what I already know.

Rest well, soft creature.

She doesn't make herself known again for the rest of the night. I sleep peacefully, dreaming of whispers against my skin.

The morning goes like any other, with one of Reid's dastardly concoctions and my feigning interest in another yoga practice to avoid being dragged on his jog like a leashed pet.

"Sweetheart, I thought you said you wanted to get better," he sighs.

"I do, I swear. I just think yoga is a good start for me. I don't think I need to run, too, especially not when I'm still full of that smoothie."

"You told me you wanted to exercise more on this trip."

I didn't.

Before I can respond, Reid scoffs and says, "We'll talk about this later."

After he leaves, I climb the stairs with a singular objective. It's ridiculous, but I can't help myself.

If I thought the woman's antics were reserved for the cover of darkness, she corrects me immediately.

I swear the walls themselves breathed a sigh of relief to see the back of him, comes her raspy whisper.

My shock must register on my face because she smirks in her canvas and speaks again.

If I have to spend the rest of your visit convincing you that you aren't crazy, it'll be a dreadful waste of time.

"Well, he's spent our entire marriage trying to convince me the opposite, so you've got your work cut out for you." The words tumble from my mouth before I can have an inner debate on the merits of speaking to an object. "And you're a drawing, so I'm probably crazy."

You don't really think you are, though, do you?

"Whether I think I'm crazy doesn't seem like a very good measure of my own mental stability."

But you know what he does to you when he twists and destroys your own thoughts and words.

She doesn't phrase it like a question or wait for me to respond.

We can make it go away. All of it.

Slowly, I perch on the end of the bed. "Go on."

* * *

Reid returns from his jog to find me slicing open the canvases on the wall.

"Honey, what the fuck? We're going to have to pay for that."

"Mhm." Ignoring him, I continue cutting around the edges of each canvas.

Precise. Surgical.

"Seriously, stop it!" he shouts, grabbing my wrist to stop the confident strokes of the box cutter into the thick material.

But I've already done enough.

Another hand appears, but it's not Reid's or mine.

It emerges from the canvas.

Black charcoal lines her nail beds and clings to her skin as a fine dust. My eyes dart between the woman's pretty, delicate hand and Reid's horrified expression.

So beautiful, she whispers. Like artwork.

She's right. Reid is beautiful enough to be an artist's muse.

The hand wraps around Reid's throat and squeezes with preternatural strength.

With her hand cutting off Reid's air supply, he can't scream, but he tries. Only whimpers and gasps escape his throat as he scrambles, doubtless trying to figure out how to defend himself against a drawing.

Then, she pulls.

Hard.

His screams are the last thing I hear of this version of him. It only takes her a moment to subdue him once he's in her domain.

When she crawls out of the canvas alone, I'm already waiting with the needle and spool of burgundy thread. Together, we make quick work of stitching the canvases back together.

We visit the villa every year thereafter, answering the low, anguished whispers with a cheerful, "Hi, Reid."

Hard planes of muscle move across the canvases as he entertains himself with a dance. I close the door and carry our luggage to a different bedroom.



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by: Stefanie Gilmour

How would you exist if you were not only a woman but a werewolf? What would life look like if you were required to keep a powerful rage-filled being locked inside your body? What would be the fallout if you lost control? Pondering these questions gave me the initial concept for *The Alex Steward* series. But there are many werewolf stories. What could I possibly add?

Before starting to outline *Fear the Wolf: Alex Steward Book 1*¹, I wanted to familiarize myself with werewolf lore. What was the lupine origin story? How did the mythos evolve? I wanted to add my own spin on a classic monster. Then I discovered the *female* werewolf and noticed how she was different from her male counterpart. I eagerly dove down the rabbit hole to learn about the female werewolf's contrary and complicated role in story, and how she's shifted forms throughout history.

As a baseline for werewolf lore, I wanted to get a grasp on the classic wolfman narrative. The story includes a man who, against his will, is turned into a werewolf by a supernatural force. He's at odds with the primal nature of the feral beast he's become. If he experiences human emotion such as guilt or remorse for his wolfman actions, he reclaims his humanity. He is redeemed and returns to the community from whence he was ousted for being a monster.

This straightforward story arc is *not* the female werewolf narrative.

In Western prose, texts containing male werewolves are more numerous and appear earlier in history. A man's transformation into a wolf can be traced as far back as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2100 BCE), a Babylonian poem. The Greek myth of King Lycaon tells of a horrible monarch who, when trying to serve human flesh to Zeus, was turned into a wolf. But where were all the female werewolves? The She-wolves?

¹ Stefanie Gilmour, *Fear the Wolf: Alex Steward Book 1* (Stefanie Gilmour, September 2023)

After more digging into the lore, I discovered the country of Estonia and its approximately 1400 texts about werewolves. In a country suspected to be matrilinear and matrilocal², I found the female werewolf existing in her own stories. The She-wolf's narrative included turning into a wolf to protect the welfare of others or to reclaim authority. Saaremaa, Estonia's largest island in the Baltic Sea, had more female than male werewolf stories.³

...the female werewolf represented the animalistic female, the medieval notions of a deceitful female, Victorian gothic tropes of a supernatural seductress, and film noir's deadly Femme Fatale.

When the Inquisition moved through Europe on its quest to eradicate heresies, the idea of equality between men and women found itself on the list of punishable offenses. Those whose lifestyles didn't fall within the Inquisition's guidelines were branded as "others." Church pamphlets, Inquisition handbooks, and folktales warned of witches and werewolves. Lycanthropy was believed to be directly linked to witchcraft. The female werewolf found herself as a symbol of an animalistic and oversexualized woman.

The female werewolf's solo debut in written fiction was in 1839⁴. *The White Wolf of the Hartz Mountains*⁵ features Christiana as the female werewolf. Under the pen of the male author, the She-wolf is portrayed as a supernatural seductress. Her charm is used to lure victims away, including children, to murder them. Christiana is killed while in her wolf form, and the monstrous threat of the deceitful woman is ended.

In contrast to a story by a male author in the beginning of the Victorian era, *A Ballad of the Were-Wolf* by Rosamund Marriott Watson was published in 1891 under the pen name Graham R Tomson⁶. In the ballad, a husband hunts a large grey wolf that killed his children. The wolf escapes, but not before he severs the wolf's paw. The husband runs home to tell his wife, who is waiting quietly by the fireside.

² Merili Metsvahi, "Estonian werewolf legends collected from the island of Saaremaa." *She-Wolf A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, edited by Hanna Priest (Manchester University Press, July 2018) page 32

³ Merili Metsvahi, "Estonian werewolf legends collected from the island of Saaremaa." *She-Wolf A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, edited by Hanna Priest (Manchester University Press, July 2018) page 24

⁴ Carys Crossen, "'The complex and antagonistic forces that constitute one soul': conflict between societal expectations and individual desires in Clemence Housman's 'The Werewolf' and Rosamund Marriott Watson's 'A Ballad of the Were-wolf.'" *She-Wolf A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, edited by Hanna Priest (Manchester University Press, July 2018) page 111

⁵ Frederick Marryat, "The White Wolf of the Hartz Mountains." *The Phantom Ship* (George Routledge and Sons, May 1839)

⁶ Rosamund Marriott Watson [Graham R. Tomson], "A Ballad of the Were-Wolf." *A Summer Night and Other Poems* (Methuen and Company, 1891) page 71

When he unwraps the wolf's paw to show her, he finds a human hand in its place. His wife stands, unbinds the bandages from her forearm, and reveals her bloody stump.

The ballad was unique for the time as it focused on unhappiness in marriage. The story doesn't leverage negative tropes of femininity to define the She-wolf like *The White Wolf of the Hartz Mountains*. Instead Watson gives us a female werewolf who is dissatisfied with the assigned roles of wife, homemaker, and mother. Watson herself divorced twice and lost custody of her three of her four children⁷.

The female werewolf pops up again five years later in *The Werewolf* as the symbol of female author Clemence Housman's anxieties surrounding what is expected of the Victorian woman. Housman was an artist who wanted to pursue her career instead of marrying or having children.

When the She-wolf found herself on Hollywood's silver screen, film creators were faced with how to visually portray her. Audiences struggled to believe a woman could harm someone with her bare hands. Even the infamously dangerous Femme Fatale of the time used a gun or another man for her unsavory deeds. In *Cry of the Werewolf*⁸, they address this challenge by having the young woman transform into an actual wolf indistinguishable from a male because, unlike a woman, a wolf is physically able to tear someone apart⁹.

By this point in history, the female werewolf represented the animalistic female, the medieval notions of a deceitful female, Victorian gothic tropes of a supernatural seductress, and film noir's deadly Femme Fatale. To say she had a lot going on would be an understatement. In the late 20th to early 21st century, anxiety surrounding sex-positive women was added to the list.

Werewolves were linked to hormonally-driven male adolescence as far back as the 1957 film, *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*¹⁰. However, Suzy McKee Charna's short story *Boobs*¹¹ spoke to what young women experienced during puberty. The female werewolf, Kelsey, is horrified that her body is changing shape from a lean tomboy into a full-chested young woman. Puberty marks her entrance into a world of sexual violence and vulnerability. Her werewolf transformation is controlled and intentional. She prefers to be a werewolf to escape the uncontrolled changes of a female adolescent's body.

⁷ Carys Crossen, "'The complex and antagonistic forces that constitute one soul': conflict between societal expectations and individual desires in Clemence Housman's 'The Werewolf' and Rosamund Marriott Watson's 'A Ballad of the Were-wolf.'" *She-Wolf A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, edited by Hanna Priest (Manchester University Press, July 2018) page 113

⁸ *Cry of the Werewolf*, Henry Levin (Columbia Pictures, August 1944)

⁹ Peter Hutchings, "The she-wolves of horror cinema." *She-Wolf A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, edited by Hanna Priest (Manchester University Press, July 2018) page 171

¹⁰ *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, Gene Fowler Jr. (American International Pictures, June 1957)

¹¹ Suzy McKee Charnas, "Boobs" (Asimov's Science Fiction, July 1989)

The Canadian film *Ginger Snaps*¹² follows sisters Ginger and Bridget, who despise being teenage girls. Ginger sees limited roles available to her: “A girl can only be a virgin, a slut, a tease, or the girl next door.” Shortly after her first period, which she and Bridget refer to as The Curse, Ginger is attacked by a werewolf. Her transformation into a She-wolf gives her confidence and strength, but also turns her incredibly violent. She embraces the aggressive nature of being a werewolf and doesn’t want the curse to end.

The early 2000s brought stories of supernatural creatures, like vampires and werewolves, living among us. Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*¹³ told a story of a normal human girl falling for a brooding supernatural boy. The female werewolf in the series, Leah Clearwater, is expected to deny self-preservation in favor of her Pack. While female sacrifice is a motif for Meyer’s books, this idea of the She-wolf prioritizing her pack, her family, above herself isn’t unique to young adult books.

The self-sacrificing female werewolf is turned on its head in the song “She-wolf” by singer Shakira¹⁴. Like *A Ballad of the Were-wolf*, the lyrics of the song communicate a displeasure with women’s assumed roles. Shakira’s protagonist escapes the suffocating situations at home and work by turning into a werewolf. As a She-wolf, she is free and confident to take what she wants when she wants it.

Shakira’s *She-wolf* didn’t mark the end to the selfless female werewolf. Elena is the only female werewolf in the 2014 television series *Bitten*¹⁵. The series lore states a female body, unlike a male body, is too frail to withstand the transformation from human to werewolf. Elena leaves her pack to forge a life she can call her own, with a career and social circle of her choosing. She has confidence, heightened abilities, and doesn’t hesitate to attack when threatened. However, trouble brews within her pack, and she’s drawn back by the sense of obligation to her found family.

At this point in my research, I was all turned around. The female werewolf was juggling so many roles! She was the lynchpin of her social group. The oversexualized badass in leather. The natural negotiator. The seductress out to ruin virtuous relationships. The self-sacrificing caregiver. The violent monster. She’s constantly shifting to fit the increasingly complicated and contradictory roles.

In 2017, Katie Anthony published her collection of short stories titled *Feminist Werewolf*¹⁶. Her book explores the complicated emotions surrounding women’s roles in Western society. *Feminist Werewolf* is

¹² *Ginger Snaps*, John Fawcett (Oddbodd Productions, August 2000)

¹³ Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (Little, Brown and Company, October 2005)

¹⁴ Shakira, “She Wolf,” track #1, *She Wolf*, Epic, October 2009

¹⁵ Kelley Armstrong, *Bitten* (Hoodwink Entertainment, January 2014)

¹⁶ Katie Anthony, *Feminist Werewolf* (Katie Anthony, October 2017)

the reason those initial questions of existing as a woman and a werewolf seeded themselves into my mind.

*Nightbitch*¹⁷ by Rachel Yoder features a female protagonist known simply as The Mother. She's an artist envisioning a balance between her career and family. Soon, she is forced to give up her job to stay at home with their child. The Mother harbors deep anger over the expected sacrifice of her sense of self to raise her child and nurture her husband's career at the cost of her own. She soon suspects she is turning into a dog. With her fears dismissed by her husband, the Mother embraces the primal side emerging from within her. She does so with joy, including her child in the newfound freedom.

She is expected to be someone she is not simply because she is a woman. And if she doesn't fall in line, she is an "other." A monster.

*Such Sharp Teeth*¹⁸ by Rachel Harrison follows Rory, a young woman returning to her small hometown to support her sister during her sister's first pregnancy. Shortly after arriving, she is attacked by a werewolf. Harrison writes the body horror of Rory's transformation in tandem with her sister's body changing. Neither woman can control their bodies, and it's awful. But they're allowed to say how scary and awful it can be instead of hiding behind the expected mask of joy and gratefulness.

The female werewolves in *Nightbitch* and *Such Sharp Teeth* strain against the daily horrors of the woman she lives within. They are the strength the woman embraces within herself, and the independence she seeks. The She-wolf is another step closer to the balance between choosing who you are and the femininity that Watson and Housman were seeking.

Such Sharp Teeth was published as I rounded the bend on drafting the third novel in the Alex Steward series. I struggled to find books to compare *Fear the Wolf*, the first book in the series, to while querying it with agents. Alex's story dances a thin line between urban fantasy and horror. Finally, with *Such Sharp Teeth*, I found my comp.

Where did my female werewolf fit into this complex pinball-like pattern of the She-wolf? I wanted an adult woman to be my protagonist, not an adolescent. In my spin on the lore, Alex is a werewolf due to

¹⁷ Rachel Yoder, *Nightbitch: A Novel* (Anchor, July 2020)

¹⁸ Rachel Harrison, *Such Sharp Teeth* (Berkley, October 2022)

a triggered recessive gene, not a bite or curse. Finally, shifting into a werewolf and her werewolf abilities—strength, speed, heightened senses—are controlled by leveraging emotion.

Unfortunately for Alex, she is a woman hiding out in the Midwest, an area of the country with conservative views on a woman's role in society. It's against supernatural law for her to publicly express her emotions and reveal herself as a werewolf. She is expected to keep the wolf hidden inside. But microaggressions add up, and she has a hot temper.

With Alex, I wanted to explore a woman's body being the She-wolf. The werewolf was awakened to protect her and itself. The wolf intervenes when it senses a threat to either. Because childbirth isn't everyone's story, I didn't want Alex's relationship with her body to involve pregnancy.

Alex's mind and body are not synced. She's scared of her body. After all, as a werewolf, she can effortlessly snap the spine of the next guy who catcalls her. She's a woman taught to be uncomfortable in her own skin. Like most women, Alex has been told her body is vulgar and something to hide. It's a carnal thing that isn't virtuous. It's her monstrous feminine.

A few first readers commented on Alex's abrasiveness to strange men. They believed she was quick to judge men moving unbidden into her space. In such situations, the female werewolf in her responds with anger and, if the men don't vacate, violence.

It made me pause. Was Alex too angry? Should she instead politely ask the men to leave? Was the disconnect she feels from her own body because of the world she lives in outdated? I don't believe so. It's been a long journey for the women the female werewolf represents, and a She-wolf is not known for her patience.

Many novels published in the past five years feature a female protagonist who I like to refer to as The Feral Female. She is expected to be someone she is not simply because she is a woman. And if she doesn't fall in line, she is an "other." A monster.

She's labeled unhinged. Unnecessarily violent. Selfish. The Feral Female does not give a flying fuck. Remaining docile to fulfill a role assigned by the system she lives in is no longer a priority. Her rage burns bright. She chooses to be who she is meant to be. I feel the modern female werewolf can be seen as this Feral Female.

Learning how the female werewolf shifted forms and evolved throughout history has been fascinating. She is both a symbol of empowerment and freedom to women, and a dangerous monstrosity to systems attempting to contain her. I wonder if a future exists where the female werewolf isn't categorized as something separate from being a woman. As an "other."

Every now and then I still have doubts that Alex's story is connecting with women on a more visceral level. But then I meet a new reader while selling my books at an event. I give her the pitch: a story of a woman who is forced into a role she did not choose. Alex locks away all her frustrations and anger deep inside her body, a body she doesn't feel is her own, until she finally lashes out as a werewolf.

The reader's eyes light up. She nods or gives me the smallest of smiles. My doubts disappear, and my heart sings. The reader realizes she's not alone living Alex's story.

And I've found a fellow She-wolf.



PORTAL

by: Katherine Kerestman

The door is right behind my bed, wedged in between the cherry-wood bedpost and the tall, six-drawer bureau next to it. It is always there at night when I'm sleeping and the unlit room is so very dark. I can never find it when I'm awake.

Every once in a while, in the night, hazy glowing orbs skittle out from behind the excess of lace that envelopes the windows - cars' headlights or flashes shot from distant lightning bolts, no doubt - soft, white flickers that disappear in seconds, as quickly as they come into being. I do not see the wraith-like lights very often, though, for our house is obscured by a small wood so thick that it cannot be seen from the road; and, except when the trees are barren of leaves in the depth of winter, not even the lighted windows of the house can be seen from the road, and neither can we see the lights from the automobiles.

There are sounds peculiar to the night, too: the hall creeks in the dark, and distant door-hinges squeak somewhere in the house. Sometimes the old furnace rattles as if shaking its chains -- and some nocturnal prowler is always scampering across the roof in the dead of night. At times, I am awakened by the sound of windows being raised or lowered, though there is no one here to effect their movement. On the quietest nights, when no living being is romping on the shingles and the wind is not worrying the shutters, when the old furnace is dozing, there is a moaning, a faint bass groan, barely more than an exhalation, but a groan, nonetheless. The loudest noises tend to emanate from behind the door in the corner.

At times, there is a loud thumping - and, once, even a tinkling melody, as of a music box or an antique harpsichord. Often, I hear the murmuring of voices speaking much too quietly for individual words to be distinguished. On the stillest of nights, I can sometimes catch the sounds of footsteps and swishes - as of boots and silken fabrics, garments or draperies. I know the sounds are coming from behind the night door. For a long time, I lie quietly, trying to make sense of the sounds. When I have

lighted the lamp on the bedside table, preparatory to rising from my bed and laying my ear to the door that is in the corner at night, I find that the sounds have vanished. And the door as well.

Sometimes I ask my sister Star if she hears the noises, too, when I bring her her tray or when I clear it away. She lives in a room in another wing of the house, and, as she never comes out of it, I bring her what she needs. She does not answer any of my questions about the noises, for she never speaks at all. She rocks all day in her rocking chair, looking out the window, until nightfall when she goes to bed. Her room is in the newer part of our great house, which is comprised of an old wing and a new wing and a vestibule and parlor in between them. There are moments when I cannot remember how or when or why she took to staying in her room; it seems it has always been that way. She keeps the room tidy enough, and she rocks in her chair. It seems as if she is part of the house. Sometimes I frighten myself, like now, when I find that I still speak of her in the present tense.

One day, on leaving Star's room, I paused to look in the mirror on the landing before I descended the stairs, and I perceived that I was older than I had thought; when one goes long periods without seeing one's reflection, a person does not feel the passage of the years. My figure was still upright and trim, yet my skin was slacker than I had remembered, my eyes less prominent, my fair complexion a paler shade. Still, I was not ashen-hued and silver-haired like my sister. She's been that way since the night our parents left us. There I go again, speaking of Star in present tense.

One day it had all changed. I had gone up to my room immediately following dinner, conceding a temporary victory to a miserable head cold with sniffles and a sudden drowsiness. Mother, Father, and golden-haired Star were in the drawing room. As I ascended the winding staircase, I could hear the thin tones of Star's playing upon the old spinet.

When I awoke the next morning, Mother and Father had gone, and Star was rocking in her wicker rocking chair in the bow window of her snow-white bedroom, as incommunicative as she is today. After a day or two - the first days are only a blur in my memory now -- I telephoned the police, who, unearthing no evidence of foul play, supposed that our parents had deserted us. The fact of the matter is, as I was eighteen years of age and Star twenty, they would have committed no crime in absconding from our home; thus, there were no further investigations into our domestic loss. There was enough money in the bank to keep us comfortably, and so we went on living. I hired a girl to tidy the main parts of the house once a week, and others to clean the whole edifice at irregular intervals.

As I ran my fingers along the smooth furrows of the carved walnut paneling of the stairwell, I felt something sharp -and I pulled my hand quickly away to look at it and saw blood. Putting my finger to

my lips to suck the blood on it, I scrutinized the molding and discovered a splinter in the polished bas relief of a hideous gargoyle, which (judging by the lascivious expression on its face) seemed to be enjoying the unusual refreshment afforded by my life fluid. As I descended the staircase, I looked upon the other carvings, to which I had seldom paid attention: grisly chimeras, winged angels, and demons. Pausing halfway down the stairs, I looked about the lower storey, whose walls and columns are covered with chiseled designs, which, in my present frame of mind, seemed to betoken a refuge for monsters. I had lived in the house all my life and had never really perceived the reliefs but in passing; perhaps it was the shedding of my blood by a carven demon which aroused unfamiliar and ridiculous sensibilities.

Leaning over the twisting brass rail, I peered down into the main hall and studied the circular parquet and mosaic marble floor, the circumference of which is embellished with the signs of the Zodiac. From its center issue rays of gold, like the hands of a watch or the arrow on a compass. Our parents were Age of Aquarius hippies, long-haired and bell-bottomed - no way could they have passed on this house once they had seen the inside of it. Our unconventional residence was rumored to have been the meeting place of a group of Spiritualists in the late nineteenth century. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a shadow moving among the columns, but when I turned my head I saw only an empty room. I looked up at the cupola, light blue background painted with the constellations. I descended to the dining room.

My breakfast had been prepared for me and was waiting on the long table inlaid with ebony. Having eaten my bread and marmalade, I determined to go up to my room. This time, however, I decided to make my way by means of the staircase which is concealed behind one of the numerous mahogany panels of the dining room wall. I wondered at my sense of adventurousness, which had long lain dormant: what had awakened it in me today? Merely an irritability occasioned by my recognition of the unkind ravages of passing time? Was something else driving me?

My fingers felt the button which released the spring, and the door slid back. I entered quickly, before Janet, our present cleaning girl, saw me, and I closed the door to the detriment of several spiders' handiwork. Instead of walking up to my room and my books, I decided then to walk down, to the cellar. It had been a long time since I had ventured below, not having occasion to go down there very often. Perhaps I was simply bored, in search of a variation from a longstanding routine.

I had been to the cellar, years or months ago, for old property records for the attorneys. I went down once to find a loved book from my girlhood, when I had the sudden desire to revisit it. My parents'

belongings were stored in the cellar, clothes and other personal items, as well as their private papers; I never did like looking at them, for they sadden me.

When I reached the bottom, I turned on the light switch. The basement is large, because the house is large. I wandered among the old furniture and the many piles of cardboard boxes, marked "school records," "medical records," and "tax returns," with the applicable years. I was startled briefly by a black shape which appeared in a dust-covered full-length mirror that was leaning against a wall; the object vanished from the glass, and when I turned around, there was nothing black, only furnishings and boxes.

I ventured further from the stairs, peeked into a recess in the concrete wall, spotted a box of vinyl records, and began to rifle through it. Between Pink Floyd and Peter, Paul, and Mary, I discovered a black leather volume with a white pentagram on its cover - this was not your New Age yoga and medication and reading your horoscope. I carried it to a box that was positioned below a ceiling lamp, and, sitting down on the cardboard box, I opened the cover and began to read.

The black book was a journal. The first entry described their housewarming party - my parents had invited practically the whole town. I envisioned the pot and LSD, free love, flower power, and the tunes. A week later, my mother, Beth, wrote that she had made a special friend of a man named Luke. He said he was a shaman. The black book had been his housewarming gift to my parents.

The next entry was dated three weeks later. My mother wrote that she was glad my sister and I would be coming home from college for spring break soon, for she missed her fair Star and her dark Raven, who had grown up all too quickly. Apparently, while my father, Brad, was attempting to achieve a higher level of consciousness by the pool, she was taking lessons from Luke in communicating with the spiritual world. She regretted that my father was not "tuned in" to Luke; he had told her his vibes were bad.

From then on, her entries in the black book were focused almost exclusively on my mother's instruction in "magick." As I read about the incense and candles, and their cutting each other's skin with Luke's athame and commingling their blood, my skin began to crawl.

The cellar became cold - I could see my breath now, 'though I had not felt the cold at all before this. I closed the book and went upstairs to my room. It was warm up there.

On the way, I prepared a sandwich and some soup for Star's lunch and picked up a bag of pretzels and a soda for myself.

Snuggled into the puce velvet wing chair in my room, I resumed my reading, with the noon-day sun warming me through the window-glass.

I skimmed page after page of magickal practice, herbology lessons, the uses of mirrors, magic circles, and wands. The last entry was dated a week before my parents "disappeared."

My mother described a "portal" which she and Luke had opened. To enter, it was necessary to offer a sacrifice, he told her. She wrote that Luke was to make all the arrangements for the ceremony. He was to bring others he knew. My father was not to be told in advance, but he was to be present, as well as their first-born child. The book ends there.

It was dusk by the time I closed the book. Guiltily, I thought that Star must be famished by now, and so I went down to the kitchen to warm something for her dinner. The day's discoveries having taken their toll on my own appetite, I brought Star her dinner and, while she was eating, I returned to my room and sat before the television with only a can of mixed nuts and a glass of chardonnay.

Needless to say, I found it difficult to pay attention to the movie. I was pondering what had occurred in those last days before we lost our parents and my sister became a mute recluse. I was feeling nervous, and sad, and, giving up on the movie, brushed my teeth, swallowed a sleeping pill, and got into bed.

It was not long before I was awakened by the night sounds. I heard the clumping of footsteps. The soft hum of voices, male and female, a door hinge creaking. I slowly perused the dark room from my warren of bedclothes. My eyes moved from ceiling to floor, roving slowly left to right, eventually arriving at the corner. The night door was there. The sounds were coming from behind the door. I could see a thin line of yellow light beneath the door, which I had never seen before.

Nearly too frightened to command obedience from my limbs, I managed to turn on the lamp on the bedside table. When I looked into the corner, there was no door to be seen.

It having been a long time since I had taken a sleeping pill, the drug began to work its effects quickly, and I drifted off again. I opened my eyes to the high-pitched creaking of the night door. It was opening!

I sat up in bed, my fingers reaching for the lamp - was the electricity out? Although I repeatedly turned the knob, the bulb would not light.

The house began to shake. The door opened a little wider. Cold air rushed into my room.

"No!"

From the door of my room (the one that opened into the hall) came the frantic screams of my sister.

"No!"

She ran to me, took my hands in hers and held them tight.

"I'm sorry," she cried, "Please forgive me."

The door opened wider and brilliant yellow light from beyond flooded my bedroom like a phantasmagoric sun. The air became wavy, moist, steamy.

Star drew me to her, wrapped me in her arms, as a grotesque creature emerged from the doorway, a dark silhouette in the blinding yellow light. Its nose and chin were sharply pointed, its head sprouted a pair of horns. It had talons for its fingers and hooves for its two feet. Its tail dragged on the floor behind it.

"What do you want, Demon? We want none of you! Return to the netherworld!" cried my mute sister.

"We tasted her blood. We want the rest of it!" the demon screamed.

"You took our parents! You can't have us! We renounce you!"

I trembled in my sister's arms, terrified and uncomprehending.

"Your mother and father forfeited their souls because they kept not your mother's bargain - their firstborn in exchange for forbidden knowledge and power. We have returned to claim only what belongs to us - the raven-haired beauty with the sweet blood in her veins."

"You have no claim to her - I was the one promised you by my mother. I am the firstborn, *for whom our father gave his life!*" Star shouted at the monstrous entity. "*Take me! Leave her alone!*"

"Very well," answered the hideous spirit. "Come, then."

"Goodbye, Raven. I have always loved you," Star said, as she tore herself from my arms. "Don't cry so - you'll break my heart."

She walked into the light - and was gone.

The door vanished.

I spend most of my time rocking in the window. The last time I looked in the mirror, and I cannot remember how long ago that was, my hair was white. I never see anyone. My attorney pays the bills and arranges for food to be delivered; he does a good job. I have put together this document in the hope that somehow my father and my sister will know by my writing of it how much I love them and think of them.

I must put it away now, for the night sounds are beginning again.



BERYLLIOSIS

by: Taylor Jordan Pitts

I'm awake when the notification comes in. From the nightstand, my watch illuminates the room to showcase the shedding popcorn ceiling, the moth-patterned curtains, and the pile in the corner. It's breathing slowly this morning, if that's what you can call it, spilling asbestos-like debris onto the floor.

"Shit." A calm current moments ago, the bedsheets explode in a sudden tidal rush. "Shit."

The light paints Rav's waist and pools into the dips of his lower back. Fresh scars line his ribs, reaching around his torso like red skeletal fingers. He was so excited when he got his set. He'd been on the list since he was fourteen—not as long as me, but then I've never met anyone else who could compete. I could hear it in his breathing over the phone afterward. Clear. Clean. I wondered what it must be like. Earlier, I raked my thumbs along those scars while we fucked. When he hissed into my mouth like a snake, I dug my nails in, broke skin and slipped through tendons and fat and muscle. He'd made animal noises as both of us went somewhere else, out of this room, someplace with empty corners.

Rav half yanks on a shirt. It's one of mine—a shredded graphic tee from an ancient Chokehold tour. There's the lead singer with his hands around his throat. I imagine being split open, lungs festering in the air, and the thought is enough to make me untether from reality. I try for a deep breath and rattle instead. When I palm my chest, it's all smooth valleys and flat hills, no trace of any disturbance.

"You're not having, like, an episode—?" Rav searches the floor, frantic. The denim pants suffocate his hips when he pulls them on, and the paint on his fingernails is fresh, as if he'd done them just for me. Right before he asked if we could meet. If he could come over. Without me having to ask. Something he's never done in all the months we've been hooking up. It's not that he doesn't understand my situation—it's more and more common these days—but he seems to get off on being put out, so he makes me beg.

"Dude. Check your watch."

I slide it onto my wrist and skim the message.

AIR QUALITY ALERT

“Okay?” My voice gets caught in the back of my throat, and I cough—sharp and violent. Rav stops what he’s doing, and our eyes meet. At some point, I’d started to sweat. *Fill your lungs as much as you can, then empty them completely.* The mantra has been drilled into me by past family physicians. Grabbing at my chest, I try not to think about how long it’s been since I had a check-up. It was a tiny cough. It happens all the time. But what if there’s a crack in the window? Like most units that have been half-ass renovated to just barely meet code, the single window in my room has long been hermetically sealed. The airflow to the building comes through the vents. I can’t seem to fill my lungs.

Somewhere, a person shouts. *“Inside, inside!”*

At the sudden barrage of a fist hammering on a door, I scramble out of bed. Was that on the first floor? The nerves in my brain that are hardwired to fear flip on like a switch, one that I slam right back down. “This happens all the time,” I say. Once a month since grade school, in fact. Even when it’s not a drill, people like to be dramatic. I want to tell Rav to calm down. To not freak out, because freaking out unsettles the pile. But when I check on it, it’s rising and falling, steady as always.

“Jesus Christ, this seems bad.” Rav tears a hand through his hair, riffing a glissando of dust. I hold my breath as it floats through the air. He lifts his phone to the ceiling, its shiny black skin muted under the glow of my watch. He’s not being calm. The pile flutters once, a moth-wing beat that I feel inside my ribcage. I check my watch again. Out here, reception can be dicey. Not too many towers are maintained in this part of the city. Usually the bed’s a hotspot—more than a few dirty jokes have been exchanged on the subject—but right now, no signal. The only notification on the screen is the alert, which I look at long enough now to see it scroll out the full message.

AIR QUALITY ALERT

THREAT LEVEL: SEVERE

Rav’s voice has sped up. “...sealed, right? Even if I leave now—” He’s pacing, just a little, like there’s a wind blowing only him. Rav would get a kick out of the innuendo if I could form the shape of the words to say it.

"Listen, I gotta go. It might be best if..."

He trails off. His voice has taken on that guilt-inflection, the one that makes your stomach plummet into the earth. Both parties were clear at the outset: Sex, no strings, because Rav was going to go places with his new lungs and I wasn't. Not that he ever used so many words, but we both knew. Rav's going to get paid to figure out how to deionize the air or something. He's going to go make the world better while I stay here, breathing and useless. "You can't go out there right now." I wave my watch at him.

There's the distant sound of glass shattering. Heavy thuds. Then come the sirens. Familiar, I could almost fall asleep to them. I'm not sure why they bother anymore. The storms come more often than they don't. Usually they're small enough not to raise an alarm. People who can, shelter, and those who can't just put up their hoods and grunt through the wall of radioactive dust slamming through the city at eighty miles an hour. I fill my lungs and empty them. Repeat. This happens. All. The. Time. This wave will blow over in a few minutes. Even with the seal, I'll be cleaning it off my windowsill for a week, white residue streaked across every surface I can touch and especially those I can't. There's only so much you can do about airflow in a building that predates respiratory protection laws.

"This isn't a drill—this is serious—" he stammers, checking his phone relentlessly. The pile in the corner writhes like a tumorous mass. *Do you see that?* I want to ask. *Do you see it?*

"Look." As if he'd been talking to himself, Rav stops and levels with me. "I like you. But I also don't know shit about you. What do you do? How long have you lived...here? Do you even have any friends? Where's your family?" He laughs. "We could die in here—*together*—and I don't even know who you are or —or what you want to *do* with your life."

What he's saying doesn't make sense. It's like Rav has emptied the contents of a ten-thousand-piece puzzle onto the bed and asked me to describe the picture. We've been seeing each other for months. It feels like milliseconds. It feels like all my life.

"—won't even talk to me." Gesticulating, Rav's arms are long like tree branches, ones that will be coated once this wave is over. Particles pelt the window. I imagine a dozen strangers huddled around the glass, peering into the room, hands clutched around carefully packed ammunition. They gasp in a single breath, unblinking, mouths cracked open like fish. I wait for a collective exhale that never comes. They're waiting for something, too.

Rav crosses to the window and yanks the curtains aside, exposing a pane of glass clouded with saltlike dust. Rav's left foot, still bare, is inches from the pile, which pulsates softly in the strange new light. Is it stretching along the baseboards? Toward the window—toward Rav?

"Can't see shit out there." Rav cups his hands around his face and crowds closer to the glass. He can't know about the strangers. The realization is grounding. My lungs empty, and fill. The alert still scrolls across my watch.

LEVEL: SEVERE THREAT LEVEL: SEVERE THREAT LEVEL: SEVERE THREAT LEVE

Crack.

A dark mass slams into the window. Rav jerks away. "Fuck," he shouts. "Fuck, what the fuck was that?"

The pile triples its pulse. I remember watching, dry-eyed in the dark, videos of moths flying full speed into windows. In some places, entire swarms hurled themselves repeatedly into the glass so hard that it broke. They flopped on the floor, dust filling the tiny holes that coated their bodies—spiracles, the accompanying caption had called them—like neatly poured cement. There were more videos from those who attempted to rehabilitate the intruders with special tanks and lights. But their lungs, it was said. *Their lungs.* Moths don't have lungs.

The split in the glass is barely there, but it's enough. A high-pitched whistle grows to a scream. Rav yanks the curtain closed, moths scattering, then brings up his shirt and breathes hard into the collar. He stumbles backward into the bed.

"Cover your face," he says, shoving the sheet at me from across the bed. He searches the floor again, probably looking for the SCBA he never leaves home without, especially not now. A third alarm chimes from my watch, the ringtone some generic, synth-windchime preloaded onto the device.

AIR QUALITY ALERT

THREAT LEVEL: LIFE-THREATENING

"Where's your e-kit?" Rav asks. He grabs pieces of discarded clothing and scatters them, looks under the bed, throws open the closet. "Epoxy? Come on, we have to fix this crack before—" He breaks off in a

series of sudden dry coughs. He coughs for so long that he bends into a right angle, veins popping out of his slender neck that he grabs, mirroring the lead singer from Chokehold.

I move to comfort him—put a hand on his back, or something—but I freeze just before making contact. The pile is stretching up the wall now. Soon it will reach the window. It throbs with each of my heartbeats. Surely Rav sees it. How could he not? But he hasn't said anything, hasn't so much as looked its way.

Another wave hits, more shards pummeling the glass. Rav makes noises that no human should be able to make. His neck cracks with the effort to rid itself of the particles it's inhaled. Finally, he gasps in a breath and manages to hold onto it. His eyes are so bloodshot that they're purple. "I just got these."

LEVEL: LIFE-THREATENING THREAT LEVEL: LIFE-THREATENING THREAT LEVEL:

The pile in the corner wheezes, discharging a cloud of white toxins. Any second, I'll inhale them. Maybe I already have. Was that its plan all along? The reason it appeared after my mom failed her transplant and I moved here to this shithole? It was like it had grown from a crack in the floorboards when I wasn't paying attention, and one day I looked over and noticed it.

"Fuck—" Rav stumbles backward toward the door. His face is an inhuman shade of red, and blood leaks from his eyes. Just hours ago, his sweat had dripped onto my mouth. He crashes against the door and gets a hand on the knob, then falls to his knees. My T-shirt is still drawn up over his nose, only more of it now, the soft planes of his stomach exposed, his ribs—his scars. There's a gnawing sensation in my side, a pain in my chest. That sick ache of envy that he's been cut open, exposed to the elements, repaired, and sewn tight. I should help him, but I can't move. He stares at me like I'm not human—like I'm a dying insect at his feet. But then something shifts, and it's like I'm too human, too broken. Like there are cracks in me that can't be sealed.

He thumps, motionless, to the floor.

I check his pulse and find none. Hands on my knees, I dry heave for a few minutes, sweat prickling my skin. My watch is dark now, but the pile—the pile is alive, and it's grown. In the minutes I looked away, it coiled around the bedpost and slipped under the covers. The wall is a spider-spun mural, a nitrate masterpiece woven into the plaster.

Carefully, I approach the window. The crack has widened, just barely—just enough. The pile is almost there, inching its way through layers of dust and dirt and dead skin. Sequestered to the corner of my vision all this time, I could ignore it while it grew slowly larger, pulsing softly in the dark. While it waited for something. But as I watch it now, I understand. It needs what any other living creature needs. What Rav needed. What I need.

The window is impossible to open with bare hands. Even the latch—once used to crank the pane out slowly and methodically to let in fresh air—has been snapped off, the nub in its place sanded down to a clumsy design element. But unlike in newer, more expensive units, this pane is made of cheap glass. It's breakable.

As I tear down the curtain, I think about plunging my fingers into Rav's scars and cradling those soft, pink lungs. Feeling them rise and fall with new breath. Breathing in Rav's breath, then pushing it back into his mouth, sharing pollutants. Lungs emptying and filling. I wrap the moths around my arm, hook them neat from elbow to palm, a bowstring of spiracles. I look down at my body and picture myself with scars of my own. Maybe Rav was right—I'm not a person. I'm not even human. Maybe I'm a moth, flitting to the nearest light, slamming into windows, breathing through spiracles.

Glittering shards decorate the windowsill when I'm finished. I feel a breeze on my face for the first time in as long as I can remember. If I pulled out my lungs, would they be soft pink, fresh with life? Or would they glow like a pair of irradiated bones? I pick up one of the glass shards.

Next to me, the pile empties and fills. It almost looks like two piles now. But this happens all the time. I draw my first real breath, and try not to cough.



ALL CREATURES HERE BELOW

by: Emmie Christie

The day that Maisy stopped believing in God, she began seeing the skeletons.

Not skeletons strutting down the street, or floating like ghosts in flappy Victorian clothing, but below the ground. Under the sidewalk. Tangled in the roots of the oak tree in her back yard. Under hole eleven at the nearby frisbee golf course. When the ground turned transparent like pool water, she would find a dead person.

Before the first time it had happened, she'd walked the block for a bit of fresh air. She'd had a long day of . . . coordinating with the sales team.

"No, Ryan," she'd said to their VP of Sales. "You can't just go around telling people we sell something we do not carry."

"But they were really interested! A multi-millionaire, Maisy!"

"Ryan. We. Do. Not. Sell. Self-Trimming. Bushes. We sell *bushes!*"

"But if you'd just talk to this tech company, they think it's really possible to graft these little scissors onto—"

"Ryan, don't make me get Trenton in on this one."

Trenton was the COO. Ryan had wilted, and agreed, and promised not to promise prospective clients flights of fancy anymore.

Maisy had logged off and thought about how God must have been on an acid trip when he formed Ryan's brain.

When you're upset, go sit under a tree. It helps sort out what you can't. Her mother had been such a proponent of greenery, Maisy had landed a job at the plant nursery at sixteen years old.

And it was true. She'd stretched and rushed out of her house in a desperate need to breathe without wanting to scream. But the grass along the sidewalk and the trees lining the road hadn't seemed to work as well as they usually did.

God isn't real.

It was more of a decision than a thought. Ryan had become VP with all the education of a high school diploma. She'd gotten her Master's, had worked at the company for five years longer than him, was the VP of Communications, and still earned ten percent less than he did. The idea that God would have this happen "to work things together for the good" had bloomed a violent rage inside her, and so she just decided not to believe any longer, for her own peace and so that her mind would not fly to pieces.

That's when the ground beneath the sidewalk in front of her had turned glassy, transparent, and about twenty feet below, a skeleton stared up at her.

She'd screamed and scrambled back, the hairs on her neck standing up, her mouth going dry. Across the street, old Ms. Elaine brushed the curtains aside and peered out at her.

Maisy had looked back down, her neck crooking almost against her will. Still, the skeleton laid there in the dirt, still with some hair on the skull, and tatters of a dress around it.

She'd run back home and refused to leave for two days.

* * *

Over the course of the next few months, more and more of them appeared but she couldn't stay inside all the time. She had to move, or the energy built inside her body like carbonation in a shaken soda. She rode her bike, first, hoping that the strange sights wouldn't occur if she didn't touch the ground.

No such luck. She saw more as she moved faster. Three skeletons appeared under the street just around her block. What had happened? *Does a serial killer live nearby?*

Then she realized: the skeletons were in various stages of decay. The oldest, the one near the blue and white house on 12th Avenue, had decomposed enough that most of it was gone except for the head, which was supplanted in more sand than dirt.

Maisy searched for information on the Internet and found that bodies dissolved into the ground after 20 years or so unless surrounded by sand or other kinds of soil that protected it better. So, she was seeing skeletons buried perhaps fifty years before, or longer. Hence the greater number.

After that, she asked for a week off work. She couldn't focus on selling fruit trees and evergreen bushes and ornamental plants when dead bodies revealed themselves to her under the tree at St. Mary's cathedral up the road. She couldn't drive to work when the commute went past the cemetery, where her mother was buried. The cemetery she had already avoided for several years.

She hoped that this bizarre experience would stop, and it would all end up being a sort of early midlife crisis.

It didn't.

* * *

She tried going to church.

She'd always identified as Methodist, ever since her parents had dragged her to the big old white farmhouse church in the town that she'd grown up in. It had been easier to stick with what she'd known. Religion had always been more of a framework for Sundays, a kind of routine to stick to when she didn't have work to make her get up in the morning.

So, she'd continued attending all through her twenties, even after her mother had died, and her father had stopped going. She'd just shown up and gone along with things, prayed the prayers, stood when asked to, and sang the hymns along with everyone else. She didn't know why the experience with Ryan had snapped her faith when her mother dying of diabetes hadn't. She'd soldiered on with a brave face, and never cried, never even at the funeral. Her dad had needed her. He'd broken down, had stopped eating, and she'd lived with him for about six months to ensure he got back on his feet.

Maybe her beliefs had decomposed for some time in her mind before she'd realized it and decided to bury it. But these new and terrifying hallucinations had started right after her decision to stop believing. If she could force herself to believe again, maybe they would stop.

Maisy crept into the little Methodist church right at the start of the service. She'd never gone to this one. She hadn't wanted to return to the same church she'd stopped attending—she couldn't bear the whispers and the looks of the people who would judge her for not going. They'd murmur and the old ladies would pat her hand and ask how she was doing, and how was her father, and had he found peace yet?

She perched on the edge of the pew in the back row, trembling for some reason. Should she ask forgiveness for leaving? For falling away? For just the decision that she didn't believe in God that had popped into her mind without warning?

"All rise," the Methodist pastor had said. "Now, let us sing the doxology."

Everyone sang:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

When the phrase 'all creatures here below' rang out, the ground shimmered in front of Maisy, and underneath the church, far, far below, several skeletons appeared. They seemed to lay in stone caverns, and their jaws clicked in time with the lyrics. As if singing.

Maisy waited in trembling paralysis; she could not just flee this problem. She'd figured that out after the first few months. If she ran away now, and just tried to return to work, and ignore it all, she couldn't handle it.

Her strange ability to peer through the ground changed, the forms of these skeletons appeared closer as if she looked through a telescope.

The movement of their jaws did not seem to match the doxology. The skeletons were saying something else. Even if she could have read lips, of course, she couldn't have understood. Except . . . whispers resounded through the cavern below the church. Or maybe just in her head.

We're God, from whom all bodies grow;

We're God, all creatures here below;

We're God and all us dead are hosts,

We're God, our bones cry out the most!

Maisy licked her lips and gave a slight nod to the skeletons below. Her paralysis broke, and she gave herself permission to leave.

But the bones below the Methodist church did not seem hostile, or angry, or condemning. They waited below in a peaceful array, 'singing' along with the living, but not upset that the above grounders had it all wrong. Maybe because they knew those people would join them, eventually.

"You can't change anything, can you, God?" she said under her breath. "You don't have power like that."

An old man two pews ahead of her cocked his head, frowning, and whispered to his wife beside him. The old woman raised a finger to her lips and shook her head at Maisy.

The collection of skeletons, hundreds of feet below, continued singing. And Maisy knew the truth of it, that they had nothing to do with Ryan getting paid more than her though he was an idiot and a half. They had nothing to do with her mother dying at fifty-one years old.

My mother.

She wanted to visit her mother.

* * *

She'd gone out of her way to avoid the city cemetery on her way to work each day. Now, she drove straight to it.

The skeletons waited for her, a mass of God, a collection of hosts. They did not *move* as she alighted from her car and traipsed down the hill towards her mother's grave. But the whole cemetery did turn transparent, and it seemed like she skated on a glass sea, and the bodies below—some of them not skeletons yet, shifted in their rest, their jaws clicking. One freshly dug grave held a small child, her hair flowing as if on the crest of a wave, her little eyelashes dark on a smooth cheek. The child did not seem to shift towards her the same as some of the older hosts did, and Maisy wondered if their awareness grew as they aged in the ground.

She still feared them. How could she not? She'd feared God her whole life, and these were skeletons after all. But they had a mass sense of sturdiness, of earth, and peace, and they did not make up one entity, or one consciousness. They were many. They were all God.

Maisy found her mother's grave. Knelt. She should've brought flowers. That's what people did, right? They brought something living to taunt the dead?

She shook her head. The dead were not jealous.

There, below, her mother lay, her skull not totally exposed, the dress they had buried her in not yet gone inside the coffin.

"God?" Maisy asked.

Her mother shifted in the grave, her jaw clicking along with the others next to her, getting louder like rain in a storm.

"Mom—God, I just wanted to say—" Her throat closed. She swallowed and tried again. Why did she try so hard not to cry? "I just—I just had to tell you. I wanted to visit the past five years. But I was angry that God took you away." She stared down. "But now you *are* God. So, I can't stay mad, I guess." She laughed, and tears dripped down onto the ground. "I'm still at the plant nursery. I'm VP of Communication."

Her mom's skeleton spoke from the six-foot hole. "*Don't forget to sit under a tree.*"

"Because it helps sort out what I can't?"

"*The trees are us. We grow them, parts of us are in them. I can speak to you. Perhaps, because you are a Communicator.*"

Maisy let out a sob and bent her head, and allowed herself to cry, really cry, for the first time.

Below her, the Gods all let out a susurrating clicking, like the climax of a thunderstorm. As if they cried along with her.

* * *

The next day, she returned to work. She ventured out onto the nursery floor, where the company grew all the seedlings and the starter trees, the plants, and the bushes. She touched one of the evergreen bushes and a whisper echoed in her mind.

Ryan asked her, "So, have you thought about that tech company I told you about? The self-trimmers?"

She turned to him. "How about you walk the nursery floor and examine each of the bushes? The conifers, the cypress, the hemlock, all of them. If you think this is a viable option, I need you to look at the products and think about how it will work. Really get in there, though, okay?"

Ryan grinned and nodded. She left him there and sauntered around to the next row of plants to the back.

The ground became like glass, and an old skeleton a hundred feet below said, "*Don't worry. We will speak to the idiot.*"



SUGARED LEMONS

by: Shae Carys

Their house was old and Sammi had once heard that the older the house, the more likely it was haunted. She had also heard that it used to be a funeral home. The new funeral home was next door, and her Mom loved to joke that the “neighbors were quiet.”

Getting to the basement meant taking the short winding stairs. Twelve steps, four straight, four left, four down. It would have been awful to take a body around the tight corner, especially with rigor mortis, which she’d learned about on the crime shows her Mom watched. The borrowed ratty box had been tucked away in the coal bin which was used for days when the weather turned sour and the sky green.

Sammi withdrew the box with a certain amount of reverence for the possibilities it held and crossed to a space on the floor where she’d laid a checkered blanket earlier. Her Dad had told her never to bring a “devil board” into the house, which was why she hid it, but her desire for knowledge had overridden his suspicious sense.

Placing the worn board onto the dusty ground, she set the candles she’d brought with her down on each side slowly and lit them with the old Bic she’d fished out of the kitchen drawer, a remnant of her father’s days as a smoker.

The child-safety tripped her up, but she pressed down and coaxed the flame to each of the fat, glass-wrapped candles. She hoped the spirits liked Sugared Lemon and Ocean Mist; they lived in this house, so they had to know that there were none of those elegant tapered candles left after they’d all been “borrowed” for her cousin’s wedding last summer.

She took out the planchette, the heart-shaped white plastic disc slightly yellowed and sticky to the touch. Wrinkling her nose at the tacky feel, she wiped it on her jeans and then set it down on the middle of the board.

A deep breath. A shiver over her arms raising all of the hairs up into blades as she positioned her fingers against the planchette laid on the board. Unseen eyes had watched her in this house. She had felt them on her like fingertips. She had heard the creaks and groans from her attic room, had noticed things go missing. She’d felt the chill. The chill! She knew. She just *knew*.

She only intended on asking the board one question.

“Is this house haunted?”

The words hung in the air like smoke, and like with smoke, she held her breath around it. Waited for it. The answer. The moment.

The planchette moved inexorably to the upper right, as if she couldn't stop it if she consciously tried. The clear plastic circle bored into the planchette stopped, laying directly over the word—

NO.

Her breath exploded out in a sigh that stirred the candles to near expulsion. It took a moment for the spirit's message to sink in and then she felt better. There were no ghosts. No hauntings in the house. The board had said so.

The back door opened upstairs. Dad was home. Rather than explain why she was carrying candles up from the basement, she spirited them back into the coal bin with the board and walked upstairs. She'd return the board to Mel at school on Monday.

Some time a little later in the night, the Sugared Lemon's wick flickered and sizzled, simmering itself back to life. They really *did* enjoy the scent.



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Tamsin Bloom is a trans woman living in Pittsburgh whose writing focuses on questions of identity and its reflections. Her short stories have appeared previously in places like *Bloodletter Magazine*.

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Emmie Christie's work includes practical subjects, like feminism and mental health, and speculative subjects, like unicorns and affordable healthcare. Her novel "A Caged and Restless Magic" debuted in February 2024. She has been published in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Infinite Worlds Magazine*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, among others. Find her at: www.emmiechristie.com, her monthly newsletter, or on TikTok.

KATHERINE KERESTMAN - Portal

Katherine Kerestman is the author of "Lethal" (2023), "Creepy Cat's Macabre Travels: Prowling around Haunted Towers, Crumbling Castles, and Ghoulish Graveyards" (2020), and "Haunted House and Other Strange Tales" (Hippocampus Press, 2024), as well as the co-editor (with S. T. Joshi) of "The Weird Cat" (2023) and "Shunned Houses: An Anthology of Weird Stories, Unspeakable Poems, and Impious Essays" (2024). More than 60 of her Lovecraftian and gothic poems, essays, and short stories have been featured in *Black Wings VII*, *Penumbra*, *Journ-E*, *Spectral Realms*, *Illumen*, *Retro-Fan*, *Dissections*, *Off-Course*, *Lovecraftiana* and other discerning publications. Katherine has a B. A. in English and History (John Carroll University) and an M. A. in English (Case Western Reserve University), thinks "Dracula" and "Wuthering Heights" are the greatest books ever written, and is wild about *Dark Shadows* and *Twin Peaks*. Her name is etched among the inscrutable glyphs of the Esoteric Order of Dagon and the Dracula Society. Interested parties may stalk her at: www.creepycatlair.com

MARIANNE MURPHY - Seashells

Marianne can't get enough of all things surreal, uncanny, and out-of-this-world. While earning her MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults and BFA in Animation, she specialized in short-form horror and experimental media. Her work has been included in publications such as *Cicada*, *Ladybug*, *Spider*, and *Highlights for Kids Magazine*.

Marianne has taught writing and art workshops for over a decade, and currently develops content and UI/UX for educational software. She lives in Philadelphia with several fake plants and two mysterious cats.

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MARY NEVILLE - Skin To Skin

Mary is an actor and writer from Salt Lake City, UT. Last July, she received her MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She lives with type one diabetes, is learning to read tarot, and loves to spend time on a paddle board.

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AGNES PARKER - Canvases

Agnes Parker clawed her way out of a murky Florida swamp and has spent the time since writing thinly veiled love letters to it in the form of romances set against the backdrop of that very swamp. When she isn't writing, she can be found spending time with her spouse, reading, or giving excellent but unsolicited advice. Visit www.agnesparker.com to learn about upcoming releases.

TAYLOR JORDAN PITTS - Berylliosis

Taylor Jordan Pitts is a book industry professional and writer living in New York City. They have published short fiction and nonfiction in various literary venues, and they're currently pursuing an MFA in writing for children and young adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

ALEXIS POWELL - Reduction

Alexis loves all things vampiric and unusual. At four years old, Alexis's first crush was Rudolph Sackville-Bagg, and she hasn't stopped wanting to be a creature of the night since then. Darren Shan (whose novels also shaped a worrying amount of her personality), Clive Barker, Anne Rice, and Stephen Graham Jones are some of her favorite horror writers. She enjoys horror that makes her skin crawl but also acts as catharsis for everyday struggles.

She currently attends VCFA, where she will receive her MFA Writing for Children and Young Adults, and works as a bookseller in the world's greatest bookshop. When she isn't reading or writing, you can find her cooing at her adorable pet snake, drawing, or playing the guitar.

TASHI SAHEB-ETTABA - Mirrored Self

Tashi is always on a hunt for the best tiramisu wherever she goes. She lives in Tucson, AZ with two spoiled cats and a Sonoran Desert tortoise. Her work is featured in *HerStry Blog*, *Not Deer Magazine*, and *R&R Press: Glue Gun*. When she's not writing, she loves gardening, traveling, binging on horror films, hosting sticker parties, and spending quality time with her pets. You can follow her on Instagram and Threads at: @novelist_tashi.

ANNE-MARIE STROHMAN - Echoes

A.M. Strohman holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts and has published short fiction in *Black Fox Literary Magazine* and *Reflex Press*. She also founded KidLit Craft, a resource for children's and YA writers, and co-hosts the KidLit Craft podcast. She finds all her best ideas on hikes near her home in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Find her online at: www.amstrohman.com.

JAY WHISTLER - The Three-Eyed Tree

Jay holds an MFA in writing for children and young adults and an MA in technical writing. She has worked as a professional writer for over thirty years, was a university writing instructor for over 16 years, and served as an editor for a literary journal.

She is currently an acquisitions reader for a literary agency and a freelance editor with Angelella Editorial.

Her first MG nonfiction title, "The Ghostly Tales of San Antonio," debuted in August 2021.

She also grew up in a haunted house and comes from a family of psychics.



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SPECIAL CONTRIBUTORS

STEFANIE GILMOUR - The Feral

Female

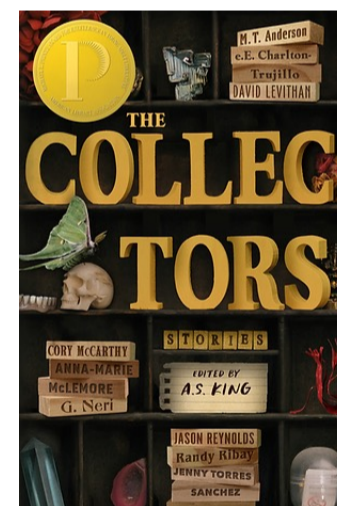
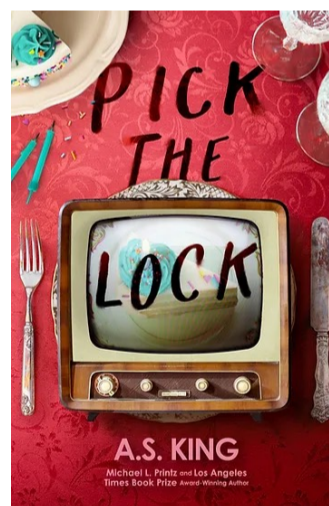
Stefanie is a graphic designer who enjoys creepy and fantastical stories. Plants, concerts, reading, and writing are a few of her favorite things. She's a



Midwest native and lives there with her patient husband and their tolerant cats. You can connect with her via her website: www.stefaniegilmour.com

A.S. KING - What to Do with Something You Can't Hold by Yourself

A.S. King is the author of many novels, winner of the Michael L. Printz Award and the Margaret A. Edwards Award for a lifetime contribution to adolescent literature, among others. She is the co-founder of Gracie's House, a charity that funds safe spaces for rural LGBTQ+ youth.



Learn more about her and her work at: www.as-king.com



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Nonfiction Contributors

Stefanie Gilmour

and **A.S. King**

2024