

Untenured 1.1



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The Supporting Cast **By Mikayla Collins**

Mikayla Collins is a Northern California born, Montreal based aspiring writer. She studies Socio-Cultural Anthropology at McGill University, and is interested in everything that makes people who they are. She is also an avid dog lover, visual artist, and musician.

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Every morning at around 8:30 am, in a squat little brick building on rue de Bullion, my ex-neighbor would go out on our shared fire escape for his first cigarette of the day, a dark green mug of coffee in hand. I know this because, in my old apartment, my kitchen window faced directly into my neighbor's kitchen window, with only a short fire escape bridging the gap between our two tiny islands. In my seven months of living in this shoebox, I became acquainted with this man very uniquely and intimately considering how few conversations we had ever shared which made it past the realm of small talk. After all, what else is there to do in the depth of winter in an unfamiliar city amid a Covid-19 induced lockdown but watch one's neighbors too closely? I knew his name, I knew he was a DJ from Vancouver with a visual arts degree, but more unusually, I knew his routine every morning and what time he went to bed. I knew when he showered and when he had company. I could often smell what he cooked for dinner and whenever he'd go out for a cigarette (which was usually at least 4 times a day) the smell would sneak into my apartment like a pungent and ruthless burglar. Though I no longer live on rue de Bullion, I often think about my old neighbor and wonder how his life is now, even though it no longer overlaps with mine.

In literature, the people we interact with only briefly, the ones who don't play a major role in the story, are called the tertiary characters. In theater, they are known as the supporting cast. A story, or a life, cannot accommodate more than a few central characters at one time and so all those who don't play significant roles tend to fade into the background. This is merely a feature of being a person interacting with the world. I find this concept very interesting in real life because every single member of my supporting cast is, of course, the protagonist of their own stories, each filled with

their hopes, dreams, and cast of tertiary characters. I can't help but think of old classmates, coworkers, neighbors, and wonder if I'll ever see any of them again. What does it mean if I do?

The man who worked at my old *depanneur* always used to wink at me as I'd bring my various purchases to the counter. I remember the very first time he did it; high out of my mind introducing myself to a brand-new city under the soft blanket of winter it felt like he was an accomplice on my adventure. "A pack of Spirits too please," was met with a slight look of disappointment that would become very familiar to me as he opened the case and handed me a pack of cigarettes that definitely were not the American Spirits I knew from home. I smoke Macdonalds now. This *dep* was conveniently just around the corner from my apartment, so I saw this man several times a week for months. In all this time, I never could make up my mind if his winks were endearing or very unsettling. I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt; I've always been inclined to like him, and I am striving to become a more optimistic person. Once, he gave me free Kraft Dinner, and that's really all it takes to make a college student fond of you. Never mind that I'm vegan and I gave it to my roommate. In July I moved, and now I never see him anymore. I don't like my new *dep* nearly as much.

I think you can tell a lot about a person based on how they treat their supporting cast. Are you excessively friendly to the barista when you order your morning cappuccino? Or do you speak as few words as possible, simply exchanging goods and services? One of my favorite things about my best friend is the way she will befriend anyone, in an effortless way that does not always come naturally to me. In her story, tertiary characters are nothing but friends that she hasn't made yet. I aspire to live more like her.

Walking from my apartment in the McGill ghetto to campus, I often pass a 30 something-year-old woman walking the cutest dog I've ever seen (yes, I do say this about nearly every dog I encounter). Black and white with vaguely poodle-like curly fur, this dog flops down the street as if

he has no bones. Seven months old, his mind hasn't yet caught up to the size of his body. Being the menace that I am, every time I see this dog, I cannot help but shamelessly ask the woman, "Pardon, je peut carressé votre chien?" She always begrudgingly lets me, and I share a few sweet minutes with the puppy before I let her continue with her life. How long is the right amount of time to pet someone's dog without inconveniencing them too much? She told me his name, but I can't remember it now. Names are funny like that.

Sitting in a Plateau cafe writing this essay, I see a small child in a yellow raincoat and matching bucket hat waddle in. Barely coming up to his mom's waist, his thick little legs poking out from under his raincoat like little sausages and his cheeks look like little round Japanese mochis. He stuffs some sort of baked good into his mouth, his chubby cheeks fighting to chew it while his mom waits for her coffee. I am almost certain I don't want to have kids, but this toddler is weakening my resolve.

Sonder is defined as the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own. Perhaps it is a side effect of moving from my isolated childhood in the pacific rainforest to a city, but I am transfixed by the way we interact with the background characters, the ones whose names aren't even notable enough to be mentioned in the script. There is something so interesting about the slight overlap between all our lives, the way we all gently bump into each other. The skyscrapers in this big but somehow little city are full of eyes and hearts. This anonymity of the city can be an isolating thing or a beautiful one. The complexity of so many lives confounds me. I think the mystery of these tertiary characters is that you never know who they might become to you. They could linger on the edge of your life for months before becoming a main character. One hot day in May, you might meet a boy by the Lachine Canal to discuss socialism, only to realize months later that he is the love of your life.

Ladybug

by Joana Galvão (JoG)

Joana Galvão grew up in Sao Paulo, then moved to the U.S. to study multimedia communications on a full soccer scholarship. Having written and directed short films exhibited in venues such as the Museum of Modern Art in NY and awarded at Rio Film Festival among others, she attended the Berlinale Talents 2008 as a screenwriter sponsored by the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She has degrees in psychology and neuroscience acquired in Germany and a PhD in cognitive innovation from Plymouth University, UK, funded by the European Commission's Marie Curie Actions. She feeds her creative impulses with feature film screenwriting projects, two of which are funded by Brazilian governmental organizations, as well as writing projects such as writingtriangles.com. In order to enhance her writing skills, she has just returned to university for a degree in literature & language at the University of São Paulo.

* * *

I searched for the train line the elderly man in front of Charles de Gaulle mentioned would culminate in the city center. I sauntered through a path along the highway with a contradicting fusion of dalliance and determination. My denim travelling bag became unnecessary, finding a new home by the side of the road. I metamorphosed into a free spirit, an ethereal being unbound by physical needs. Relieved of the weight, I continued my journey taking only a metal Rosie the Riveter lunchbox—acquired at O'Hare airport with the phrase "We Can Do It!" stamped on it—containing the remaining of my belongings.

I approached a tunnel which forced me to cross the highway. My path hit a dead end. I stepped on the asphalt, determined to reach the other side indifferent to automobiles accelerating in my direction. *My life has been predestined; I know this is not my time to die.* Cars blew their horns and slammed on their brakes. A few threatened to slide off the road due to the abrupt change in speed.

Without grasping the self-imposed life threat and potential danger to unnamed coequals, I ambled as vehicles dodged my body waltzing to the opposite byway. Wandering on the grass pathway, I picked up my Discman from the lunchbox and inserted another Ani DiFranco CD. The

soundtrack accompanied an imagined film with particular verses matching each step of my journey. As a result, I would discard any full-listened album, tossed over my shoulder.

The lunchbox contained only the essentials. I opened my wallet and stared at the empty bill compartment with a smirk. For the first time of my adult life, money had no significance. I broke a credit card, the last sign of capitalism, in half and threw it aside. My scuba diving card received a special treatment, getting buried in the earth. I pictured myself peregrinating through the world. I would swim *au naturel* into alien waters that wouldn't require wetsuit, air cylinder, diving mask, or flippers. I gaited out of my flip flops and curled my toes into the soil as I stepped away from my shoes. Jack Johnson reverberated through my headphones with a Hawaiian luau vibe. The clouds pranced as the breeze grazed my placid countenance. I was in the moment and out of it when tried to figure out how the plot would proceed.

I finally reached the aimed train line but was not in such a hurry to progress with the journey. Doubts abounded. Reconsidering my quest, I could keep traipsing freely eastward until the Land of the Rising Sun but only after my expected meeting with Jacques Chirac. I fantasized about that anonymous life of a wayfarer, foregathering people in envisaged villages along my Eurasia venture.

I perched at the summit of the valley containing the railway as a train cruised through it. I got into the process of digesting emotional baggage when I sighted a ladybug traversing a trunk. The self-identification was eminent hence in my mother tongue this red beetle is the diminutive of my given name. I had the impetus of writing and hunted for a pen in my lunchbox. Nothing else was available to scribble on but the empty pages of my passport. The travel document was needless in my newly devised life.

The flow of words didn't match the motion of my hand penning it down. I struggled to stream messages from my left brain to my right fingers. The story was constructed, written, and

experienced. *Two girls fall in love. They live happily ever after for seven years.* Highlight seven, hand. *They die.* I sobbed over their death. *They come back as cats.* A smile surged over tears. *The felines have nothing else to say to each other—their mutual understanding is through looks and meows. The two beings cherish each other for seven lives. They're back as ladybugs—no more cuddles, but company. These insects share their existence for seven days. And now it's time for them to be on their own.* I grabbed the lunchbox as I knew I had to kill the ladybug to free myself. I hesitated. I didn't want to execute the creature, but in one thrust—bam—I smashed the minikin. The arthropod embodied either me or her. I wept at the death of this tiny organism and wiped my regretful tears with muddy hands as I witnessed a second ladybug taking off. *One dies; the other survives. They split. Both become stars, shining light-years apart. It's OK, they're falling stars who can inspire other girls to strive.* End of the story, in chicken scratchings on unstamped pages of my passport.

There was nothing else to do but to absorb the experience with the headphones now pumping "Little Plastic Castle" still camped on the hilltop. A police car pulling over on the other side of the railway shattered the contemplative moment. Two officers jumped out of the vehicle and swaggered in my direction. I considered running away but the cheery melody in my ear channels brought an ironic twist to the scene. The synchronicity of the lyrics was unprecedented. I remained still until the two cops got steps away, when I cordially stood up to greet them. The two whizzed questions at me. "When did you arrive in Paris?" shot one. "This morning," I retorted in poor French. "What are you doing here?" snapped the second cop. "I'm Joan of Arc's sister. I'm here to speak to your president," I said. It was to me an affront they didn't contain their chuckles. The officers looked at each other and nodded their heads in a silent agreement. One of them picked up my lunchbox, opened it, and leafed through my passport, examining it. Both escorted me to the police car which I assumed it'd be a ride to my intended destination.

I snuggled in the backseat and resumed listening to the previous album. My bare feet, covered with dried mud, propped on the floor surface. I watched the officers speaking to each other in the front, but couldn't hear them over the music. I was eerily calm, just watching the landscape turn into streets on my Parisian private tour. Sooner than I anticipated, we arrived at our destination, a different place than the predicted journey's end. The policemen invited me out of the car and accompanied me into a police station.

From a waiting room, I overheard the policemen discussing what they found—me—to a police chief. Through the half open door, I observed the officers spraying my purple perfume around the room, joking around it could bring a good omen, citing the Maid of Orleans. While the agents discussed my fate, I got distracted by trying to decipher what that limbo meant. A big glass window separated the waiting room from a small retention space where a young yogi with a reddish robe sat in meditative lotus position. I gaped at him, intrigued by the encounter. Perhaps we were in the same boat—a young representative of each continent about to join strengths; I was part of a bigger scheme. I made a circular sign with my index finger to him, meaning "Are we all together in this?" He gazed into my eyes, brought his two palms together, and leaned his head in a Namaste salutation.

A police officer asked me something in French I couldn't understand, but with a hand gesture invited me into the police chief's room. I repeated my mission to the lawman: I was there to speak to Jacques, already intimate with their commander in chief. Pinching his five fingers and bringing them to his mouth, he proposed, "Would you like a pill? All of this can go away with it!" I couldn't identify the relation between taking a tiny pressed synthetic substance with everything evaporating. *What is he talking about?* My mind shortcut the meaning of his proposal to a tablet that would end my life. "No!" I yelled back. *Are they trying to kill me?* For my understanding, it went from them arranging my transportation to Palais de l'Élysée to wishing me dead.

The officers conducted me back to the police car for another ride. I was finally back on track; they would take me where I should be. Hundreds of thoughts rushed in high speed from axons to dendrites whilst on tour number two. The sun began to set when we approached a gate. The car parked inside of an old building and the policemen accompanied me to an industrial elevator. My cells tingled as I tried to guess what could happen next. *Is this the end?* The cryptic lady from the plane from Chicago to Paris imprinted in me a new purpose. *If everyone were to find their spiritual family and I'd find mine, would I disappear? Was the elevator bringing me to such an event?*

The door opened to a hallway. The policemen escorted me into a room in the end of the corridor where a well-dressed agent awaited. He darted me another set of questions. "What are you doing in France? Why did you leave the U.S.? Why didn't you inform your university?" I reiterated I was there for a meeting with their leader, but my purpose kept shifting in my brain. The mysterious woman had a point and now I was following her lead. "We're here to find each other," I said, followed by my grand freshly conceived theory, "There is an invisible force uniting people, and this movement will bring the continents back to Pangea." The composed man ignored what I said and kept repeating questions I found irrelevant. Frustrated by my replies, he groaned before walking out.

I was led to a medical room in which a tall Black man in a white coat was expecting me. Silently, he handed me a disposable emerald paper gown and pointed to a folding screen in the corner. French words filled the room as he gestured towards my lower body; I decoded I also had to take off my underwear when changing into the garment. I presumed they were studying me considering I was a special being. "Who are you?" I asked the coated man. He said his face was familiar because he resembled a Hollywood actor. I felt bamboozled. I repeated my question, but he didn't seem to notice the urgency in voice. *Does he have a message for me?* He kept switching between broken English and French while I did the opposite, mixing fluent English with basic

French; after a while, I had no clue what the words coming out of his mouth meant. He continued examining me: heartbeats, blood pressure, reflexes.

They confiscated everything I possessed: the clothes I wore, the lunchbox, and the few items within it. Once the checkup terminated, the coated man handed me an apple and a jar of water. *Why the forbidden fruit?* I hadn't eaten the whole day, but I wasn't actually hungry. Another man accompanied me to the end of the corridor, to one of the cells with heavy iron doors. There were two metal structured bed frames covered with thin mattresses. He commented something in French with another worker and they decided that that was not my lodge. We cruised to the opposite side of the hallway, reaching one more cell. A single mattress lied on the floor. I deduced that the edgy bed frames were the reason for their change of mind. He invited me in and receded, fastening the iron door behind me. *It's a mistake!* They locked me up. A colossal misunderstanding even after I had explained my intention word for word.

I sat down on the mattress and appreciated the apple, feeling pity for destroying its shape with my teeth. I was eating something that was as alive as I was. The apple looked immaculate, fulfilling its full potential. I thanked the fruit for letting me devour it. Feeling trapped and with much energy running through my veins, the story jumped from me being a messenger to having superpowers. I was not merely a human being in a mission any longer; I could command the world with my cognition.

Through a high thick glass window, I watched faded stars peer in the dark sky. Stamina inhabited each squared millimeter of my body. I kneeled on the floor, following my body's intention. A force from my guts created a tornado inside of me. All the air from my lungs arose through my throat in the loudest scream ever to exit my mouth.

"EVERYONE WHO DOESN'T BELONG TO THIS WORLD..."

The vociferous sound emerged from the bottom of my soul and, at the end of my roar, all the problems in the planet would unravel.

The workers backfired, shouting words in French that I knew meant "Shut up!" Two of them slammed their hands on the metal door, almost drowning out my cry.

I had to consummate the sentence; it couldn't be left unfinished. My fists closed while I kneeled down, like in a soccer player's goal celebration with my torso muscles contracted.

"...DIE RIGHT NOW!"

Six guys forayed into the room, knocking me down as I vocalized the last words. I could solely conclude they'd kill me. If they'd end my existence and hide my cadaver, no one would ever know. Battling for my life, I fought back. I tried to release myself from those twelve arms, but I was a prawn against an octopus.

In the middle of wrestling, they forced a straitjacket into my upper limbs. Squirming my arms into the straitjacket, they tied it behind my back, restraining my movements. I spotted with the corner of my eyes another guy entering the room holding an injection. There was an evident reason to combat with vehemence; it was indeed a question of life or death. I grappled back but not enough to avoid the needle to be waltzed into my ass. The unknown liquid flew into my body as the worker pulled the syringe's plunger. *Oh my gosh, they killed me. I'm dead.* They hushed outside, bolting the iron door. I was left facing the floor with my arms crossed behind my back, still wrapped by the straitjacket.

I surrendered. That was the end. Laying on my stomach, I tried to move. The straitjacket drifted with its tie loosed up. By moving my trunk and arms, I could release myself from it. It was exhilarating. *They didn't kill me after all!* I survived. I freed myself from the constraining garment and stood up with a mix of pride and delight. I was alive!

I erected my body and strode towards the squared glass window on the iron door. My face beamed while I waved to the workers on the corridor. *Look at me! I'm alive! You didn't kill me!* I won the battle. They goggled me with an inhospitable mien. One of them wagged his hand in a gesture for me to turn around and relinquish. I persisted with the salutation but retreated with the unfriendly response. In seconds I became lethargic, melting into the mattress.

The next memory I encoded was my arrival at Ville-Évrard.

I was guided to the main hall which contained a small reception, tables with benches for meals, and a corner space with a sofa and shelf with board games. A black short bald-headed male nurse chaperoned me. He instructed me in French complemented with mimic that I should leave my belongings in a locker, assuring all would be secured, shaking the key up in the air. I was back wearing my outfit from the previous day and not the confinement gown even though I had no recollection of how that had happened. I don't remember waking up in the cell and the whole procedure of being transported to Ville-Évrard. From a medical report, I know I had arrived by ambulance but under the influence of a potent sedative I was unable to record those next-day events in my brain.

I refused to leave the Discman in the locker claiming I needed my music. He insisted. I clung to it and the short man started losing his temper. He pulled the sound equipment from my hands adding I would also have to place the clothes inside the locker after bathing. Following a disputed negotiation, the infuriated man let me keep my recently acquired baby blue beret as an accessory to the two-piece patient uniform. A female nurse approached us with my new wear together with a towel and a bar of soap. They opened a door and instructed me to wash myself inside.

The bathroom was nothing like any other I had been in my life. It was an ample aseptic space with an iron bathtub in the center. I had no idea where I was and for what reason. I played with the faucets to figure out how they worked; even objects spoke a foreign language. The door

was unlocked, and someone could walk in at any given second, adding an extra layer of tension. I didn't quite comprehend why I had to follow a such awkward sequence of rules. Cool air crammed the room. I stepped into the unwelcoming bathtub with my dirty feet. Brown water drained down as I reconciled with my nude silhouette. With cold goosebumps, I dried myself in a flash and wore my unfashionable azure outfit.

The short-tempered nurse awaited me right outside the bathroom, ready to seize my remaining belongings: grey social pants, black shirt with white vertical lines, and underwear. Something went wrong; I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I had urgency in speaking to an authority to elucidate the whole situation. A collapsing domino-falling structure of misunderstanding transpired: policemen, police chief, agent, nurses. My hope lied on the next domino piece. I told one of the nurses I needed to talk to whomever was in charge. The answer escaped from the tip of her tongue, "Doctor's appointment tomorrow." Rethinking my situation, that would be my lodge for one night as I'd reach the last domino tile in the following day. Game over. Freedom.

The nurses showed me my bed in a spacious room, shared with a woman with severe intellectual disability who rambled through it. Something was in fact going wrong. *I'm not like her.* The well-seasoned vegetable soup served with baguette and brie temporarily nullified my apprehension, my first meal at Ville-Évrard.

I hopped out of bed at the crack of dawn and strolled through the hallway, trying to recognize that outlandish environment. I wasn't aware of where I was, but I knew I shouldn't be reposing; *I must find a way out.* Infuriated by my transgression, an employee hauled me back to my sleeping base. In the following morning, determined to uncover my next act, I strode to the shelf accommodating board games, searching for signs. In one of the boxes, there was a board with names of cities and countries in a path. I rushed to my bedroom foraging for a pen and scrounged a

landscape photography from my roommate's nightstand, the only writable piece of material I could find. I penned down the list of places I'd cover as my new given goal.

In the appointment, the middle-aged male doctor spoke French only as a young female assistant acted as a translator. I was prompt to patter. "All began with my first ecstasy. I experienced a reality greater than reality itself as my five senses boosted to a hypertensive mode; my consciousness arose." With her warm ears, she nodded with a semi-smile, turned to the doctor, and translated into French. He took notes. "But not until the mushrooms I could really be enlightened." The pattern repeated throughout. Me-her-him-notes. "I was designated as a messenger, a messenger of the Truth." For my disappointment, at the end of the session my status remained the same. Another frustrated domino tile. The doctor and assistant vanished as I asked another nurse when I'd be set free. She informed me I'd have a next appointment with the same doctor in a couple of days. My fate got postponed while they offered me a tray with a cup of water and tablets. I didn't know what those pellets were but complied believing they'd be nothing more than placebo to me.

The familiarity of an international hostel surged at mealtimes. A Spaniard introduced himself with a quivering handshake, which its tremor reverberated from the rest of his body. The young man revealed having witnessed his father gun shooting his own temples when he was only five. Never overcoming the bloody scene, his body kept the score. There was this old French man who played swapping berets with me. He filched my hat and donned his old-fashioned lid on top of my head. Nibbling baguette and brie with my fellows, I met Laura, a French youngster who spoke rare words of English. Laura admired my beret and I offered it for her to try. She didn't understand what I was doing there. I also couldn't make sense of it. I tried to get the reason for her confinement, but her sentences evaporated in the air. I just managed to capture the word "boyfriend" which stood out.

Eureka! I still had an air ticket to the U.S. in my email. Luckily, I had bought a return instead of the intended, but pricy, one-way ticket. I had no intention of going back to Uncle Sam's country but now that my plans weren't working my way, I could retrieve the electronic ticket and fly back as nothing had ever happened. *But what day is today?* I knew my ticket was for a week after my arrival, but I had no idea how many days had passed. No calendar, no mirror, no notion of time, space, or self. Confident it had been less than seven days, I tramped through the corridor aiming at a computer and printer, intruded an office where two ladies typed away at their work desks. They balked my advance with hostile gazes. "Can I use the computer for five minutes? I just need to access my email and print an air ticket!" They shouted me out, arguing that that was not an area for patients, completed by a shutting door.

The only option I had was to flee. Due to the swallowed pills, my body wouldn't obey the guidance of my aroused mind. I traced my strategy by staring out of the window, capturing the horizon. A road in front of the ancient *château* cut across a green meadow. I couldn't discern the subsequent course of the path but envisioned a front gate. *I jump over it and voilà!*

After my sophomore soccer season, my coaches noticed the drop in my ambition, remarking they'd take my full scholarship away if I didn't meet their expectations of embodying a leader who is not only technically exemplary but also physically fit.

Encouraged by fear, I took up running with Amber. She led me to a trail in the woods in the small town in "Almost heaven, West Virginia" we both lived. The path became less recognizable as we debouched in a field surrounded by graves. My conception of a cemetery consisted of high imposing walls separating common citizens from deceased ones; a barrier natives rarely overpass in my home town, the major urban conglomerate in South America. Now we jogged in a splendid scenario—that of a graveyard! My heart pounded. Straight ahead a heard of deer grazed peacefully where the path shaped again, carving its way into the woods. About twenty animals faced us.

Hesitant, I asked Amber, "Should we go right or left?" She bunted back, hastening, "We keep running straight. They are the ones afraid of us."

Amber sprinted towards the does and bucks whilst I tried to keep up. The deer split, opening an avenue in the middle of the herd. I felt my confidence surge and spurred my pace; my fear ebbed away, instead I was filled with joy and a new sense of freedom.

The entrance door yawned outward with free access to the exterior world. Inspecting my chances through the window, I visualized myself dashing outside. No one would be able to catch me. While my fleeing plan took shape, my body remained inert, lifeless, disconnected from my motor cortex. I was not only physically confined but imprisoned by chemicals. The cocktail of psychotropics rendered my body a heap of dormant organic material. Each step endured the heaviness of walking on quicksand. *How can I escape in such condition?* Other thoughts cropped up. *Where have my freedom of choice gone? How could they remove me from society and impose pharmacological treatment without my consent?*

I wouldn't give up. Dragging my lower limbs, I managed to reach the corner of the deserted reception area, trying to remain unnoticed. *There must be people who know I've been incarcerated by mistake.* Not able to sprint, I stomped out of the entrance door.

An ambulance rested in the front of the building. That was my chance. Open wide, the vehicle door invited me. I crawled inside. That was a sign—someone was there ready to rescue me. The driver was my comrade; he was in the position to step on gas. I yelled, "Drive!" No response. I moved my hands imitating a steering motion while shouting, "C'mon. Let's go!" His gaze penetrated my skin, organs, and skeleton; trespassed my ghost-body, shadowy existence.

The sounds of hurried steps and frantic French shouting plundered my means of transportation. Desperate, I squawked once more yet the driver ignored my commands. Within milliseconds nurses forced their body weight on mine, trying to retain my movements. I put my

mind on making my body respond, fight back, but it wouldn't comply. They lugged me back inside. I failed to escape.

The old French patient carried a radio with him. I couldn't understand why he had the privilege of accessing music while my Discman slept secured within the locker. Laura forged a plan, inviting me to be her partner in crime. She distracted the old man whilst I hooked his portable tuning device. We slinked into Laura's room, cozier than mine—a small chamber with two parallel single beds separated by a nightstand below a window. Silently, we eased the door closed, maintaining our concession and relishing the little adventure. Negotiating in body language, we agreed each could pick three songs in a row, taking turns. Laura tuned dramatic French songs drifting from station to station. When she'd capture a ballad near the end, she'd appeal for an extra, leading to disagreements dissolved with hand sign exchanges. In my turn, I strived for English sung songs which I aimed to capture the hidden messages within the lyrics. Peace reigned in our den. We didn't need a verbal exchange to attain conjoined solace. Warmth filled my core in a moment I forgot about fleeing, succumbing to the contentment of existing.

To the Barricades (or: Writers, Blocked)

By Marshall Moore

Marshall Moore is an American author, publisher, and academic based in Cornwall, England. He has written several novels and collections of short fiction, the most recent being *Inhospitable* (Camphor Press, 2018). He holds a PhD in creative writing from Aberystwyth, and he teaches creative writing and publishing at Falmouth University. His next books are a memoir titled *I Wouldn't Normally Do This Kind of Thing* (Rebel Satori Press, 2022) and a co-edited academic collection on the subject of creative practice. For more information, please visit www.marshallmoore.com, or follow him on Twitter at @iridiumgobbler.

* * *

1.

When your existence itself is a crime, laws can become little more than rough guidelines: things to be questioned, worked around, or ignored altogether.

2.

We're going to talk about writer's block. It's a topic writers tend to avoid discussing, half curse and half contagion. This superstition has its roots in another, possibly older one: that of the muse, which underpins much of what we believe about how writing works and why it sometimes doesn't. What it boils down to is that secretly or not, many of us have habits or rituals to summon a Greek goddess who may not exist.¹ If she manifests and is pleased, she will send us into a creative flow state during which words will pour out of us like cold, refreshing Assyrτικο on a hot afternoon in Santorini.

Hours will pass, pages will fill, but our hands will not tire. It's exalting when you experience it, but it

¹ It was widely believed up until the late 1800s that poems and other works of literature genuinely were divinely inspired and had their origins in external sources.

(Reynolds, 2015). Reynolds, S. (2015, October 25). Five reasons you're experiencing writer's block. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/prime-your-gray-cells/201510/five-reasons-youre-experiencing-writer-s-block>

doesn't happen on command. To an extent, it's beyond your control. Fallow intervals can be terrifying, which is why we don't like to discuss them much.

When I was a kid, I slipped more easily into that elevated, feverish momentum, writing story after story longhand on lined notebook paper. Although I preferred legal pads, which felt more adult because they had more lines and no holes, any sort of paper would do. A story would come to me. I'd scribble it down as fast as I could get the words out. By the time I was done, another idea would usually have formed in my mind. If I didn't start on it right away, I'd wait until the next day, never longer.

I began writing longer-form work back then too. My first "novel," to use the term loosely, was a linked series of stories about hyperintelligent cats who had their own flying saucer. They parked it in a hangar under a shrubbery in front of the house where they pretended to be pets. By day, they'd fly to random countries because you could get the best rosewater in Bulgaria or the best gemstones in Tanzania. I didn't know much about geopolitics then, but I did love an atlas. These stories formed a narrative arc that involved a conflict with an evil scientist who had death rays and, of course, hated cats. I wrote this magnum opus in one of those hardbound blank books I suspect are often regifted. At some point, I graduated to writing about humans: basically fanfic continuations of Edward Eager's *Half Magic* and his subsequent books. The recurring themes: being hated for who the characters were, and of magic-enhanced escapes to distant places where they'd no longer be in danger. Or not the *same* danger, at least.

Since I still had to live through my subject matter, I was saving myself through these escapes into writing. The frenzy was my constant refuge, my hopeful blankness. One after another, I'd bash the stories out onto the page, show them to my parents and a couple of friends, lodge them in a

notebook with the rest of my work, and move on to the next. I started reading *Writer's Digest* in my teens, so I knew what writer's block was: *a problem other people had*.

3.

I'm gay. I was born in North Carolina in 1970. Came out in my late teens. North Carolina had sodomy laws on the books until 2003, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Lawrence v. Texas* that they were unconstitutional. Although I was living on the West Coast by then, in a state that abolished its own sodomy laws when I was still in elementary school, North Carolina remains the standard by which I measure everything, even now, in my fifties, from the other side of the Atlantic. Obviously sexual activity and sexual identity aren't the same thing, but it takes more than a dose of saltpeter and a bucket of icewater to pry them apart. So in a sense, certain aspects of my existence were illegal until my early thirties. And depending on what country I visit, that's still the case.

As integral as sexual orientation is to my identity, I came out as a writer (so to speak) much younger: at age seven or eight. I attended a small private school, total enrollment less than two hundred.

There was one teacher per grade, and she would teach every subject. We stayed in the same classroom all day except for recess and PE. That year, the teacher often gave us creative writing assignments. Since this was a thing I already did, I was happy to carry on doing it and getting As on my stories. One day, she asked several students to read our stories to the class. After mine, the kids all applauded. Fireworks went off in my head: *This is what I was put here to do*.

4.

To understand writer's block, it helps to know what creativity is. In a paper published in 1962², Sarnoff A. Mednick offers a useful definition: creativity is a complex problem-solving task. It relies

² Mednick, S.A. (1962). The associative basis of the creative process. *Psychological Review*, 69(3), pp. 220 - 232.

on novel connections between ideas and bits of information. Although we tend to think of creativity in more abstract terms – self-expression! new ideas! the muse! – it makes sense when you think of it taking place in the service of an objective. If you watch those home-renovation shows, you (sometimes) see creativity in the designers’ clever ideas for rearranging existing space and adding extensions. You see it in storage cubbies and cabinets in space that was otherwise wasted. Elsewhere, you (sometimes) see creativity in accounting, when CPAs expense everything they think they can get away with. While you’re driving, creativity (sometimes) comes into play. Do you stay on the main roads, do you obey your satnav’s directions, or do you veer off the beaten path if you know a better route? And in a political crisis, creativity runs amok: graffiti, slogans, artwork, a banned anthem. The problem is the government, or the lack of one.

In the arts, creativity is both more and less obvious. A book, a short story, a poem, a painting, a sculpture: we see the finished product, or perhaps the work in progress, but the creativity manifests in every minuscule decision the artist makes. Once you begin to think of the process as a series of objectives that will culminate in a finished product, this definition makes more sense. You’re solving a creative problem, and the process of reaching a solution is complex, self-reflexive, and interconnected. Think of the thousands or millions of individual problems – some tiny, some not – that have to be solved in the course of writing a novel: punctuation, vocabulary, sentence structure, verb tense, paragraphing. Whether to convey information via dialogue or exposition, or some combination of the two. Minute shifts in perspective, point of view, and narrative distance. Character names. Which descriptive details will convey enough information without bogging the reader down. Larger structural issues of chapter length and composition. Framing and flashback. The overall narrative arc. Similar lists could be drawn up for any branch of the arts.

It stands to reason that in any system as complex as this, something will go wrong from time to time. If you're willing to accept the idea of creativity as a natural human process somewhat akin to, say, digestion or respiration, then it follows that you'll get the occasional creative stomachache or case of the sniffles. To carry these metaphors³ a bit further, creativity is similar in its requirement for input if it's going to work properly. You can't write a novel without having read a large number of them first. Ideally, you will also have read poetry for exposure to language that is both beautiful and economical. You will have read short fiction to learn about efficiency in storytelling, and nonfiction to fill your head up with interesting facts. Screenplays for their lessons in structure and staging.

So it's normal and natural for the process to break down now and then. Like any other bodily system, it works until it doesn't. Moreover, the problem may not be a breakdown per se; it may just be that your problem-solving process is incomplete. You may need more input: time, solitude, company, art, literature, experience.

There's no muse.

5.

I lived in Hong Kong from 2008 until 2020. If you remember 2019's huge protest marches, I was one of those people in black. Although I never threw Molotov cocktails at the cops or set train stations on fire (I believe the police instigated much of the violence to justify cracking down on the protestors), I was there for all of it. Even if you avidly followed those events in the media, you have no idea how dark things got at the end, how violent and horrible, and how sinister the situation continues to be.

³ These are only useful up to a point. There are obvious parallels between input (nutrients, air) and absorption and so forth. However, the end product is waste, whereas the end product of a creative endeavor is not, one hopes, nothing more than halitosis or shit.

6.

Depending on which survey you look at, either Germany or Sweden ranks as no. 1 for recycling. However, there's another largely undiscussed venue for recycling: the writing community online. If you're reading this on a browser, open another tab and do a quick search on some phrase like "top tips for writers" or "how to write a short story." You'll get some crazy number of hits, something like nine digits depending on which search engine you use. Check the first few; compare what they say. You should notice the pattern right away: I'd guesstimate that about 95% of the writing advice you find online is recycled, albeit paraphrased and repackaged: Daily word counts. Butt in seat. Show, don't tell. No adverbs in dialogue tags. No two characters whose names start with the same letter. The muse. Find your voice. Be authentic. Stay in your lane. No matter how many times all this gets repeated and retweeted, these rules will not apply to every writer in every situation. Little is original and new.

During Donald Trump's grotesque campaign for the White House and the blur that was 2016 - 2020, the word "gaslighting" entered the public vernacular. Broadly speaking, to gaslight someone means to say things and behave in ways intended to make them question their own beliefs, even their own sanity. One form of gaslighting involves repetition. Repeating a lie won't make it true but it will wear the victim down; it will make them more vulnerable.

Now do one more Internet search: "writer's block is not real."

If you're one of the contingent shilling writing advice online in hopes of gaining followers, finding clients for your editing services, and/or building a readership for the creative work you should be doing instead of writing listicles, you're kind of proving my point. Repeating a lie won't make it true but it will wear a frustrated writer down. It will make them more vulnerable. To whose benefit, though?

7.

There are three kinds of writer's block. (It's a real thing, by the way. There are equivalent terms in French, German, Spanish, and Chinese. The origins are disputed, but the notion that it's all a collective delusion or pathologized laziness has been debunked.⁴) One is the most common sort: you just can't write. The second is more nuanced: you can crank out the words in forms other than your preferred one. The third is more about erasure: you can write but you loathe your work so much that you feel compelled to keep it from being read. I've been through all three, sometimes concurrently. At the time of this writing, I'm doing all right, but after graduating from college, my creative work crashed to a halt. For about four years, I couldn't finish a story. It wasn't that I lacked tools: Back in the early '90s, Brother Industries made a word processor, the WP-80, that was basically a single-function computer. It was a single integrated unit with a screen, a keyboard, a slot for a 3.5" diskette, and a printer. No Internet, of course. That wasn't a thing yet. But I had a lot to scream about and nothing to say. Those were very grey years, and I began to suspect whatever creative spark I'd once had, had gone out. Clearly I wasn't going to become the Famous Author I'd dreamt of being all my life. My personal mythology drifted in those years: it became more about comfort, agency, and a certain craving to be taken seriously than, well, *writing*. At some level, I understood this and became convinced I should go to law school. It wasn't the life I wanted, it wasn't the *career* I wanted, but it seemed to tick the right boxes.

Immersed in research, I forgot about stories for a while. Everything back then was slow and paper-intensive. You had to buy and flip through thick guidebooks for any educational program you were considering. Having done well on standardized tests all my life, I figured the LSAT ought not to be a

⁴ Castillo, M. (2014). Writer's block. *American Journal of Neuroradiology*, 35, 1043 - 44.

problem. And hell, I'd actually study for it, which I'd never needed to do before. I used my Brother to make lists of the universities I thought I could get into and the others that might be a stretch.

The weekend before I took the exam, my messy alcoholic boyfriend came messily out to his mother. Instead of studying, I spent most of that Saturday and Sunday talking on the phone with him through tears and meltdowns. We lived in different cities, about three hours apart. Any closer and he'd have spent the weekend crying on my pillows between dashes to the bathroom to throw up. He was the kind of guy who'd be drunk by the time I got home from work, but being no paragon of mental health myself, and searingly lonely to boot, I kept him around because the alternatives were scarier. Being required to take care of someone who was such a mess was comforting in a strange way, even if he could be demanding. The Monday of the test, I felt so anxious and unready that I couldn't keep food down. I ate two stalks of celery that day. While I didn't bomb the LSAT completely, my score came back about 20% lower than I had expected – not enough to rule out law school altogether, but enough to keep me out of the better programs.

Serendipity saved my writing career, such as it is. I wasn't looking for calls for submissions but happened to find one in the classifieds of some gay magazine or newspaper – maybe the *Washington Blade* or *The Advocate*. The editors were compiling an anthology of LGBT-themed ghost stories. I grew up in the rural South surrounded by folklore and crazy people. There was no lack of material. I'd been away long enough to have processed it more. I figured if I couldn't come up with something for this book, I might as well give up once and for all. A couple of days later, a story idea sprang to life in my head. It took me a few days to write it. I printed it out and faxed it to the editors on the day of the deadline. A couple of months after that, the acceptance came in the mail. The breakthrough I'd been desperate for. My first sale.

I really came that close to giving up.

8.

Block, blockage, blockade.

Black bloc.

9.

Since then, I've maintained a consistent writing output. I've been called prolific, but I don't think that's a fair assessment. I'm not Joyce Carol Oates. I don't do this full-time. I'm not even sure I want to. I cherish the relationships I've formed with colleagues and students. I enjoy the camaraderie of writing conferences; I also enjoy the subtle art of lacerating dickheads who ask keynote speakers paragraph-length questions. I run a small press, too. It's not the cornerstone of my identity, but I'm comfortable with my layers and complexities. Apart from that interlude in my early twenties, I've never had an existential crisis because I know what I'm here to do and the rest is either a bonus or expendable.

There are fallow periods and false starts. Any number of half-finished short stories drift like tendrils of goldfish shit toward the bottom of my Google Drive folders. Two of what Anne Lamott would call "shitty first drafts" of novels languish there as well (okay, perhaps I'm not done with the digestion metaphor). Someday I might revisit the more recent of the two, as I like the underlying premise very much, but it won't be a black mark on my soul if I never get around to it. I'm all for writers supporting each other, but the idea of announcing my daily word count online fills me with a gassy sort of horror.

10.

The protests in 2014 came about because Hong Kongers were expecting a democratic "one man, one vote" [sic] election of the territory's Chief Executive. Beijing made it clear this was never going

to happen, something more people should have seen coming. When you've lived in Hong Kong long enough and your social circle is more local than expat, you learn things. Case in point: when Margaret Thatcher was negotiating the Handover terms with Deng Xiaoping, apparently he told her that under no circumstances would a direct democratic process for the territory's leadership ever be acceptable to China. And if she were to press ahead with such reforms, he would use the full strength of the People's Liberation Army to take over the territory. If it took sacrificing millions of lives to get Hong Kong back, then he would pay that price without hesitation.

At the time, Britain could have obliterated China in about twenty minutes. It still could. However, the Falklands War had just happened, and Thatcher felt there was no public appetite for prosecuting another war over a colony so far from home. Better to cut losses and compromise. Hence, the actual language of Hong Kong's Basic Law (the document that serves as the territory's constitution) is more aspirational than binding. In other words, it smells like democracy and tastes like chicken.

I was out there the night the protests started in 2014. I had just started my job at the university where I would work for the next six years. Somewhat naively, I felt that if my students were out there getting their heads bashed in by the cops, I should at least be there to bear witness.

I don't think anyone imagined how bad things in 2019 would get.

11.

In his studies of writer's block, Robert Boice identified six negative emotions that may cause or exacerbate the condition⁵:

⁵ Boice, R (1993). Writing blocks and tacit knowledge. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 64(1), pp. 19-54.

- Internal censorship
- Fear of failure
- Perfectionism
- Residual trauma from negative early experiences with writing
- Procrastination
- Mental-health issues

I have written a book-length, diary-style manuscript on the 2019 protests and their 2020 fallout. The working title is *Blood and Black T-shirts: Dispatches from Hong Kong's Descent into Hell 2019-20*. Not elegant, but it gets the point across. I documented everything, including the dark shit that never made it into the international news. But I've been warned not to publish it.

I'm mildly concerned that no one will take it seriously. I'm used to not being taken very seriously. I used to rant about that on my blog when I was trying to sell a book proposal about why the 2008 financial crash was going to happen and how if you were a member of Generation X, you should strongly consider leaving America before it did. The two or three replies I got from agents were dismissive at best: *You don't know what you're talking about. You don't have the credentials to make a claim like this.* The subtext: *Stick with writing gay thrillers.* I left the US in 2005. In 2008, when the global economy tanked, I was in Hong Kong. Every day on my way to work, I'd walk through Hong Kong Station and discreetly gloat at the red numbers on the stock tickers on the big video screens overhead. Mass financial collapse has never been so fun and affirming.

Am I a perfectionist? Yes and no. I have a master's in linguistics and have run a small press for ten years. Bad punctuation annoys me. Sloppiness annoys me. Pretty much everything annoys me, if I'm

honest. But sometimes you have to make a conscious decision to be done with a piece of writing and move on to the next project.

Residual trauma from negative early experiences with writing? Yes, I can see how that would be a problem. All the years people spend trying to get published. The starvation for that crucial, validating first byline. The negative experiences came much later in my own career.

Yes, I procrastinate. I prefer having written to the desolate, swamp-draining slog of actually doing it. No one writes because they enjoy it; they do it because they must. If they're in the so-called zone, they're in a state of creative euphoria that lifts them out of the drudgery of the keyboard. There are times I just can't. I'd rather read, take a nap, or hang out with the cat.

As for the mental-health issues, I'm going to sidestep a bit and refer you to Alice Flaherty's magisterial book on the subject, *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain*.⁶ She does a better job with this topic than I possibly could.

12.

To be clear, the 2019 protests were not riots. For the most part, the marches remained disciplined and orderly because that's how Hong Kong rolls, or used to. The mounting violence at the end was down to the police and the mainland paramilitaries embedded with them. Dispersal operations at the end of the marches soon turned into vendettas, then open hostility toward the public. There was a wantonness to them, a mindless slashing evil the likes of which I had never seen before, much less thought I'd have to live through. As weeks turned into months and the government dug in its heels, the stories turned darker: insidiously at first, then out in the open.

⁶ Flaherty, A.W. (2004). *The midnight disease: The drive to write, writer's block, and the creative brain*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin.

These things happened, or some version of them did: gang rapes in custody – young men as well as women; beatings so bad that shattered arms hung from black-clad shoulders like sacks of glass shards; rendition across the border to black sites up in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, certainly for torture and possibly for organ-harvesting; burning prisoners' eyeballs with laser pointers while in custody. Kettling protestors and passersby, forcing them to kneel in stress positions for hours, then hauling them away by the dozen. Tearing off masks to pepper-spray protestors' eyes and faces. Attacking commuters in metro stations for the crime of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, probably killing a few, subsequently covering it up, and desecrating the memorials citizens put up and maintained. Kids were dragged out of food courts in shopping malls, out of elevator lobbies in their own buildings. The cops teargassed the whole city for weeks on end, perhaps thinking mass civic torment would turn the populace against the protests. It didn't work, so the motherfuckers kept on gassing.

Toward the end of this nightmare, a journalist friend told me another story: the string of "suicides" among younger protestors – dozens of them – was actually a series of murders. The common denominator? They'd all been arrested and mistreated in jail, and could serve as witnesses should there ever be Nuremberg-style trials. Detainees from wealthier families were pressured to leave Hong Kong. The ones who couldn't afford to do that were flung from tall buildings or drowned in the sea and left floating. The official explanation was, of course, to blame the protests. That's typical for Hong Kong under this regime. But young people began carrying notes to say they would not kill themselves in custody, and on getting arrested they would shout their names and "*I am not going to commit suicide!*" in case they turned up dead later. The cops quickly got in the habit of covering people's mouths upon apprehending them.

A Telegram group was set up in an attempt to locate people who'd gone missing. There were hundreds, it seemed. Possibly thousands. Although I couldn't read the Chinese details and descriptions, I could see faces. Most were young. In half an hour of scrolling, I recognized at least four of my own former students.

13.

As a Southern writer, I have always been fascinated by place, and I tend to write the kind of stories that wouldn't be likely to happen in other locales. The debate around cultural appropriation – who is entitled to write about what – has made me reflect on my own choice of settings. A few years ago, I put together a spreadsheet of my short stories and novels: where they were set, where I was living when I wrote them. A pattern emerged, a gap of approximately two years before my default location setting shifted to wherever I was living at the time. For much of the time I lived in Washington DC, I still wrote about North Carolina. When I moved to Northern California, I kept on writing about DC. Once I knew San Francisco more intimately, it became the primary setting for my work. In the same way, this work habit followed me to Portland, Seattle, Seoul, and Hong Kong.

At least in fiction, I'm still not writing about England; I haven't been here long enough; I'm not quite ready. But two years have passed since the horrors of 2019. The *place* was already there – I spent twelve years in Hong Kong and considered it home – but to say the *subject* has found its way into my work would be a bit of an understatement. There's been no lack of material. I've been away long enough to have processed it more. Now that I've escaped to a distant place where I'm no longer in danger (or not the *same* danger, at least), I should be able to write about it. Shouldn't I?

14.

Black bloc.

Writer's block.

Blockages.

Barricades.

15.

The (creative) writing has been on the wall for some time now. In 2015, the creative writing MFA program at City University of Hong Kong was abruptly shut down. Although the stated reason was that it was losing money, it was a self-funded program. CityU's administration charged the program to use classrooms, theater space, and other facilities... and, according to a well-placed source, kept changing the rates, sometimes retroactively. Malice and incompetence are ugly cousins.

As is often the case in the Potemkin financial hub, the official explanation ignored the obvious: many of the MFA students had been participants in and supporters of the protest movement. The international, low-residency nature of the program attracted students from all over. And – troublesome foreigners! – they went on to write about what was happening there, and published widely.⁷ This attracted the wrong kind of attention.

Early in the 2014 protests, the writing spray-painted on a wall at my own university read, in English and Chinese, *Are you going to keep silent until you die?*

16.

Negative emotions, updated for present-day realities in Hong Kong:

⁷ Canadian novelist Madeleine Thien, who taught on the CityU MFA program, wrote about this in an article that was published in *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/may/18/why-hong-kong-is-clamping-down-on-creative-writing>

- Internal censorship: If I publish anything, there will be safety issues. I've already been warned by one author who used to practice law that this is "NSL stuff"⁸ and I should shut up. Another has told me to try essays first and see what happens.
- Fear of failure: Will anyone actually publish this?
- Perfectionism: What if I get something wrong?
- Residual trauma from negative earlier experiences with writing: Living through it in the first place was more than traumatic enough.
- Procrastination: (I'll get to this bit later.)
- Mental-health issues: I have PTSD again – I was first diagnosed with it back in 2004 and recognize the symptoms – but the strain of the Covid pandemic means I won't be able to obtain a formal diagnosis via the NHS until sometime later, eventually, maybe.

Taking all this into account, I probably ought to have writer's block, but I don't.

16.

Writer's block is at least partly a crisis of expectations.

There was a boatlift to Taiwan so that protestors could escape. I found out about it a couple of months before it made international news.⁹ One of my more politically active friends told me that unscrupulous boat captains would take money to help these young people flee to safety. They'd get within sight of the lights of Kaohsiung, the southernmost major city in Taiwan and the closest point

⁸ The NSL is the National Security Law drafted and enacted in Beijing in 2020 without consultation with or input from Hong Kong's elected officials. In the eyes of the international community, this act marked the end of the "one country, two systems" treaty with Britain under which Hong Kong was supposed to manage its own affairs without interference from China.

⁹ The *New York Times* broke this story in December 2019. I think it was incredibly irresponsible of them to publish it, and by doing so, they put people's lives in danger and likely led to the high-profile arrests that took place in 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/08/world/asia/hong-kong-taiwan-protests.html>

to Hong Kong. A mile or so from shore, these boat captains would force their passengers to get out and swim the rest of the way. Never mind that that wasn't what the young refugees were expecting. Quite a few of them drowned.

As far as I know, no one has written about that. Not in English, anyway.

17.

I keep almost having ideas for short stories. I have a few titles in mind, but the necessary fusions and combinations don't happen as often as they once did. It's rare for a fully formed story to present itself to me: usually the process is more like a cascade of connections, one idea merging with another, meiosis as well as mitosis. There's no end to the metaphors I could mix. They're all valid and they all fall short. The stories are in my head somewhere. In the meantime, there's the novel, the essays, and the academic projects. I am content. If writer's block is a crisis of expectations, it's still real. The only solution entails more time and more input. More connections have to form.

Sometimes you drown.

18.

When I started writing this essay, I planned to list Hong Kong writers, journalists, and academics who have lost their jobs because of the political situation, because of their writing. Because they are being blocked. However, some are personal friends: still there, still in the maws of the territory's so-called legal system. I decided to omit this part for two reasons: naming them would add to the jeopardy they're already in, and in the time it has taken to write this, several more names have been added to the list. I can't keep up.

19.

The first Hong Konger was convicted recently under the National Security Law.¹⁰ No jury. Three judges handpicked by Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, who has continued to insist that freedoms of speech and the press remain intact. As is often the case in Hong Kong, the official explanations elide the obvious: the NSL has outlawed anything and everything the government and its puppetmasters don't like. It is absurd and it is vile; it is stupid and it is a travesty. Malice and incompetence are ugly cousins.

Erasure is the third form of writer's block I identified in my research.

20.

“No intelligent man has any respect for an unjust law.”

- Robert A. Heinlein, *To Sail Beyond the Sunset*

21.

I'm not okay. I function, but I'm not okay. I know I can't go home. My home has been torn away from me. This seems to be my home now. I feel sort of at home here. I'm no longer in danger, or at least not the *same* danger, anyway. I should be able to write about that, shouldn't I?

22.

When your existence itself is a crime, laws can become little more than rough guidelines: things to be questioned, worked around, or ignored altogether.

Block, blockage, blockade.

¹⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/07/first-nsl-conviction-beginning-of-the-end-freedom-of-expression/>

Black bloc.

Barricades.

Repeating a lie won't make it true, but it will eventually wear an authoritarian government down.

I promise to obey the National Security Guidelines.

I promise to obey the National Security Guidelines.

I promise to obey the National Security Guidelines.

All Turkeys Go to Heaven

Brendan Praniewicz

Brendan Praniewicz earned his MFA in creative writing from San Diego State in 2007 and has subsequently taught creative writing at San Diego colleges. He has had poetry published in *From Whispers to Roars*, *Tiny Seed Journal*, *That Literary Review*, and *The Dallas Review*. In addition, he received second place in a first-chapters competition in the Seven Hills Review Chapter Competition in 2019. He won first place in The Rilla Askew Short Fiction Contest last year.

* * *

His name was Nev.

Short for Nebuchadnevah. An egregious typo, meant to be named the biblical Nebuchadnezzar, but a suitable name for a 55-pound turkey, who I believed would “nevah” die.

The first time I saw Nev was at a feed shop in rural San Diego. The dusty scent of hay and alfalfa hung in the air. With the intentions of purchasing chickens, I wandered through the store. A baby turkey peered through a metal cage, stretched his long neck between bars, and gently pecked my hand. Then he squeezed out this chirp that sounded like water, splashing into a basin.

I lifted the bird from the cage, cupped my hands around his tiny, warm body, and fell in love.

Buying a turkey warrants an immediate response from friends and neighbors. A question never asked when you purchase a pug or guinea pig—“When are you going to eat him?” I had no desire to feast on my pet.

For the first few months, I kept Nev in a dog kennel, wrapped in chicken wire. He had twelve room mates, all baby Golden-Laced Wyandotte chicks. A heat lamp hung from the ceiling and cast the birds in a red glow and warmed them through the night. My German Shepherd inspected the garage, patrolling every half hour to ensure their safety. My yard was occupied by predators, coyotes and red-tailed hawks lurked everywhere. The hens took time to age and grow before they could roam freely.

Turkeys, like childhood celebrities, never age well. When little, they are adorable, but months down the line, extreme puberty occurs. Turkeys are the Macaulay Culkins of the animal kingdom.

Nev grew into the size of wheelbarrow. Blue and red bumps emerged from his soft-feathered head, and a worm-like snood dangled from his beak. His cute chirp evolved into a thundering gobble, annoying neighbors and frightening anyone who approached.

The turkey followed me around the yard, stomping his giant feet as if he wore oversized flip flops. Ascending hills, he huffed and wheezed like he'd just smoked a carton of cigarettes. Even on the edge of heart attack, he trailed behind me everywhere.

Whenever I stopped walking, he'd puff his chest, fan his tail feathers, and bump into my leg. Turkeys have a tremendous sense of confidence, as if this action would send me ten feet back or make me spontaneously combust. He never tired of this game.

Despite his bullish ways, he always entertained. His eating habits were hilarious. He'd tilt his heads back and practically gargle food pellets, spilling them everywhere. Nev had a sweet side as well. When I'd pet his bumpy crown, he'd peer at me with golden eyes, expressing gratitude.

One day Nev decided to play turkey games with my German Shepherd. The canine, 140 pounds, generally patient and well-tempered, had enough of bully butterball.

While washing dishes, I overheard the commotion in the yard. A couple of gobbles, a few warning barks, and wings flapping in panic.

I ran outside. Feathers coated the dog's mouth, and others, speckled with blood, helicoptered in the air. Nev, still intact, stood wheezing. A pocket-sized wound hung from his chest.

Did I mention I loved that bird?

Within seconds, I corralled Nev toward my four-door Chevy Prism. Gathering the bird in my arms, I shoveled him in the backseat.

Racing down the street with my hazard lights on, I probably looked insane. The band, the Killers, pumped from speakers. In the back of my car, this creature, the size of a California condor, spread his enormous wings, smacking them on windows, and gobbled with fury.

When I pulled up to stoplights, people in lifted trucks stared down in jaw-drop wonder and pointed fingers. When the light turned green, I revved the engine and gunned the car toward the closest pet emergency hospital.

It's not easy guiding a turkey into a vet's office. A Looney Tunes scenario with predators abound—dogs lunging on leashes, and cats, in attack mode, ready to pounce out of carriers.

The most disconcerting part—the judgment—skeptical faces in every direction, seeming to ask—“Why don't you just eat him?”

The front desk receptionist glanced down and asked, “What do we have here?”

“My dog bit my turkey, and I think he needs stitches.”

“Let's get him to a back room,” she said with surrounding killers in a frenzy.

Vet techs gathered around the feathered curiosity. Bearing grins, they seemed elated that someone brought in a species they'd never operated on and probably never would again.

A young, muscular assistant, struggled lifting Nev in his arms, and he teeter tottered as he lugged the bird down the hallway.

In the lobby, I waited in trepidation. It's a risky venture, bringing a turkey to a vet—were they going to heal him or eat him? I kept my nose on alert for any scents of garlic or rosemary. But Nev's constant gobbling, echoing down the hallway, assured me of his safety.

Moments later a vet returned with a clipboard. Her face held concern. “He's badly wounded. In order to stitch him, we need to anesthetize him. It's going to be 1500 dollars.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets and sighed. With Christmas approaching and living on a teacher's wage, I didn't have the money.

"I'm sorry, but I can't afford that."

I prepared myself to say a final goodbye to my friend.

"Just a minute," she pursed her lips. "Let me see what we can do."

Gobbles and negotiations ensued.

She finally returned and said, "Because this is a special case." She leaned forward and whispered, "We can write off some of your bill for training purposes. Can you afford 500 dollars?"

"Let's do it," I smiled in relief.

An hour later, out stomped my clumsy, drunk turkey, who glared at me with a confused, angry expression that said—I don't know what happened, but get me out of here.

I thanked the vets, wrapped the bird in my arms, and carried him to my car. Night had fallen, and Nev, wrapped in blankets, dozed off in the backseat.

Nev lived another two years.

Sometimes he'd attract a gang of wild turkeys into the yard. They'd play like children, kicking up dead oak leaves as they'd hunt for crickets and grubs. Nev didn't have the ability to fly away and roost with them—his body wasn't designed for flight. And he couldn't breed with the wild hens because domesticated turkeys aren't engineered to reproduce naturally.

Despite his handicaps, Nev adored his adopted brothers and sisters. Together they'd lie in cool summer grass until the creamy sun descended into canyons, when his family departed to the safety of tree canopies.

One night a band of coyotes killed Nev.

With great sorrow, I buried him beside a blood orange tree.

Nev lived five years longer than most turkeys. Humans are born to live, but these birds are bred to die.

If you take a moment to understand them, turkeys offer so much endearment and joy. Their clownish antics and unwavering companionship, continue to warm hearts long after they're gone.

I miss him.

Adventure Time

By Margaret Marcum

Margaret Marcum is currently a third-year student in the MFA program in creative writing at Florida Atlantic University. Her creative writing has appeared in *Amethyst Review*, *Scapegoat Review*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, and *Children, Churches, and Daddies*. She lives in Delray Beach with her two cats, Angel and Alice.

* * *

As I pull up to Andrew's white-stoned house, my mind begins to race. Should I really be doing this? Shouldn't I be studying for my classes tomorrow? How do I even know—I take in a deep breath to silence my thoughts and fears. This is where I need to be. There are no accidents—once you swallow the red pill, there's no coughing it back up.

As if the world around me agrees, a stunning white owl swoops down and lands on a branch just outside my car window and stares right at me. I stare back, not breaking eye contact for a few moments, which pass rather slowly as I gaze in amazement at this majestic bird. The owl blinks a few times and then flies off briskly, giving a single “hoot.”

I open the car door still in awe and look up into the sky to see if the bird is gone from sight. The sun is beaming through a splattering of clouds, and I swiftly make my way over to the front porch and ring the doorbell, not skipping a beat before I can change my mind.

A woman with penetrating electric eyes opens the door. She seems to be in her mid-fifties and has light streaks of silver in her brown hair. She looks me up and down with a subtle flash of her eyes before mechanically asking, “Hi, can I help you?”

I try to blink away the effect of her metallic tone before answering. “Hi, I'm Clementine, Andrew's friend,” I retort struggling not to break eye contact with her icy sapphire stare or to contort my face in reaction to it.

An awkward pause follows, and I can feel my discomfort and annoyance begin to surge behind my flushed cheeks when finally she replies, “Ah, yes.” Crossing her arms and turning her back, she yells upstairs. She doesn't seem too pleased. And I can feel my heart pounding as I silently curse myself for not texting Andrew to meet somewhere else, anywhere else.

Andrew comes bounding down the stairs and I'm filled with immediate relief.

“Hey-O,” his voice echoes throughout the cavernous foyer.

“Hey!” I call out waving an awkward hand.

“I see you've met my mom,” he places an arm around this woman whose gaze returns to fix itself on me.

“You have a beautiful home, ma'am,” I say or rather squeak.

Her expression is completely neutral. “Thank you,” as she side hugs her son in return.

Andrew runs his fingers through his disheveled hair.

“Well, wanna come on up?”

“Andrew,” his mother cautions sternly suddenly jerking her head towards him. “You know I’d prefer if you didn’t have female guests in your bedroom.”

“Really?” I think to myself, “this is 2022!”

“Sure, mom.” His tone shows no sign of agitation, but when he turns to me he gives his eyes a slight roll. “Well, wanna come on up—to the garden?”

“Sure,” I respond confidently, wanting nothing more than to flee this situation. I wonder if their relationship has always been this strained, or where Andrew’s dad is and if where his dad is might have something to do with Andrew’s relationship to his mom. I find the courage to smile politely at his mom before turning to follow Andrew out to the courtyard.

The pebbled path into the garden is lined with gnomes of different statures. The sun rays streaming down make the roses appear like they are glowing iridescently. All the flowers seem to be shifting shades of color, as they bow and dance in the breeze beneath the sunshine. The fragrance too is overwhelming. It reminds me of a distant memory in my childhood, although I can’t seem to place it exactly. But it makes me feel close to Andrew, as if he’d somehow been there too.

“Your garden is beautiful,” I remark keeping a casual gait by his side.

“You mean my *mom’s* garden,” he gestures lightly, “is beautiful.”

I don’t say anything but watch our feet move in unison.

“She can be a little much—I know.” He turns to face me now.

Again, I don’t say anything. I just study our shoes intently, trying not to let anything slip out that might offend him about his mother.

“It’s just”—he sighs deeply—“she’s been different ever since my—” his voice breaks off, along with his gaze. A cloud rolls over the last bit of uncovered sun, casting a gray-scape atmosphere over the garden.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me.” Although I wish you would, I think to myself.

“No, it’s okay.” He takes another deep breath. “When I was nine, my dad passed away. Drunk driver.”

“Oh no!” I blurt out. I never know how to react to this kind of information or if I should react at all. But I see his face and my insides scorch—and I react: “Oh, Andrew. I’m—”

“I know.” He stops at a large rock and we both take a seat on its cold surface. “So, ever since then, my mom hasn’t really been the same. She used to be super friendly and warm, and whenever I brought anyone home, she’d always be happy to meet them. But now...”

Andrew picks a twig off his plaid jacket and flicks it into the air.

“But now it’s like she’s forgotten where she put her box of joy, and what’s worse is that she treats me like I’m the only person in this world who knows where that box might be. It’s exhausting. Now whenever any of my friends come to the house, she is skeptical and untrusting. She rarely lets me go out with anyone, and when she does she has to be overbearing about every little detail. Like I might actually grow up and move out of the house one day. That I too might leave her.”

I glance up from the pebbled path with my non-pressured gaze. His eyes are still glued to the pattern of his jacket. I *knew* there had to be something about his dad. The sadness radiating from Andrew's sunken body simply overwhelms me.

"It's just not fair." He looks up suddenly like he just remembers I'm here. "But what can you do?" His voice cracks rising an octave too fast. "Like anyone else, you just learn to lie. It's an art." He playfully nudges me in the side.

Despite his efforts to lighten the mood, my heart feels like it's about to drop through and out my body melting onto the rock.

Before I can ask if he's okay, he says, "But it's getting harder," he lifts his head while side glancing at me, "lying."

Bees buzz while pollinating the roses that surround us, sounding like satellites searching for a signal.

"And it's not that I feel guilty," Andrew continues, "just that it feels...I don't know how to explain it...just...wrong." He looks at me in deep thought. "Like I can't help but feeling I wouldn't want to be lied to if I were the other person."

"I mean I didn't always feel like this. Just recently," he says, "I've just started to feel...really different."

I use this segue as a good opportunity to ask what I've been curious to know.

"So, was it Montague who told you about David Hawkins' book, *Transcending the Levels of Consciousness*? Is that why you stayed after poetry class to talk to Montague and tell him what is happening?"

He frowns in intrigue. "How do you know?"

"I talked with him this morning."

"No, I found that book on my own. Ironically, I was walking by a library, and it was there free for the taking—so I took it. And, I mean yes, I did tell him what is happening with me," his face lightens up slightly, "but I only stayed after because he quoted something during class that resonated pretty much with what is happening to me."

"Which is?" I ask, trying my best to hide the twitching curiosity in my voice.

"Montague said the Vedanta claims that there are two signs of enlightenment," Andrew speaks into the clouds, "the first is that you just stop worrying—nothing seems to perturb you anymore—you're always filled with joy. And the second is that there are too many meaningful incidences of synchronicity occurring to the point where you actually experience the miraculous."

Instinctually I feel a smirk rise up in me, but then I remember I've experienced far too many eerie coincidences or "synchronicities"—the strangest thus far being that Montague and Andrew both have a different connection to this book, and both divulged this revelation to me within the span of several days. Generally I don't believe in this kind of supernatural stuff. How can you believe in something if you don't have proof? I might as well believe Santa Clause is real. But I can't ignore the signs any longer. I have to find out what happens when you follow and connect the dots. So, when Andrew crosses his arms behind his head flashing me a tattoo of a small white owl on his forearm and suggests we go camping to escape life's distractions, I say yes.

We'd been driving for quite some time, and I wasn't concerned so much that I hadn't brought anything with me, like a toothbrush, as I was that my mom and sister Molly would be worried. I'd called and when they hadn't answered I left them both a message as well as a follow up text, and hopefully that would be enough. I would've stopped by to tell them in person, but there's something about Andrew that when he wants to do something, there's a certain urgency to it—an inexplicable immediacy.

"Wait," I say suddenly. "What did you tell your mom?"

"I didn't." His eyes remain focused on the ascending road, his smile broadening.

"Well, won't she like freak out?"

"Probably, but I couldn't bring myself to lie to her again and I could bring myself even less not to take this trip with you."

His words fill me with hot nervousness. I look out the window and try to let the vibrant green scenery calm me.

"I'm not too worried about her though. She'll be fine. I think it'll be good for her in the long run." He squints out the window with a widening grin, as we round a bend as if teetering on the edge of the world.

We're going to a campground I've only ever heard about. It's in Mt Blue State Park and apparently it's one of the most beautiful campgrounds in Maine. Andrew has been there before and says it's insanely peaceful if you know the right spot to go.

We pull into a dirt parking lot. Andrew cuts the engine, and we step out and gather up the camping gear in the trunk of his old Corolla. He takes from his pocket a crinkled map of Mt Blue and smooths it out. We then traipse into the forest on a path that is glittering with specks of golden light.

Along the way, instead of asking logistical questions like, "Where are we going by the way?" or "What are we planning to eat for dinner tonight?"—we exchange turns revealing deeply psychological information about ourselves—playing "Would you rather?"

When we finally arrive at the camp site, I look around, as if I'm just now noticing my surroundings. The landscape is brushed with emerald foliage, the trees towering over a small clearing that overlooks Webb Lake, creating a homey canopy. The grayish white-blue of the mountain looms as a backdrop to the water, contrasting with the pinkish hues from the setting sun. I breathe in the scene around me, entranced.

"Wow," I murmur.

"I told you," Andrew responds unzipping his L.L. Bean black backpack.

We set out what little camping supplies we brought. Unraveling a large green plastic tarp and some cord, I help him attach the tarp to a sloped tree creating a shelter that Andrew calls a "Flying Squirrel." We shove our sleeping bags underneath and begin searching for dry fallen bark and twigs to build a fire.

"So, you camp often then?" I inquire selecting twigs from the ground. "I mean you must if you have camping gear up and ready to go in your car's trunk."

“I went camping quite a bit when I was a kid with my family, but recently, I don’t know. But there’s something about being out in nature that just feels right, I guess.”

“Ah, a young Thoreau, I see.”

He waves his hand playfully. “Don’t try to flatter me.”

As the sun dips lower behind the horizon, the sky’s color gradient descends to deep indigo as the temperature begins to drop. I shiver pulling my hoodie over my head.

“Aren’t you cold?” I ask eyeing his thin T-shirt.

“Nope. It’s all in the mind,” he responds tapping his temple. “Anyway, we’ve found enough kindling to get a fire going.”

Andrew begins to dig a hole in the earth and motions for me to hand him the twigs with which he builds a small teepee over the dried bark. He then takes out a lighter and ignites the inside of the little wooden teepee. He blows the flame gently, slowly adding more kindling. He begins to blow harder until the flame has risen exponentially, and he’s soon stoking a fully formed fire.

“How do you know how to do all this?” I ask, gazing into the flames.

“Just did my research,” he answers.

He then asks, “Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” I respond.

He fishes out a cast iron pot, some wooden bowls and silverware, and a can of pinto beans along with a bag of rice.

“Wow, you really are always prepared.”

“Oh, always. Whenever I need to go, I go.”

“Well, I should hope so,” I reply with feigned concern.

He laughs heartily at my twist of meaning.

As he begins to fill up the pot with water, my doubting thoughts swarm through my brain. I should be working on my finite math homework, but instead I’m out here in the middle of the wilderness with some boy from school I barely know. My sudden turn in behavior has been nothing short of alarming lately. But still, there’s an irrevocable drive that compels me to find out what exactly is happening to Andrew.

The image of us in the library comes back to me where Andrew had told me I’d soon know. What did he mean by that? There’s no stopping now—I open my mouth to speak.

“So, tell me more.”

“About?”

“You know.”

I can feel him smile next to me.

“Well, I mean it all happened so fast. It was strange. I was deep in meditation and then, bam! I just felt this brilliant surge of energy whip through my body. I couldn’t tell if it was good or bad, or whether I was about to start laughing or crying. It just felt like this huge surge of energy rising up my spine and then out through the top of my head. I had to lie down because I was scared I was going to fall or honestly to fall out of my mind. I thought that I had a thought that wasn’t my thought, like it was just placed inside my head. And it told me I was going to be okay. And as soon as I thought that I wasn’t in my body anymore, I really thought I had gone mad or was hallucinating. I was just suspended above my body looking down on it, and then all of a sudden these light pinkish bubbles with rainbow rims came floating beside me. I felt like the bubbles were conscious somehow and they were there to help me. Then this star began to inflate my whole line of vision. It turned into this gateway that opened up to this brilliant white light that wanted me to enter inside it. But then I got way too wiggled out and just wanted it all to end. And then it did. But it was the most intense experience I’ve ever had. It felt like I was dying. In that moment the terror was so great, it snapped me back down into my body. After that, I haven’t felt the same. I feel so much more at peace than I ever thought possible. I also feel this incredible immediacy in everything now. Like time has never felt so precious.”

He pauses to rip open the bag of rice and to pour it into the now boiling water, stirring it slowly.

“It’s like this restless sense of peace. That we must waste no time.”

At that, a wicked current of cold wind whips through the sky making me shudder under my hoodie. Sounds like he’s been wasting no time at huffing fairy dust. But I’d like to see what he’s going on about for myself. So, my curiosity takes over.

“Waste no time to do what?” I ask, as I observe his blackened silhouette against the nighttime skyline.

He leans over to set the lid on the pot brushing his arm against mine and in an instant a radiant vision permeates my mind. Two lions, one with an illustrious mane and one with eyes filled with kindness, are romping around in a savannah. Rising lines of heat blur their purring playful display of unequivocal love.

Andrew’s voice snaps me back to the dark quiet.

“To be liberated.”

A storm of emotions coming from two different directions thunders inside me. I don't know whether to feel more bewildered about the fact that Andrew actually believes what he is telling me or the fact that I just seemed to experience some type of full blown vision. The absurdity of both however starts to blur together and from a desperate desire to understand where Andrew is I manage to muster, “Show me.”

Child of a Lesser Human

By Hareendran Kallinkeel

Hareendran Kallinkeel writes from Kerala, India, after a stint of 15 years in a police organization and five years in the Special Forces. His fiction usually tends to be dark and fantastical with some magic realism elements, often portraying racist, fascist, and discriminatory tendencies that still prevail in his social setting in a deceptively subtler form. His recent publications include *The Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Bryant Literary Review* of Bryant University, and *El Portal* of Eastern New Mexico University, among several others. His fiction is forthcoming shortly in *34 Orchard, Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, and *Lalitamba Journal*. His fiction has been nominated for Pushcart Prize and he is also a finalist of the Best of the Net-2020.

* * *

“It’s the White men,” Koman said, “the ones who speak a strange language. They came in hordes, in large ships, grabbed our land and took what we held dear.” His body shivered, not as much by the fierce December chill of Western Ghats bordering Kerala, as by fear. He brought his palms together in salutation to the goddess; a wrathful deity, despite her small size of less than half his six-foot figure.

“Do not think you can escape your responsibility by putting the blame on others,” the goddess said in a voice that boomed in the thick cluster of trees.

Situated next to their thatched hut, Koman’s forefathers had built a tiny wooden house for the deity to dwell, beneath an aged banyan tree. They had worshipped her, taking care of her abode and the surroundings. The elders passed on an onus to Koman to continue the tradition. But, since his wife’s departure a year ago, he had neither lit a lamp for the goddess, nor cleaned the area.

Koman gazed at the goddess whose eyes blazed like burning embers. Her smooth, black skin glazed in the moonlight. Angered by his abandonment of duty towards her, the goddess had emerged out of her earthly form of a stone. A chill ran through his naked upper torso as his knee-length cotton dhoti fluttered in the breeze.

“I have in me what it takes to care for myself,” the goddess said. “But, your forefathers had enshrined me in an abode, passed unto you a responsibility.” A garland of wild flowers that hid her

breasts bounced as she struck the ground with a trident in her hand. “But, you disowned me by discarding your karma.”

“It wasn’t in my mind, *Devī*, the almighty feminine power, to ignore my duty to you. My grief, the loss of one most beloved, had overridden my senses.”

“That again,” the goddess said, “was your fault.” She raised her right foot, her red silk sari sliding slightly above her ankle, and stomped the ground. “It is your abandonment of duty that caused the loss of your wife.”

“What could have I done against those landlords whose upper-caste status elevated them to the power of demigods? We, the lower-caste, untouchable and unsociable, how can we defy their mandates?”

“You are the son of a virtuous father, who got you educated in the *Vedas*. He had served a renowned teacher for over a decade so you attain wisdom under his tutelage. Is this your return for his sacrifice?”

“When I lost my wife, I lost everything. I live only because my son had entrusted his son to me.”

“Your wife left because you remained indifferent to your karma,” the goddess said. “I am aware of your deeds, don’t forget that.”

“I...”

“So, I present before you the events of your past, to remind you what transpired before she went with John.” The goddess drew a large screen with her hand.

Koman watched in amazement as moving images filled its blank space.

#

Koman walks with his wife, Malu, along a narrow path passing through a dense cashew-apple garden. Raman, the landlord, appears from behind a huge cluster of trees. “How dare you enter my land?”

Koman bows to the man. “Pardon us,” he speaks in a quivering voice. “She is ill, can’t walk much. So, we had to take this shortcut.”

The old man glares at Malu. “And, don’t you know, you lower caste apes aren’t allowed to wear breast-cloths?” With the tip of his walking-stick, he raises a small piece of cloth she wore to hide her breasts.

Koman observes her nose wrinkle in disgust at the smell of cow dung smeared on the stick’s tip, or maybe the landlord’s insolence.

“That stick of yours is dipped in dirt,” Malu says, “just as your soul is immersed in filth.”

“I can have you torched alive for your arrogance.” The old man laughs. “This scrawny lump who stands by your side knows it well.”

Malu measures the man with a quick scan of his body. “It looks like there isn’t enough fire left in you so you can ignite me.”

The old man stoops as if his knees buckled. “You...”

Koman pulls at Malu’s arm, and walks away hastily. The old man’s mumblings drown in the buzz of bees swarming around a hive on a nearby tree.

“Didn’t I tell you, never to anger the landlords?”

“But, why’d he want to question my right to hide my breasts?”

“You know, women from lower castes aren’t allowed to hide their breasts. You have changed a lot since that white lady opened a school. I remember, your last birthday, June 1820.”

“Yes, you’re right. Rose told me about my rights, taught me their language.”

“See, you’re forgetting your manners. Don’t you know you shouldn’t take the name of a teacher, you need to call her a Lady or Miss?”

“This is what’s wrong with you, Koman. You allow yourself to be mastered and ruled by their dictums.”

“You’re again breaking the rules of your culture. You call me by my name and you have no qualms about it. You’ve worked for six months in the white people’s school, just a cleaning hand. And, you forget your manners?”

“I respect and love you,” Malu says in a firm voice. “That’s what counts for me, not how I address you.”

“You shouldn’t merely love and respect your husband,” Koman says in a louder voice. “You have to also make it appear so to others, that’s why we have certain norms how women should behave.”

“I can’t agree with your fractured logic, not anymore.”

#

“Did you realize now,” the goddess asked Koman, “you discarded your karma, failed to protect your wife’s honor?”

Koman withdrew his eyes from the screen and looked at the goddess. “The landlord would have burned my family.”

“I am no benevolent goddess, to show mercy. I am spiteful, unforgiving. Now, look back into your past again, see why you lost your wife.”

#

“What could he, that man of white skin, give you that I didn’t? Instead of giving, he and his people stole from us what we held dear.”

“Didn’t your landlords take away what’s dear to you; did you raise your voice when they killed yours?” Malu stares at her husband. “Honor is a virtue my father cherished; I pity myself I lost him early. John stood for my right to hide my breasts.”

“Don’t you have any trust in my love for you?”

Her eyes stray away as she answers him with a question, “What trust can a woman place in love that cannot protect her dignity?”

“Your dusky skin, an exotic appeal; my dark hide, a reason for disparity... Your natural endowments become assets they exploit.”

“You’re cynical. Get hold of yourself, be humane; fight for the right.”

#

“Now, come back to the present, accept the wages of your sin,” the goddess said. “I am also bound by karma. I must pay the dues to everyone.”

The first thing Koman saw when he looked back from the screen was her hand clasping firmly at the trident’s stem. He bowed. “I have no regrets about how I spent my life, in devotion to all that I held dear. My fear for the landlords derived from the safety of my family.”

“This repentance, your genuine remorse, entitles you to a boon.” The deity lifted her trident. “So, ask me a favor.”

“My grandson, I trust you with his care.”

The goddess raised the trident, struck him in the middle of his chest. As a spray of his blood hit her breasts, she walked towards Koman’s hut.

The baby, asleep inside, opened his eyes. The deity knelt before the child, near a cradle made of cloth in which he swung. She ran a hand along his head where tiny sprouts of hair had just begun to grow.

#

Two men, shirtless and clad in dhoti, dragged a lanky man along a jungle path. His body twisted and turned as they pulled him through the foliage.

Beams of a full moon drew shiny, erratic patterns on his brown skin drenched in blood. A group of men accompanied them, some carrying burning torches made of dry coconut palm fronds.

“He deserves harsher punishments,” one of them said. “Thirty years ago my father raped his mother and burned their hut. But, this bastard’s grandfather saved him.”

“Let’s dump him here,” an elderly man said when they reached the top of a hillock. “He can’t make the forty miles back to the village.”

“He’ll be dead before sun rises,” someone said.

“This should teach those lower-caste mongrels,” their leader, a priest, said. “They’d never again desecrate our temple.”

#

Chindan felt his skin burn from the outside, flesh from inside. Icy tongues lapped up his body, licked along his face. More burning, pain... He ran his tongue over his dry lips, tasted salt; blood, sweat, tears...

Rain battered, drops of acid ate into his skin. Lying supine on the ground, he struggled to open his eyes. Water, inflaming, washed off the fiery embers crusting his eyelids. Suddenly, her presence, aroma of coconut oil, scent of jasmine... *Go away, Sita*, he wanted to tell her, but words wouldn’t come out. A hand running along his forehead; the touch he loved with a tinge of hatred, hope that led him to despair.

“Hope...” He tried to whisper and felt the salty tang of blood gurgling in his throat. Saliva ran down the corners of his mouth, searing the skin along its way to his cheeks.

Darkness in his eyes thickened; the thudding in his head echoed in his ears, pulsating, rhythmic. He sank, from delirium to naught, a weightless flight.

#

Chindan opened his eyes. Sunrays, filtering through a dense growth of tree leaves, felt like granules of sands in his eyes. He lay on a mattress of jackfruit leaves, body covered in herbal paste. The burning on his skin had almost gone.

He had a vague memory of the priest and his men taking him to the landlord, who was the village chieftain. But, he could vividly recall the command, “Hundred whiplashes and dump him in the jungle.”

“Yes, yes...” a gathering of men shouted.

“The untouchables, they’re vermin infesting our society,” the chief said. “They shouldn’t dare to blemish the sanctity of our temple again.”

Chindan remembered the whip hitting his body, licking away patches of his skin and bits of flesh with each swing.

Standing up now, he noticed a woman; tall, lean, and athletic. Her blackish-blue skin had an ethereal glow, like the gods of upper caste people. The deer hide she wore barely reached her knee. Her curly tresses, long like dreadlocks, wriggled down her shoulder. She was a few meters away from him, a bow raised in her left hand, right hand drawing the string.

A dog sat by the side of her right leg.

She released the arrow. A commotion followed from the nearby bush. The dog lunged for the game, a brown bush rabbit, and came back. She walked towards his direction, the dog heeling.

Chindan laid back on the bed, pretending to be asleep.

“I am Loya,” the woman said. “I know you were watching me, not sleeping.”

Chindan sat up. “Eyes trained on the hunt, how could you see me?”

“I am a *Bhagawati*, an ancient deity. We know things without seeing.”

“How can you?”

“We just do,” Loya said. “We go around your world, for enjoyment. Sometimes, we keep an eye on... persons of interest.”

“I see. Your dog looks somewhat like ours.”

“It’s a dingo.” She ruffled the tiny hairs on its neck. “He’s from another part of your world.”

Loya surveyed Chindan from head to toe. “Your wounds are almost healed.”

She kindled a bonfire made of twigs and dry leaves. “Now, you need to restore strength.”

As she spoke, Chindan watched in amazement at the deftness with which she performed each task.

She skinned the rabbit, smeared it with a red paste. “Cayenne pepper,” she said, seeing his curiosity. “Tastes good, and it can speed up recovery from injuries.”

“How long had I been unconscious?”

“Almost a week,” Loya said, laying the hare on the fire. Tiny orange sparkles escaped like fireflies as she poked the embers with a stick. “Fierce heat of burning teak, it’d be ready in a few minutes.”

“You’re well informed, about the ways of our life.”

“You’re lucky I found you.” She offered him an earthen pot. “This wine, I brought from the land of the dingo. Taste it, it’s better than the toddy you tap from coconut palms.”

Chindan accepted the pot and peeked inside. The white toddy he drank frothed when the pot changed hands, shaking in the process. This looked somewhat like red rice soup he used to have with his dinner. Raising the pot, he poured some into his mouth. “It’s quite good,” he said, after drinking a mouthful. “The best I ever tasted.”

“Have some more,” Loya said, smiling. “It will ignite your appetite.”

Chindan took another swig, then another. He felt a sense of elation, being light on body, high on spirits. He stood up, and spread his arms.

“You are a boon to your grandfather. But, the blessing of your grandmother is the key.”

“Uh, she’s a woman who deserted my grandfather, a cause of his pain.”

Loya picked up the pot, took a sip. “She dispelled his fear of death. The boon came to you through him but because of her.”

#

Chindan stood erect, eyes trained on the target. A rabbit frolicked on the green-carpeted forest ground. He took a deep breath, back muscles taut, bowstring pulled. Loya stood by his side, watching his posture.

The rabbit rose on its hind legs, ears on alert. Chindan saw its nostrils flaring as if to smell possible threats.

“Now,” Loya whispered.

Chindan released his fingers and watched the arrow hit the game.

“Perfect,” Loya said.

Chindan snapped his fingers and the dingo lunged forth to collect the hunt.

Loya placed a hand on his shoulder. “Well, that’s more than fair enough for the three-months training.”

“I owe you a great deal. You brought me back from the dead.”

She had also taught him sword-fighting, made him haul large stones, climb trees, and trek mountains. He had grown stronger and bolder.

The dingo came back with the rabbit and dropped it near Chindan’s feet. He petted the dog by running a hand along its neck.

“Let’s go now, three rabbits should be enough for tonight,” Loya said. “Wake up in the morning, scout five miles of the jungle.”

After a dinner of two roasted rabbits and cassava, Chindan sat down near Loya in the hay mattress. Earlier, when he asked her help, to avenge the landlord, Loya had said, “Learn to fend for yourself and your people. Don’t expect the gods to break out of heavens.”

“But, how will a man...”

“I brought you back from death,” Loya said. “There’s a hand poised over your head that showers blessings, a power that empowers. But, your karma is yours.” Loya leaned back against the trunk of the tree beneath which they sat. “Tell me about Sita.”

Chindan looked at her, surprised. Moonlight cast dark shadows on her glazing skin. Her loose hair glowed auburn.

He stretched his legs, looked her, and smiled. “She’s the one...”

#

The one with the magic touch; a touch he hated, but its warmth he loved, the one who inspired hope... Chindan recoiled as if her finger scorched his skin.

Sita, his landlord’s wife, had placed her hand on his naked shoulder, tracing a finger along his nape. The woman, to whom he was untouchable, had violated a mandate.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, leaning back against the bed’s headboard.

“The landlord, he’d kill me...”

“All you’re afraid of is death,” she said, “when you get to drink the sweet nectar of sin, from the Holy Grail of a lady of the upper class?”

“Adultery fetches rewards in hell...”

“You are somewhat like your grandfather. When he worked for my grandpa, he’d always remain mute.” Sita laughed. “But, I’m educated in the ways of the West also, so I can speak out.”

Sitting on the floor, Chindan said. “I don’t even know what a holy grail is.”

“You don’t have to. All you need to know is I’m a Holy Grail, drinking from me will land you in heaven, not in hell, to be punished.”

“What about my loyalty toward the master?”

“The one who closes his eyes when the white man strides into our bedroom,” Sita said. “He can’t gift me a child. But, he has to carry his lineage forth, will be a blemish if he doesn’t.”

“I’ve never seen a white man tread into...”

“Ugly things, you know?” Sita laughed. “The dark little events in human life, those things happen behind your back.”

Chindan sat in silence, trying to make sense out of her words.

When she suggested years ago that he learn to read and write, he had resisted for fear of the master’s anger. She insisted, and she prevailed.

“Our family follows the matriarchal system,” she said. “Some decisions are left to the women folks. I decide whether you learn, or whether we retain you for work.”

“But...”

Sita held a hand up. “He’d have to honor my wishes, value my decisions.”

“Your rights... I have mine. Yet...”

She ran a hand through his hair. “Challenge their authority. Don’t bend to their will like they bend to the white men’s will.”

Chindan sat gazing at her.

“I carry the burden of a name, the other half of *Lord Rama*, who ensembles the virtues of a man; my husband’s values...” Sita shook violently and fell back on the bed.

Chindan watched as a plasmatic layer peel itself out of her body. An apparition of the dwarf goddess appeared. Her brass anklets jingled as she stepped down and stood before him, her right hand firmly gripping her trident.

He kneeled before his family deity. “Forgive me, goddess, I have sinned. I bow to you, to accept my punishment.”

“I have no care for your relationship with any woman,” the goddess said in a mild voice. “But, I do care for your karma, the ultimate path you’re destined to follow. You linger too much, too far behind, in confusion. You must make use of your opportunity.”

Chindan held his palms together. “She taught me the scriptures, initiated me to a foreign language. How could I fight the mighty power of those landlords, or white men, with the little knowledge I gained?”

“The foundation, she laid. With what she gave, everything else would fall in place. You only need to do your karma.”

“What is the karma, mighty goddess, you entrust me?”

“Prove to the landlords that their gods will not run away if someone with black skin entered their temple,” the goddess said. “Honor your goddess; build her a temple. Let her be the goddess of all, not just your family’s.”

#

“Sita and your goddess, both are right,” Loya said. “Enter the temple of landlords, those who call themselves the upper class, and claim your right to worship.”

“You know that’s what I did earlier.” Chindan eyed the large, pink scar on his forearm. “And, you’ve seen the outcome.”

“You were alone then. Now, take the others with you.” Loya gripped Chindan’s hand. “You know, there’s strength in unity.”

“My people won’t unite, they’re afraid.”

“You have to convince them. The landlords’ weapon is not their spear, but your fear. This is your chance, lead your people.”

Loya beckoned the dingo to her side. “Or, even defy them by enshrining a goddess of your own. Show them you don’t need their gods anymore.”

“A goddess, in our temple...” Chindan smirked. “My people eat meat and fish. We don’t know how to perform the rites in temples. How can we have a temple?”

“It’s your goddess that you’re going to worship in your temple, one who consumes what her children eat; down to the dried fish you relish, one who drinks toddy, keeps a dingo to give her company. Follow the rites of your choice...” Loya fell asleep.

Waking up the next day, Chindan remembered what Loya had said. *A Goddess that accepts toddy and dried fish as offerings in her shrine...*

As he got up to look for Loya, the dingo followed him.

“Loya,” he called out.

No response. He shouted her name again, going deeper into the woods. Loya wasn’t to be found anywhere. For a couple of days that followed, Chindan searched for her. But, Loya had vanished, just like *maya*, a myth.

Loya the *Maya*; was she a myth? Yet, the dingo remained, faithfully his.

#

“I hold a secret that only you two know,” Sita spoke to her husband, standing next to Chindan on their veranda. “If I let the people know, you’ll lose your respect. They’ll ridicule you, their chief.”

“Shut up, you...”

Chindan pulled out a dagger from the waistband of his dhoti. “I am no more the person you knew,” he said. “Didn’t your men tell you what happened when they refused me entry into the village, when I returned from the jungle?”

The master glanced at Chindan and back at Sita.

“Don’t intimidate her again,” Chindan spoke. “Your men won’t come to your rescue. My people are with me now. So, you don’t stand a chance.”

“You better make a deal with me, grab this chance to salvage your dignity,” Sita told her husband. “Chindan’s son has the right to the property because I’ve borne him. Give him an acre of land, to build a temple.”

“An acre...”

“Yes, an acre of land. And, you’ll pay the expenses for construction.”

The master stared at her.

“We’ll pretend that the child is yours,” Sita said, “no one will know.”

The master spoke, “Maybe, it is god’s will that a part of the property goes to him.” He took a deep breath. “I agree.”

“It’s not your god’s will but his *karma*,” Sita said, “the wages of his sin.”

#

The dwarf goddess danced, stomping her feet on the wooden platform of her tiny abode, striking gleefully at it with her trident. Loya scouted the jungle, looking for game; an occasional deer, or rabbits. Pausing under a coconut palm, she shot an arrow. A bunch of tender coconuts fell.

The dwarf goddess continued her dance, the weight of her feet heavy on wood, strokes of the trident splitting its core.

Loya removed the coconut’s husk with her teeth, struck it on a boulder.

Streams of coconut nectar gushed out in sprightly sprays. With her fingers, Loya directed its flow. Sweet and refreshing, the liquid ran down the dwarf goddess’ throat. She enjoyed its taste, elixir that quelled her thirst and hunger.

“Enough,” she said when she had her fill. “Now I wait for my enshrinement in the holy temple of the untouchable.”

Induction
By Soramimi Hanarejima

Soramimi Hanarejima is the neuropunk author of *Literary Devices for Coping* and whose current work is forthcoming in *Lunch Ticket*, *The Nassau Review*, *Cheat River Review* and *The Gateway Review*.

* * *

1

The moment I see Meridienne walk into social studies, my gaze is pulled to her like never before, and I know that this week I have crush on her. She breezes past the front of the classroom, her creamy blue shirt and blond hair bright against the blackboard, making the air thrum with energy, and that's the crush making my mind thrum with energy—but quietly this time. Nothing like the last crush, that rambunctious menagerie of thoughts and feelings about Altina. This crush just makes me alert to Meridienne, getting me to notice her poise once she's settled at her desk.

“Good morning,” Mr. Deslar says the instant he steps through the doorway. “Let's get started with current events. Randy, you're up.”

Mr. Deslar closes the door and stands in the corner by it. After quickly skimming over some notes, Randy excitedly tells us about new cognitech that makes dreams feel like vacations by creating places for the sleeping mind to explore and enjoy. In a couple years, we might be hiking a majestic mountain or roaming a lively city while getting a good night's rest. That sounds amazing. Curious about Meridienne's reaction to this news story, I glance over at her. From my desk near the back of the classroom, I can usually see only the back of her head and torso, but now Meridienne's turned to the right to look at Randy, and I can see her face in profile. Her expression is a familiar one of paying casual attention, but her eyes have a certain focus, as though clearly gauging her distance from not just Randy but this technological development.

As class continues with Mr. Deslar leading a discussion about last night's reading assignment, my gaze is drawn again and again in Meridienne's direction, to things about her that I never really

paid attention to, if I even noticed them before. Like how she has a half-used eraser in the upper right corner of her desk. There's nothing to take notes on yet, but the eraser is at the ready to rub away mistakes.

I'm less distracted in linguistics because Meridienne isn't in that class, and when I do get distracted, it's by Altina. Whenever she answers a question, I can hear that *something* in her voice related to character, a certain tone entwined with her accent. Whatever that is, it somehow complements her light brown hair, neatly braided as ever, this time in pigtails. I still want to be friends with her, but this desire doesn't have the intensity it did a couple weeks ago when I wanted to spend every morning recess with Altina, making her laugh with odd comments or strange things I'd heard about.

During the other morning class I have with Meridienne, I notice that the crush changes how I feel toward things about her that have always stood out ever since we started having classes together last autumn. These things mostly make me feel bad for her now. Like the frilly socks that are simultaneously fancy and ridiculous—especially when she wears them with sneakers. Her mother must have bought them. And then there's the way Meridienne says everything with so much emphasis, as though she's always making sure to get her point across. I'm sure that some classmates and even teachers are also put off that. Even when she complimented my ideas for the social studies skit we worked on together last week, I didn't like her tone. It gave her the air of someone who has a high opinion of her opinions and thinks of her praise as precious, coveted validation. Maybe she doesn't mean to come off that way but can't help it. Or maybe she's afraid she won't be taken seriously if she doesn't speak assertively.

If this is what it's going to be like liking Meridienne—a combination of curiosity and sympathy—I'll take it. Not that I have a choice, but I can do another four days of this no problem. Especially since the two classes we have together are in the morning, so for the rest of the day, the

crush can't get me to stare at Meridienne and can only turn my attention to thoughts about her. This may be the easiest crush yet. Is that because of its design?

At lunchtime, I want to tell you about this crush, but I also want to keep it to myself for a little longer, until I have a better idea sense of how I feel about how the crush makes me feel.

2

Along the quaint street that our ways home have in common, we marvel at all the tree blossoms that just opened over the weekend, both of us saying things like, "Wow, that yellow is so soft but bright" and "I wish I had a blanket that silvery shade of blue to just wrap myself tight in." We pay compliment after compliment to this fresh extravagance of color and texture, until I ask you, "Have you had a crush on Meridienne yet?"

"Nope. Is that who you have to admire now?"

"Yup. It's nice. I've never had such a mild crush," I tell you.

"The low-key ones are the best."

You veer to the edge of the sidewalk and kick a dandelion growing in the grass by a street tree. The first of the season. Its downy fluff scatters toward a gray car parked beside the curb. I wonder if you will ever outgrow this habit.

"It's not as exciting, but it's definitely more pleasant when the feelings aren't, you know, overbearing," you add.

"Then it's not Meridienne."

You pull at one of your backpack's shoulder straps, then say, "It could be her. Who knows how this all works."

"I mean, it's not just her," I clarify. "You've had crushes like this."

“A few times. The first one was that way, and I thought, OK, I can handle this. Not a big deal at all. So I was totally unprepared for the next one. That started strong and never let up.”

“Oh, you never said anything about that.”

“I was just trying to, you know, get through it and didn’t know what to say about everything I was feeling.”

“Sounds like my week admiring Quomin.”

“Yeah, you were going crazy. Those crushes make me glad I have this week off for recovery. I mean *reflection*.”

3

After we go our own ways at the usual intersection, I stop by the neighborhood park on the next block down. It’s more of a big lawn with some benches. I sit down on one of them and take my notebook out of my backpack. On a blank page in the back, I jot down a few things about Meridienne.

- *The way she kept staring at the blackboard after Mr. Iltre had walked away from it to use the holographic model of the mind. She looked both angry and sad, like a painting that combines two seasons—snowfall over a field of thistles in full bloom.*

- *When a downpour started in the middle of lunchtime recess and everyone went inside, she just switched her jacket to waterproof mode and kept jumping rope. Is that some kind of routine she has to keep up, or does she just really like to jump rope?*

- *She keeps re-tying her ponytail during class, like she has to keep her hair as tightly gathered as possible.*

I flip back several pages and look at some of the things about Altina I scribbled down to get them off my mind.

- *She's so good at all the activities we do in gym class! Which sports teams will she join in high school? I bet she'll be on one every season.*
- *She laughs at even the corniest jokes, like she's got an especially ticklish funny bone.*
- *Does her mom help her to get those braids so neat?*
- *When did she start braiding her hair? And why?*
- *I wish I could hear other people's voices with her accent. The more I listen to it, the more her way of pronouncing words gives her character—spunk, maybe?*
- *When she reads the textbook chapters we're assigned, does the voice in her thoughts have the same accent as her speaking voice or does it sound more like our teachers?*

The things I've just written about Meridienne are so different. How much of this difference comes from me, and how much comes from Meridienne and this crush's design? Maybe I can ask Ms. Sarelion about that later.

4

When Mom gets home, she stands at the memory repository by the front door for a while. She always stores her workday memories in the repository so they won't distract her in the evening, but ever since she's had this cognitech for her job at the bureau, the offloading has never taken this long. Which means it's been a very memorable day at work, and I want to know why.

Once Mom is in the bathroom taking a shower, I turn on the memory repository then put on the headset and load the longest memory. In it, there's a city street that I see with Mom's perspective. As she makes her way down the sidewalk, everyone's emotions are visible to her as clouds of color around their bodies, like she can see auras thanks to the psychoscopic glasses she's wearing—probably the same pair she let me try the few times I've gone to work with her. The

kaleidoscopic scene is dazzling with color-coded emotions coming into and going out of view, transforming from one shade to another—emerald to amber to ruby.

After she's gone down a couple blocks of shops, restaurants and offices, Mom catches a glimpse of a dark purple figure, just before that person turns left at the intersection ahead. Mom walks briskly to the end of the block then finds and tails the figure, careful to stay several sidewalk squares behind. Whoever she's following is more a hazy silhouette than a person—enveloped in such a dark shade of purple, like violet combined with maroon. I can tell by the way her gaze stays fixed ahead that Mom is deep in keen observation, alert to any information that could be useful.

Abruptly, the figure cuts into an alley, and Mom calls in the sighting—"a level five"—and hurries toward where she last saw the figure. Mom wouldn't call this in if it weren't important, so purple must mean something serious, but what? The times I've worn her glasses, I only saw shades of green, yellow, orange and magenta.

When Mom gets to the alleyway, no one is there. She surveys the corridor of brick walls, dirty windows and doors with peeling paint. Seeing no obvious clues, she switches her glasses to thermal imaging. One of the doors ahead of her to the right has a doorknob that glows orange with lingering warmth and above it, a matching handprint. She approaches the door and peers through its little square window. But thanks to the tinted glass, the inside is dark, and only vague shapes are visible. She tries the doorknob, which turns easily. I feel the throb of her uncertainty, a doubt that doesn't come from fear but the worry that this person will get away if it's just her in pursuit. Does she go in or wait for backup?

In the distance, I hear the hairdryer whirring up its little storm of hot air—my cue to quickly stop the playback and turn off the repository. When she goes by the living room on her way to the kitchen, I'm back at the coffee table doing my homework.

During dinner, Mom looks different. Taller somehow, even though her flowy loungewear usually makes her seem smaller. We eat our plates of eggplant casserole in silence until she asks me about school.

“Just the usual,” I reply.

She nods, then asks how you are.

“Also the usual,” I answer.

“OK, that’s good,” Mom says.

After we wash the dishes, I do the rest of my homework at the coffee table instead of in my room, to see if I can get another chance to use the memory repository. Maybe after she’s done meditating, Mom will have some tea in the kitchen.

But no such luck. Mom stays settled on the cushions in the alcove across the living room from me. Even though she’s really into the book she’s reading, it would take only a second for her to catch me at the repository. All she’d have to do is look up from her book and she’d have a nearly direct line of sight to the front door.

“Let me know if you want any help,” Mom says at one point.

I just nod. I would like to know if I’m on the right track with the word problem I’m working through, but asking Mom about it would definitely keep her here in the living room.

When Mom finally leaves the alcove, it’s to use the memory repository, restoring her memories so her sleeping mind can process the events of the day. Now there’s no longer any reason to stay here reading ahead for my classes, so I go brush my teeth and get ready for bed.

5

At school, I imagine what the hallways would look like through Mom’s glasses. Full of chirpy chatter from classmates with bright eyes and grins ranging from silly to smug, the usual morning

bustle here would probably be a lot of yellow and orange with occasional pink. But maybe not. Should I trust my classmates' faces and voices to reflect what they're actually feeling?

In social studies, my attention keeps drifting away from Mr. Deslar and over to Meridienne, to the back of her pale green shirt dappled by sunlight filtering through canopy of the tree just outside the classroom window. From her relaxed but attentive posture, I guess that she'd be a light shade of orange. Except when she grabs up the eraser and vigorously runs it back and forth over something she just wrote, then she'd be a darker orange.

6

After lunch, we're in the playground at the edge of the athletic field that our classmates are using to play their rough-and-tumble games under the watchful gaze of the recess monitor—Ms. Caprilene this week, who knows she never has to worry about you and me. As we sway lazily on the swings, I tell you about Mom's memory of the purple figure.

"Any idea what level five means?" you ask the moment I'm finished.

"I don't even know what level one is," I answer. "My mom has never mentioned anything about levels when she talks about work. And the repository only stores episodic memories. No semantic information, unless it's a major part of the experience."

"So the levels are probably something your mom is very familiar with and doesn't have to really think about."

"Yeah, I—"

"Hey," I hear Meridienne say—out of nowhere and very close by.

Turning in the direction of her voice, I find her standing right beside me.

"See you in ethics," you say. "I need to get some things from my locker before that."

The next thing I know, you're leaving the playground quickly, and Meridienne is looking down at me so severely that I suspect you said something to her about me having a crush on her.

"I always thought you were *boring*," she says. "Then last week, I had a crush on you, and that made you *really* interesting and made me think I had been wrong about you."

"OK, that's normal," I reply.

"Yeah, but after the crush was over, you went *back* to being boring."

If she had said this under other circumstances, I might be upset. But right now, I just feel bad for her, even a little sad that she had to go through this—her mind like a rubber band stretched into a new, even interesting shape, then released, snapping back to its original form.

"It was like the crush made me see something that wasn't *actually* there," she continues.

I want to tell her that she's wrong and remind her of what Ms. Sarelion said about synthetic crushes: *You ll see things about each other that usually aren t easy to see.*

But then I decide it's better to let her say what she needs to say—feel what she needs to feel.

"So all the things I said about your skit ideas," she continues. "That was because of the crush. I don't really get those ideas anymore, if I ever did."

She doesn't wait for any response and turns to go. I want to look away, but I can only watch her walk toward the school building, amber ponytail swaying with each swift stride, right hand clutching her coiled jump rope.

I know the way we treat each other at school can change a lot during and after these crushes. Still, her words sting because I like her so much right now, and there's this chasm between us. Standing on the other side of it, Meridienne is the stern teacher of a lesson we're supposed to be learning at this age. Sometimes the distances between us can't be crossed by words, no matter how carefully chosen they are.

When we leave school together, I wait for you to ask me what happened with Meridienne, and in the meantime, we walk silently by little house after little house, their colors muted by the clouds that have drifted in front of the sun. Maybe you're waiting for me to tell you what Meridienne said. But what is there for me to say about that? Her feelings changed during and after the crush, and that's pretty much what happens to all of us, to varying degrees.

When one of us finally says something, it's you—asking about that memory with the purple figure.

“Do you think the levels have to do with danger or threat?”

“Maybe, but it didn't really feel that way,” I answer. “There wasn't any fear or panic in the memory. Just tightly focused attention.”

“But your mom is trained to deal with situations that could be dangerous.”

“Yeah, but I think that means she can better handle being afraid and not let fear affect her that much.”

“Oh, that's like what our teachers keep telling us. You know, to feel fear and choose courage instead of suppression or avoidance.”

“Right, that's probably it,” I reply—though I've never thought of it this way before. How Mom conducts herself at work never seemed to be a choice. It's just what she does for her job.

Mom gets home earlier than usual and doesn't offload her memories. Today must have been uneventful. Maybe even monotonous. Is that why she's back already? The heaviness of her eyelids tells me she's tired.

"Let's go out for dinner," she says.

We take the neighborhood walking path to her favorite diner, this gravel trail somehow gloomy today in the shade of the apartment buildings along it.

When we get there, the diner is busy, but after a few minutes of waiting, we're seated at a booth. The swath of red padding behind Mom makes her look small, especially as she leans over the table to read the laminated menu the hostess placed there. Around us, different conversations blur together and silverware clinks against plates, this lively atmosphere making me feel small.

"I think I'll get the trout with polenta," is all Mom says as we each pick out what to order.

I make sure to pick something else. That's easy to do with all the appealing entrées to choose from. Before long, I settle on the shrimp gratin.

"Tell me about school," Mom says after we give the waitress our orders.

Starting with social studies, I run through the things I've been learning in my classes. Mom nods along like I'm singing a catchy pop song.

Once I've covered everything, Mom says, "And the crushes?" as though reminding me of this one thing I've overlooked.

"They're fine," I answer. Because overall, they have been—nothing to complain about.

"That's good to hear," Mom says. "We can always talk about them, if you ever want to."

"OK," I say. "I'll let you know."

And I will, though I'm not sure how much she'd be able to relate. She was already done with college when synthetic crushes became part of the standard curriculum.

A couple minutes of quiet between us pass, then the waitress comes over and places our food on the table.

"Enjoy!" she says before hurrying off.

Mom pushes her steaming plate toward mine until the rims of our plates are almost touching. Using my spoon, I place a scoop of gratin on her plate, and on mine, Mom puts a little portion of trout and dollop of polenta. Then we dig in, me eagerly, Mom slowly. The polenta is the softest I've ever had.

9

When I'm close to the top of the granite stairway, I see you standing by the double doors of the school's main entrance, grinning the moment we make eye contact. You've been waiting for me. I hurry up the final steps.

"I found out what levels three and four are," you tell me with an enthusiasm I immediately recognize—that I've known since third grade, when you were obsessed with solving the weekly riddles Ms. Winterstone posed to our third-grade class with the promise of a mystery prize for the correct answer. You were filled with this same excitement when Ms. Winterstone gave an intriguing clue or suggestive hint, when you felt closer to the thrill of figuring out the solution, which was the only prize you wanted, and I'd help you for the thrill of seeing you thrilled, which was the only prize I wanted.

I follow you inside the school building, and we make our way through the bustling hallways.

“I asked my uncle,” you say over the chitchat of all the students standing by their lockers and heading to class. “You know, the one who used to work for the bureau. He handled the kind of cases your mom identifies.”

“Oh yeah,” I murmur, remembering how you mentioned him when I first told you about my mom working there.

“He was over for dinner, and afterwards I got to ask him about the levels. He said they’re degrees of something called ‘emotional engagement. I’ll tell you more at lunch.”

With that, you head to your locker, leaving me to wonder what emotional engagement is.

That curiosity doesn’t last long, soon replaced by thoughts about Meridienne. She’s not in social studies, her vacant desk a gap in the grid of our seating arrangement. Maybe she’s sick—or pretending to be so she won’t have to be around me while I like her, if she knows about that.

Though there’s no solid reason to think so, I sense that I have something to do with her absence. This has to be because of the crush—a result of how it heightens the possible significance of things related to Meridienne, pulling my thoughts and emotions in directions they wouldn’t normally go. Even after what she said yesterday, I miss her. Her absence makes the morning drab, somehow empty even. And though Mr. Deslar’s explanations about shifts in social norms sound like they’re dull even to him, I make sure to take detailed notes. Then I do the same during psychology, just in case these notes could be useful to Meridienne once she’s back.

10

The moment I sit down beside you at our cafeteria table, you say, “So level three is conscious awareness with unconscious reinforcement, and level four is conscious awareness with conscious reinforcement.”

“Does that make level five even more conscious thought about an emotion?” I ask. “How can there be something beyond conscious reinforcement?”

“Could be both conscious and unconscious reinforcement.”

“Oh yeah, that makes sense.”

“Now we have to find out what purple means,” you say as though to keep this investigation in motion. Then you pick up your sandwich and take a bite.

I think about whether there’s a way for me to gather information or at least clues. But besides remembering Mom’s memories, nothing comes to mind. Mom doesn’t keep anything related to work at home.

“I guess your uncle doesn’t know all the color-coding shades,” I say.

Chewing a mouthful of sandwich, you shake your head.

“He said he only worked on mild cases,” you explain. “The most severe it ever got for him were borderline blue cases between levels three and four. He thought higher levels and darker colors might be really rare or were created after he retired.”

“Maybe he can ask around.”

“Yeah, he said he’d check with a couple of his old buddies.”

11

While Mom is in the shower, I speed through today’s memories. They’re all short, ordinary episodes of monitoring her assigned neighborhoods, reviewing data and attending meetings at headquarters, checking her equipment, training new team members in best practices for affective monitoring. Nothing related to that purple figure from two days ago.

And that only makes me more curious because the rest of that memory is now a total mystery and is going to stay a mystery unless I can nudge Mom into telling me what happened by

asking a question like, “What’s the most serious thing that’s happened at work recently?” Which would seem suspicious. I never ask questions like that.

But I do ask questions about technology and history. So while we’re eating fish tacos at the kitchen table, I ask, “What was it like before psychoscopes were invented?”

Still chewing, Mom shakes her head, as though with regret, like she doesn’t want to talk about this.

But then she smiles faintly and says, “Way harder to understand each other and ourselves. We had to rely on questionnaires and journaling. Talk therapy, mindfulness and that kind of stuff. And even when people did all those things, their emotions could still be mysterious even to themselves.”

I can hear the relief in her voice—how grateful she is that those days are over.

“It’s so much easier in so many ways now that we can see emotional states,” Mom continues. “I mean, it’s still hard but not as hard. We still need to put work into understanding where our emotions are coming from and how to handle them, but psychoscope tech helps us do that work more productively.”

This reminds me of the way teachers talk about synthetic crushes.

“Ms. Sarelion said induced affection is supposed to help us to better understand our emotions,” I tell Mom. “The affection gives us the chance to know what we can feel towards our classmates and people in general.”

“Right, right. In school, you’re doing some of the crucial work needed to figure out the nature of your emotions. Their range and intensity, their effects on you, how you can respond to them. The progress you’re making now will be the foundation for the kind of psychological work you’ll have to do in the future.”

“Making progress with the crushes isn’t exactly easy though.”

Something about this comment makes Mom smile—a wide grin this time.

“Oh, I bet they’re really challenging,” she says. “But better to be challenged at school with the help of teachers before being challenged in the wilds of the world with less support.”

“But the bureau is a kind of support for everyone, right?”

“Well, yes, though it’s usually support for people who don’t know they need support or aren’t seeking support. School is supposed to help you build a solid foundation for emotional wellbeing so you won’t need the type of support the bureau provides.”

“Do you think school is good at building that foundation?”

“It’s still too early to say for sure, but the overall trend is good. Ever since the new standard curriculum launched, fewer and fewer young people need bureau interventions compared to before.”

Was that purple figure an older person then? Around Mom’s age, maybe?

12

You’re waiting for me outside the main entrance again, but this time you don’t have anything new to share. You’re hoping that I do. So I give you what little I have as we walk to the hallway with our lockers.

“I went through all of yesterday’s memories and didn’t find anything,” I say. “It was just an ordinary workday.”

Somehow, you’re not disappointed and instead open to the possibility that this could mean something.

In social studies, Meridienne is still absent. I hope it’s not because of a family emergency. During class, my gaze goes to her desk and lingers on it while my thoughts go back to the times I’ve seen her there—brushing away eraser bits with the back of her right hand, feet crisscrossed under

her chair, the braided loop of a magenta-turquoise friendship bracelet streaking through the air with her left hand launching into the air to answer one of Mr. Deslar's questions, pale blue scrunchy pressed tight against her head to funnel all her hair into a golden cascade. The crush makes her empty seat an open space for my mind to fill in with memories.

13

At lunch, we've reverted to talking about classes and crushes, until you say offhandedly, "One day we'll know what purple and level five mean. Then that memory will all make sense."

I'm both surprised and not surprised by your certainty that at some point we'll know what adults know. This is how you think, with the expectation that we'll have the kinds of experiences our parents and teachers have already had. You simply take for granted that in the future, we'll be head-over-heels in love and know how that's different from these synthetic crushes; go on dates and know what it's like to kiss someone; have kids and know what it's like to be parents.

I've never had this sort of certainty. For all I know, I might never kiss anyone or have any kids. I might never know what Mom's job is like unless I go into her line of work. It seems that with people and the world generally, there are more ways of not finding things out than ways of finding things out.

But I go along with your confidence and say, "Yeah, and maybe we'll find out that purple and level five aren't such a big deal. Like how our teachers' personal lives seem so mysterious but are probably just ordinary."

"Yeah. I mean, it sounded like your mom wasn't really that affected by the purple level five situation. It was probably just something that needed to be taken care of."

It does seem that way, but what does it mean for a situation like that to be taken care of?

“Can you tell me about the colors you see when you’re at work?” I ask in the middle of dinner.

Mom looks up from her bowl of curry and says, “Oh, sure. Why do you ask?”

Not knowing what to say, I shrug then default to the reason that I give for most of my questions.

“Just curious.”

“OK. Well, it’s like seeing the solar system through a telescope,” Mom begins, her eyes brightening. “You know there are planets out in space, and you may even see them as specs of light in the night sky, but then with a powerful telescope, they’re so vivid. The psychoscopic glasses also take something invisible or partially visible and make it obvious. You know that everyone has their own inner life, their own experience, and the glasses show you part of that experience. Similar to how a telescope only shows you a planet’s atmosphere or crust. With the glasses, you don’t know what else is there, what kinds of thoughts are causing or reacting to the emotions the system detects.”

“Has it always been like that? Like looking through a telescope?”

“Oh, I didn’t quite think about it that way from the start, but the feeling of seeing color-coded emotional states has mostly stayed the same. The first time I used the glasses, I thought about the sky.”

Mom goes quiet, and I think that’s all she’s going to tell me and we’ll just go back to eating dinner. Instead, she puts down the spoon she’s been holding then continues.

“When I was about your age, I looked at the sky every chance I had because the city around me always felt so dull. And the open expanse above us seemed to be something people could never

ruin, at least not as badly as they had messed up the land all around me. Maybe I felt that way because the things above us in the sky were well out of ordinary reach.

“And I loved seeing those things. A strand of birds here, puffy clouds there, a thin veil of haze now, an airplane climbing upward later. And that first time, when I saw my mentor through the glasses with all that yellow and orange swirling around her, I thought, ‘Oh, the mind is like the sky.’ There’s always something going on, even when it doesn’t seem that way to us.”

“So you like seeing people’s emotions through the glasses?”

“Most of the time. It reminds me that there’s always something going on in people’s minds.”

“How about the rest of the time?”

“Well, sometimes there’s a storm, and you want to make sure it doesn’t make a bigger mess than it has to.”

15

At the top of the steps, I wait for you, in case I got here first. Then it starts raining, and I go inside.

The moment I walk into the social studies classroom, I see Meridienne, back in her seat, eraser once again in the upper right corner of her desk. I watch her intently during class, eager to see what I couldn’t while she was absent. The light blue scrunchy holding back her wavy hair. Her ankles crossed under her chair, revealing the soles of her loafers worn down to the point of almost being polished smooth.

She doesn’t answer any of the questions Mr. Deslar poses to our class. Maybe she’s still getting caught up on what she missed or still under the weather, if that’s what kept her out of school. But she has the same attentive posture, her back effortlessly kept straight, head held high—

her ponytail like a waterfall arcing through the air from a cliff to the lake below, the end of her cascading hair hovering by the lacy collar of her yellow shirt.

In psychology, Meridienne stays just as quiet with her left hand resting on her lap while she takes notes with her right hand. At one point, Mr. Iltre looks in Meridienne's direction, expecting her to answer the question he's just posed to the class, but she doesn't say anything. When this happens a second time, I quickly raise my hand to answer his question about the endowment effect.

16

Sitting alone at our cafeteria table, I crunch my way through a small bowl of salad while waiting for you.

When I hear footsteps approaching, I turn around, eager to tell you about what Mom said yesterday about seeing colors. But a split second later, I'm looking up into Meridienne's violet eyes, and my enthusiasm is gone. There's only silence until she says, "Sorry about what I said the other day on the playground. I didn't mean it."

But I can tell that she did, and if there's anything she didn't mean, it's what she's just said. Her tone of voice isn't convincing.

Then her eyes seem to be telling me something. They aren't as fierce this time and have an earnestness that means she's actually... trying. Trying to correct what she did by doing something to make up for it. And I see that she meant what she said on the playground but didn't mean to upset me, so she's trying to fix that by apologizing.

So I try too—try to help her out by answering, "OK, don't worry about it. I know how much the crushes can change our feelings and thoughts."

She nods, her cheeks rapidly turning red.

I'm about to ask her if she wants my notes for the classes she missed, but instead, I find myself asking, "Why do you always jump rope at recess?"

"I... just enjoy it," she says, then hurries off.

Of course that's the reason she was jumping rope in rain! I'm glad I found out and glad that she has something she gets to enjoy every day.

"What are you so happy about?" you ask when you sit down next to me.

"Oh, just something related to this crush," I answer, these words getting me to feel the smile you must have noticed.

16

Mom comes home carrying a bag bulging with takeout containers. While she's in the shower, I set the table, made steadily hungrier by the aroma from each container I open, especially the garlic prawns with oyster mushrooms.

After we've had some wontons, Mom looks intently at me and says, "Now, tell me how you really feel about the crushes."

Her sudden seriousness surprises me, and I need a moment to gather my thoughts before I can answer.

Then I tell her, "They can be a lot—sometimes too much. Even when I like how a crush makes me feel about a classmate, my mind gets really... busy. And it's different each time, with new changes."

Mom rests her hand on the table, the chopsticks they hold angled upward as though pointing out something.

"What kind of changes?" she asks.

“Oh, like someone who was really ordinary is instantly so much prettier or their voice constantly gets my attention. Or I wonder about them in ways I never did before. One day a classmate is just, you know, herself, and the next day she’s more herself in some way I never knew.”

“I do know. And yes, that does sound like a lot.”

“More than I expected. When the teachers were first explaining the crushes, Ms. Sarelion said that induced affection would let us see things about each other that we otherwise wouldn’t. But I had no idea how much there was to see.”

Mom smiles and says, “There’s certainly a lot to each person. I’ve known you all your life, and you’ve known me your whole life, but there will always be more for us to learn about each other.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Mom holds my gaze in hers and says, “Well, this is something I wanted to learn about you. I can’t fully understand what you’re going through. You know that we didn’t have synthetic crushes when I was growing up. But from what I can tell, you’re doing great.”

Something in this gesture—and her words are definitely a gesture—reminds me of the time she held my hand in a hospital examination room, while a nurse drew blood from my other arm. Because that gesture years ago said the same thing, that she could only make the situation slightly better by being right there and that I was doing great simply by doing what the situation required.

“Thanks,” I answer, not sure how else to appreciate this gesture—but sure that in time I will have more ways to.

Looking at me with tired yet unmistakably knowing eyes, Mom nods.

Our Grand Endeavor

By Max Talley

Max Talley is an artist and a writer who explores most genres. He was born in New York City and lives in Southern California. His writing has appeared in *Fiction Southeast, Vol.1 Brooklyn, Atticus Review, Entropy, Santa Fe Literary Review*, and *Litro*, among others. Talley's curated anthology, *Delirium Corridor*, debuted last December and his fiction collection, *My Secret Place*, is forthcoming from Main Street Rag Publishing.

* * *

And we traveled far in search of the New World. It began as a thronging mass, impressive in size and resolve, and will likely finish exhausted and broken—mere splinters of the main body. Perhaps during a festival or a convention or a retreat after the Recovery was where someone hatched this foolhardy concept. Now our slow parade climbs through Northern California, on to Oregon, and eventually Washington. The wagons and carts of our ancestors carry us, as well as rusted motor vehicles. When there is no more continent, we'll build or buy boats to propel us onward. We are fleeing our home, our country. It has been poked and prodded, weeded and worried, reviled and defiled, bombed and poisoned, fucked and fracked, dug up and buried asunder.

Ahead at the point of the procession is our Guide hovering aloft in a blimp. Guide is actually ten men and women bunched together. They have the best vision, the keenest sense of smell, and the most acute inner radar for danger. The tireless eyes of this team, a giant of a man whose laughter rumbles through the clouds, squats and meets with me inside my tent as our troupe camps at sunset before journeying anew at daybreak.

His voice is thunderous, so he whispers to not damage my eardrums or alert anyone else from our party. "It's essential that we face some hard truths," he says.

I nod, already aware what he will share, for I am Leader and must know everything that is, or will be, or might occur.

“As we travel the Northwest to see what we can cross to, or what we can set sail for, it must be stated...”

“Yes?” I ask.

“We can never find the New World. This land we hope to escape from, is the last New World that will ever be.” His eyes scrunch shut. “I apologize.”

“I know. It's all used it up.” We rendered our world old and ravaged in three hundred years. The tragedy immense; our stupidity epic. “Perhaps there is no virgin place awaiting us, but that was a necessary goal to motivate those following behind.”

“Yes, so instruct me as eyes of Guide. What should I seek, Leader?”

“Look for a less-used country, a preserved place that seems new in contrast. Where nature and climate barriers prevented a mass of humanity from living there.”

“I will, tomorrow morning.” He crawls outside.

“In Guide we trust.”

I don't explain to him that over centuries of people roaming the earth, they discarded countless jewels behind them. Abandoned Utopias with some vague flaws when our ancestors were searching for the best destination. So we are engaged in a cycle, a repetition to discover what wasn't given serious consideration the first time around. What has changed, is there are no undiscovered lands we can wrest away from the birds and the beasts and lay claim to as our own sacred soil. Political chaos and toxic clouds demand that we journey to more remote locations.

I hear finger cymbals and know Jennifer approaches.

“Come join us later at the Fem encampment for music and dance.”

“Maybe so.” We walk outside my tent and stare back at the snake-like column extending southward. Dozens of campfires burn in the darkness as voices drift toward us from great distances. Our stationary caravan is speckled with dots of illumination from thousands of solar lights.

I stroke my long beard. A month ago I planned to shave it off. Jennifer somehow knew and stopped me.

“Half the people in this procession are following your beard, not you. Because it's not a young man's beard but a Biblical one.”

Perhaps she was right. I am fifty, so my beard is gray and brown and blond, an unkempt growth that is often windblown. I could be a desert prophet or heretic shouting my certitudes atop a mount in a thunderstorm. Because of this, I avoid giving speeches whenever possible.

Jennifer departs with a hand wave as a half dozen vans return from foraging expeditions. Leftover vegetable oil found at derelict fast-food restaurants powers them. One van pulls up to park by my tent.

“Leader, our mission was a success,” Goggles tells me. “Beneath the wreckage of a Costco we discovered their sub-basement storage.” He points back to his bounty. “Batteries, solar panels, canned goods, medicine, and Persian...”

He pauses, and our faces turn grim as we recall the Incident and places that no longer exist.

“Excellent,” I finally reply. “Now relax and enjoy the full moon parties.”

#

Our trudge north at dawn is difficult at first. Weary from lack of sleep and the spirited celebrations infusing the camps last night, we are fueled by too little food or caffeine to travel with

enthusiasm. Our northward ascent does not always bring cooler temperatures or rain-bearing clouds. By noon, we'll stagger under the scorch of a blazing sun. Witness the urban wreckage from chemical fires to the west and vast plumes of smoke from wildfires burning perpetually inland across the forests and foothills. The heat forces us to strip down to essentials in clothing. A display at times appealing and other times appalling.

However, at sunrise we appear immaculate and glorious, our vast procession glowing orange and yellowy with the soft beauty of dawn. Do you imagine Lewis and Clark's expedition to the Northwest, or the Mormon's relentless crossing of Colorado and Utah? No. Impressive as they were, we are modern, actually, post-modern and post-nuclear. View the various colors of our faces, the bodies of women, men, and those who are neither or both. Some of us appear unmarred from the Incident, others wear scars and burns, beautiful in their resolve to continue.

In a stranger's first sight of our caravan, veering through fields then navigating coastal redwoods before roaming eastward over bare golden hills, we would resemble a circus troupe. Brightly painted wagons and carriages roll, led by horses or moving by the locomotion of steampunk contraptions. Tethered to our heavy mobile containers are two massive dirigibles. One floats at the front where our scouts study the sky and land from on high. The other blimp is roped to the rear flank some miles behind.

We avoid the virus-impacted cities and areas still beclouded by gasses and instead skirt the organic villages that have sprung up in recent years. Crossing Humboldt County today, we encounter wild patches of their legendary crop grown into small forests, and are delighted to find that most buds test as safe and untainted. As we break through the canopy of redwoods and the shade of oak trees, we spot snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada Range rising to the east.

Back a mile or so in our convoy is what looks like a train's freight car. Inside, teenagers and young adults sit hunched over banks of solar powered computers and text their nearby neighbors inside the enclosure. They do not enjoy direct sunlight or standing erect or even vocal conversation.

Before the dazzle of afternoon makes us sweat, and brings insects and eventual human exhaustion, we are at our finest. Women in elaborate costumes ride elephants and camels, their bold face paint shaded under parasols. Acrobats launch themselves from air cannons to perform balletic moves aloft before drifting back on harness lines to the great procession. Clowns jostle about, fumbling, falling, grimacing, eventually bespattered by mud. We did not invite them. They appeared, somehow sensing our distant vibrations, attracted like moths to this mobile enterprise. They cheer up our restless, moody children, so we allow their tomfoolery.

“How's the weather?” I shout up to Uncle Samsung. “Smoke or gas flames?”

“Neither. Clouds ahead, but not toxic ones.” He wears eight-foot stilts inside his absurdly long pants that are somehow connected to motorized roller skates, and maintains his balance while listening to a battery-powered boombox.

“Good. We don't need our masks then.”

Musicians strum guitars, blow trumpets, clang on cymbals in an outdoor parade. It is rousing, at times abrasive, and keeps us centered. No, this grand voyage is not the best place to catch up on reading or meditation. We live each moment in the present, both celebrating and tolerating one another. The raucous din probably warns wildlife ahead to stay the hell away.

Over the months, our ranks got swollen with Burning Man devotees chasing their bliss and seeking to fill the void of rampant spare time, with aging Deadheads grappling over loss, with

community activists, off-the-grid cranks, flea market enthusiasts, commune dwellers, former rock stars, and those eternal children who wish to run away with the circus.

As the voyage stretched longer, factions formed, divisions sprung up. To be expected. We are not a cult; there are many heads on our extended dragon beast. One group, The Aggrieved, had suffered—as we all had once—and wrote songs and poems to howl their pain. The rest of us wore scars and bruises too, but saw those indignities as previous chapters and intended to create our own destiny, a positive future, rather than wallow in past misfortune.

So The Aggrieved broke off. Our sentries with telescopes in the rear blimp say they are forming a community north of the Bay Area. I try to be as patient with their youth as they are impatient of my age.

I am saddened by any departure, but we will endure. We are not what we began as, and how we will end is a mystery—unfathomable in the present moment.

Toward the rear of the procession is The Anger Caboose. Loud, sweaty people, mostly older men, who concoct conspiracy theories. They point fingers, curse the very enterprise they are part of, and condemn me for corruption and unproven crimes. Vile creatures. It is only through our fierce adherence to free speech that their presence is tolerated.

#

I meet with Jennifer to seek counsel. We were once together. The trip brought many changes. Despite our separation, we remain close friends.

“The weather is warm and our journey remains pleasant,” I say. “But what about three months from now? The future will undoubtedly bring hardship.”

“You're scared you'll be replaced as Leader and lose your power?”

“I don't have much power but would prefer to step down before being removed.”

“By who, trolls in the Anger Caboose? No one sane listens to their lies. Cut them loose.”

“I've considered it...”

Most women travel isolated from the rest now. They believe that men fucked up, mistreated them in the past, and it is hard to argue that. They feel strength by combining their powers. A few nights a month, depending on the moon and tides, they come out to hunt us men, or other women. The pagan, animalistic hours. The rest of the time they remain standoffish.

“Perhaps you could take the reins as Leader.”

“No. My sistren and I already have power,” Jennifer says. “Being Leader brings only complaints and contempt. Eventually mutiny.”

“So I've learned.”

“We're heading north,” she says. “Maybe we'll find the New World in Canada or Alaska.”

“Both beautiful places in summer, though cold and unwelcoming by late fall. What then?”

“As a Buddhist, I can only live in the now, and now is good. Why worry ahead of time?”

“Some days I feel we're on a heroic quest. Other mornings I wake gasping like a condemned man.”

“We're all condemned, eventually.” She hugs me before retreating down the caravan. “Make the best of this butterfly moment. Your moment.”

I have no other choice—besides fleeing like a scoundrel in the dark. I am Leader; I must continue.

Bring Keftiu for Unas

By W. Andrew Babb

W. Andrew Babb is an alumnus of The University of Arizona. A native of California, he currently lives in the suburbs of Chicago. He writes fiction, poems and creates digital art. He was told he needs a social media presence and thereby occasionally tweets @wandrewbabb

* * *

Rishku lived simple bliss in the hills of central Crete. He raised goats and had all he needed, save for a caring father. His father was a stubborn, angry man. A man born into husbandry, who grew bitter with time and his societal position. He was cast to the gutters by stereotyping city dwellers and looked on as inferior by the nobility. He coveted the wealth and extravagance of others, he longed for what they had. His life by contrast felt insignificant and worthless. He found no joy or happiness with life's simple pleasures and as such was rendered a vile man. Consequently, Rishku was weary of him, never comfortable around him and always on edge in his presence.

On the day Rishkus' father sold him to slavers he cried and wailed as he was torn from his goats. He reached back in desperation, grasping at them, tears streaming down his cheeks. The life he knew disappeared as he was dragged down a dirt trail. He was taken, on that day, to a number of other isolated herders huts, where similar scenes played out. The routine repeated until dusk, when the boys of the hills were forced to bivouac in the mountain chill. The following morning, they walked to Knossos, through descending defiles to the commotion of the coast. When they arrived Rishku was awestruck by the enormity of the city. The boys, likewise in awe, fell silent as they were led down a busy city street. The people went about their business, not giving the parade of shackled youths a second look. Rishku noticed this and thought it strange. It was clear he and the others were not foreigners or of age to fight in battle and yet nobody seemed concerned. Rishku grew irritated and wanted to scream out, 'What's wrong with you?' 'This is not normal!'. But, before contemplation became action, he was brought from the street into a harbor house. There he spent the remainder of the day and the whole of the night in a locked room. He slept with the other captive boys on piles of hay and spent the night with a fear yet unknown to him. He spent the night in terrible turmoil. His future was destroyed, torn from his hands. The pain he felt was known only to him, dictated by unique circumstances and anguish which threatened his sanity.

The following day moored boats were prepared for voyage and the boys loaded aboard. For seven days Rishku remained in the darkness of the boats' hold. The boys continuously cried out from fear and anxiety, all the while a stench grew exponentially. Vomit, urine, and feces slushed with the waves, covered the boy's feet, and prevented them from restfully lying down. At the crossings end the hold was opened and light flooded in. The boys were too sickly to care. Those that could walk to the beach did so, the rest were dragged onto the hot sand, covered in filth, bile, and excrement. Rishku was of the later, dragged from the boat, lying on his back, eyes closed, weak and exhausted. He was startled by water thrown on his face. He opened his eyes to strange men standing over him. They were dressed with white wear wrapped around their hips and legs. Their torsos were exposed and their heads were shaved. The language they spoke, Rishku did not understand. He marched with these captors and the remaining boys toward a city at the edge of the beach, where palm trees grew and white marble encased the buildings. The people of this town, contrary to

Knossos, took note of the boys in shackles. They stopped to stare or yelled out insults; occasionally throwing refuse or mud. This continued to the streets' terminus where a large, brightly painted, multicolored building sat in the shadow of a pyramid stretching to the sky. The boys were taken into this building; a holy home for the priests of Pharaoh Unas. There they were each locked into separate cells, built into a wall and secured with copper bars.

Days passed and necessities provided. On the seventh day a boy was came for. It was early in the morning and many, including Rishku, witnessed the event. A few days passed and another boy was taken; from the cell next to Rishku. Rishku surmised he would be next. A few days passed. Rishku was awoken by guards opening his cell. His stomach sank and his extremities tingled. He left, begrudgingly, and proceeded to his fate. Anxiety struck him in waves as he walked. Its power ebbed and flowed until Rishku told hold and harnessed strength from his anxious state. Consciously he kept calm, as a storm of enteral truths powered growth within. He was led through dark doorways and damp corridors, all the while his strength grew. He emerged from a torch lit tunnel into a square courtyard where sunlight streamed on shimmering sand. Men stood at the courtyards center, flanking ceremonial furniture. As Rishku stepped into the natural light his power pulsed with vigor and exploded in smart spontaneity. He fell to the ground with a deliberate trip. His escorts, annoyed by this, bent over to pull him up. Rishku seized the moment. He sprung at the man nearest him, gouging out one of his eyes. The man recoiled in pain, grabbing his face as he did. The other guard, shocked to stillness by the unexpected, stayed stationary long enough for Rishku to take the initiative. He rolled sideways across the sand and stretched his hand up between the man's legs and ripped off his testicles. The man fainted at this realization and Rishku ran back from where he came. His body was humming, his mind, clear with focus. No fear, no hesitation. All that is good and true guided him, he knew his purpose. He freed the other boys with swift precise movements. The boys crashed out into the morning street. Each ran as they could. Some screaming for help and rescue, others silent in sprint. Rishku ran toward the beach, shouting at the staring citizens, 'Do you understand me?' They stood silent; their faces wide eyed as he rushed past. The beach neared and Rishku grew excited with thoughts of escape, when he was shocked by a firm hand grabbing his arm, stopping his forward momentum and pulling him off the street and into a house. Rishku stumbled and fell with the change of direction. He orientated himself and looked up, 'I understand you' said a man standing over him. Rishku began to weep, hopped to his feet, and threw his arms around the man.

The man was a merchant from Crete and listened with astonishment as Rishku told his tale. When Rishku finished the man sat in contemplation for a moment before standing and instructing Rishku to follow him. They walked, hand in hand, under the guise of father and son. They made their way to the city's merchant quarters. There Rishku retold his tale as the gathered men listened intently. After he finished, they spoke amongst themselves in heated conversation. Eventually writing was commenced and a scroll produced. It was handed to a young man who left the room in haste. He returned shortly with a group of distinguished looking locals. The merchants related Rishkus' story and the atmosphere intensified. The voices grew louder and the men became angry. More men showed before the room burst into the streets. They grabbed tools and makeshift weapons as they marched. People flooded from their homes to join the crowd which swelled to a mob. They reached the holy house of Unas' pyramid complex and stormed it. They proceeded through, chanting and looking for opponents. They marched into the courtyard of Rishkus' heroics,

they marched past the ceremonial furniture and into the pyramid itself. Torches were lit as they proceeded into the shadowed sacred spaces. The men with torches crept close to the walls and illuminated the texts covering them. They read up and down, looking and searching for what, Rishku did not know. A voice yelled words Rishku did not understand and everyone rushed toward the noise. The man standing with a torch facing the wall read aloud what he had discovered in both Egyptian and Minoan. It read, 'I am Unas. I eat the lungs of the wise for their wisdom. I am Unas. I eat the hearts of the young for their virility'. General mayhem ensued. The people rushed back into the streets. Word spread; the rumors were true! Unas was eating the hearts of children and the lungs of elders! Riots spread across Egypt. Government building and temples were taken and the records seized. Trials were held and the crimes of the elite exposed. At sentencing the peoples' representative spoke.

'Acting on impulse renders sense obsolete. The impulse to greed has blinded those we trusted. It has destroyed them as they have destroyed us. Greed is a crime at the root of all Human horrors and those guilty will be sentenced accordingly. They will be shunned, banished and obligated to live without the care of a community.'

A new age was brought to being. Extravagance was forgotten and moderation the model. The two nations grew strong. Strength led to immense prosperity, which in turn led to a foolish generation infected with selfish tendencies and decay began anew.

Will You Hear Me This Time

By Rachel Racette

Rachel Racette, born 1999, in Balcarres, Saskatchewan. Interested in creating her own world and characters and loves writing science-fiction and fantasy. She has always loved books of fantasy and science fiction as well as comics. Lives with her supportive family and cat, Cheshire. Published in the anthology; The Spelunkers: A Chipper Press Anthology, and *Arthropod Literary Journal*.

* * *

It always starts the same. With a drink, dreary weather, and a meeting I put off for as long as possible. Despite how much I want to rush towards the chance to talk with *her*. Even if it's just one more time. Even if it ends the same way it did the previous meeting.

And yet every time, *she's* the late one. I'm left waiting, nursing one of a hundred possible drinks like a stood-up date. I think I've tasted all of this café's drinks as least five times, I hadn't really kept track. I insist on sitting outside, even with the darkening clouds above threatening to drench me. I wish I would get drenched. Washed away with the filth. I wish every time that the sky would open up and wash away this place, even if it had been her favorite before and while we were dating.

The memory of this place – *of that night* – isn't the only problem. The staff know me too well here. They speak with familiarity, ask about me, about how I'm doing. Eyes pitying, trying to meet my gaze, offering little treats that are more than often than not offered on the house. Sometimes I cave and try one, but I always insist on paying for it. Even though I always leave half of it uneaten. Too used to leaving half for someone else.

No one ever says anything. I wish they would. I wish they would get angry, would quit treating me like a friend. As if they really know me. Would stop acting as if they understand what I'm dealing with. As if they knew her the way I did. I wish they would stop pretending that I don't notice that they notice I see their lingering looks at the empty chair across from me. The servers always ask if I would like a single table, or even just a different one, with strained smiles and dimmed

eyes. I always refuse, but not unkindly. They're just trying to help. It's not their fault that they can't see my Diane. This specter of my dead lover who always appears when I come to this establishment.

It's always here, at our table off to the side where we could be alone, where the sounds of the street and café once hid our conversations. A table that was always open for us no matter how busy the café was. Predictability working in our favor. Or perhaps they just enjoyed how generous of a tipper Diane was.

It is always here that I look up and find Diane sitting there, impossibly beautiful and sparkling like the sun is directly above us. Her pale hair hanging in its usual curls, a sharp contrast to her earth-soaked skin. Her eyes still so big and bright. Full of life and wonder like she was born out of dreams and made to make the stars jealous. Impossibly alive. Like I hadn't seen her – Like *that night* hadn't –

She looks just as she did the day before everything went wrong. Before the weeks of tense moments and fewer and fewer kisses. When she would still talk to me like I was her everything. When I could hold her hand and smile and she would smile back and brighten my world.

Before her eyes stopped meeting mine and her hand stopped feeling so warm and right in mine. Before the wine and that tense conversation that turned into a final argument. Before our words turned heated and cruel. Back before she told me the words I had been dreading since she began slipping away. The words that I had thought she would never utter. An impossible nightmare.

And yet, my Diane stood under the stars that had witnessed our first kiss, our first "*I love you*"; and she told me she didn't love me anymore. And in that silence, despite praying it was the wine talking, I realised she meant it. Even as she looked so apologetic and horrified. Like that had been a horrible secret she hadn't wanted to say out loud. And then my words turned so *cold*, colder

than I had thought possible. I still loved her, I would always love Diane, but it seemed my other half didn't feel the same anymore.

Our love had faded and fractured until there was nothing I could do to hold us together. Perhaps those words could have been taken back, but neither of us had tried. Neither of us blamed the wine. Neither of us spit out excuses, and neither Diane nor I tried to insist those words weren't true. That we could still stay together. We lost that chance ages ago, and neither of us had noticed till that night.

And now there's no hope of closure between us.

This reflection of my beloved sits before me like those weeks hadn't happened. Like *that night* hadn't happened. Like I hadn't fled, angry and tearful, while she followed. Screaming my name like *I* had been the one to call our relationship off. Her ghost sits here and *mocks* me, acting like I hadn't made that stupid mistake. Stumbling in the middle of the street, a street so wet with the previous rain that it made that driver lose control.

My Diane looks whole and perfect here. Smiling like those weeks had been swept away, like she wasn't going to pull away. Like the thought of leaving me was as impossible as I had thought. Like *that night* had only been a vivid nightmare and this was reality. That I had only imagined those warm calloused hands pushing me away, stolen from my grasp as she was flung across the pavement. That I had imagined the *crunch* of bone, the red that had bloomed around her broken form in a horrifying comparison to the crimson petals of the hibiscus flowers she insisted on buying every year despite how fleeting their lives were.

But it's not a dream. My Diane is dead. Ripped from me and the living world in a fleeting moment of broken anger. In a moment of sacrifice. I had laid her body to rest a long time ago, but it seems her ghost hasn't gotten the message.

I have a plan this time. This time, I'm not leaving her fractured ghost here. If she wants to haunt me, *fine*. But she better follow at my heels if she wants to do that. She can't desecrate a place meant for love, for quiet and kind companionship, despite it's black mark. She can't linger in a sweeter moment of a dead life, even if it would be a kinder cage than that wooden casket six feet underground.

The street is empty this morning. Will continue to be empty for a hours. The majority of the populace drawn to some event in the city park. Damian, a man who held the title of longest employee at this café, comes and leaves me alone with my drink before ducking back inside. He gives no fanfare, no extra comments about moving to a different table or asks how I'm doing. He meets my gaze for a split second, nods, and leaves.

I wonder if he understands this will likely be the last time I come here and sit at this table. I wonder if he and his coworkers watch me from behind the tinted glass. I wonder if they miss Diane too. The kind lady who shared smiles and jokes with them. The lady who tipped so well because she loved this little café, and the privacy the staff afforded us on our dates.

I take a long drink while Diane dreamily mutters about how nice the weather is. Twirling her pale locks in loops around her slender fingers. I set my drink down, saying nothing as Diane continues to converse. She doesn't seem to notice that she's carrying on only half of a long dead conversation. Her tunes have only changed when I break down sobbing, or when I leave abruptly. Then and only then, does she turn unhappy. Her face alight with fury and sorrow that seems to shock her before her vision flickers and disappears on a gust of wind. A few times I've turned back and sat down again. But after that surge of negative emotion, she doesn't come back until the next time.

I've tried to tell her this isn't real, that she's *dead*, but it never seems to get through to her. So this time I'm trying something new. Everything I did, I had done for her or with her when she was alive, and after she – Her memory, the echoes of her voice haunt me worse than her actual ghost. Guiding me along because I've forgotten how to live without her. How to go on without her hand in mine or her voice in my ears.

“Diane,” I whisper as she continues to comment on how beautiful the day is. How lovely the flowers are. I don't point out that there are no flowers left in the pots where's she's pointing. “Diane I need –” I wait for a pause, wait for her eyes to meet mine before I continue. “Diane I need to let go.” I say. “I need you to let go too.” She blinks, still smiling, still stupidly happy. *Why couldn't it have been me?* I think. *Why did you have to make sure I kept living? You would have done a better job. You would have moved on.*

“I love you so much, you know that.” I say, choking on a bitter laugh. “Even after you said – I *still love you*. I don't think I'll ever stop loving you, but – but you did.” I spit out the words, despite the way they burn my tongue. “You stopped loving me, and I *need* to understand that. I do understand that, even if I'll never know *why*. Even if I'll never understand what I did wrong. Or if had been my fault at all.” I drop my gaze to my hands, curled up in trembling fists in my lap. I take a deep breath. *Push on*. I tell myself. *You have to. Do it for her. Do it for you.*

“Diane I –” Again, I stop. The words I swore I would say sitting on my tongue like shards of ice. “You can leave.” I choke out. “You don't have to stay and smile and make sure I'm okay. Okay?” I look back up. Diane stares back, soft and sweet, and *silent*. Her bright eyes shine with affection, but also with what could be tears. “I'm leaving.” I croak, digging my nails into my thighs. As if the pain will help move me along.

“I’m leaving.” I say again, louder, more certain. I blink, and tears roll in hot trails down my cheeks. “*I’m* walking away this time, Diane. And I’m not coming back. Follow me if you must. Haunt me if you want but,” I stop, drinking in this last reflection of her. Still beautiful, and for the first time, looking as if she heard me. “But I’m gonna try to move on, okay?” I breathe, hoping for an acknowledgment I know I’ll never get. Diane does nothing. I nod, swallowing the rock in my throat.

“I need to move on.” I tell her, smiling gently, lips trembling. “I need to learn to live without you now, and I... I just needed to tell you that.” I rasp. I nod, more a jerk of my head, and rise on weak knees. I push the chair back in and leave a tip under my glass. I pause, staring, watching Diane stare back. “Goodbye Diane.” I sob, offering a final painful smile.

I pivot on my heel and walk away. I march, each step heavier than the last. *God*, I want to turn around. I push on, vision blurry and sniffing like a child. I push on, because even if every step hurts, that ache in my chest that I’ve grown familiar with since Diane died grows lighter with every step forward. I move away from our place and breathe deep. Something I think is acceptance blooms like her warmth in that hollow space where my heart lies. I start to wonder what the other café’s in the city are like.

Goodbye Leah. An aching familiar voice whispers in me ears. I jerk to a stop, head swinging to look back at our table. Something red glimmers on the tablecloth. I sprint back, stop and stare, and then drop to my knees, sobbing.

I hear the door to the café swing open violently and the rushing steps of several of the café servers. Every one of them asks what’s wrong, and who to call, and was I hurt? Was I having an allergic reaction? I shake my head and sob harder, unable to find the words, shivering under the weight of so many gentle hands.

It's Damian who notices that slip of red on the table. It's his quiet rumble that draws everyone to silence. I grin stupidly up at Damian, sobbing in painful relief and anguish as he kneels next to me, a crimson hibiscus flower cradled in his hands.

Before the Law

By Miriam Kamil

Miriam Kamil is a PhD candidate in Classical Philology at Harvard. She studies poetry, myth, and gender in the ancient Mediterranean.

* * *

[In the early first century CE, the Roman poet Ovid told of the myth of Myrrha, a young girl struck with erotic desire for her father, Cinyras. In the story, Myrrha tricks Cinyras into having sex with her under the cover of darkness. After discovering her identity, he chases her from the house, intent on killing her. Before he can catch her, she is magically transformed into a myrrh tree.]

Beneath the shadow of the courthouse, the town charter lays encased in glass atop a marble pedestal. Once a pristine and imposing document, centuries of indirect sunlight have now blanched its ink and withered the parchment. The yellowed corners crimp like autumn leaves, poised to break off. At the foot of the charter, above the spiky signatures of ambitious men, one may still read the town's famous credo: "Before the law sits a gatekeeper."

I am the gatekeeper, thinks the judge from her bench overlooking the courtroom, straightening her spine. Her back muscles protest, shoulders slumping in toward her lap in revolt. Her whole body aches. Within the huge belly that strains the seams of her black gown, a malformed baby slaps the floor of its fleshy chamber. Now the judge has to pee.

Below the judge's stately perch, the defense attorney checks her watch, adjusts her pencil skirt. It's skintight and narrow at the knees like a mermaid's tail, forcing her to walk with tiny steps. The courtroom's old mahogany walls, elegantly engraved with meandering designs of dubious symmetry, echo the clicks of her stilettos as she crosses to the prosecutor's desk. The prosecutor looks up from

tinkering with his pocket square, which is the same vivid lavender as his tie, and smiles. They are old friends.

The judge on her perch massages her swollen fingers, pushing the flesh around beneath the skin. In the gallery below, past the chitchatting lawyers, a mob of reporters grows restless. Necks crane to eye the brawny bailiffs who guard the door beside the judge's bench. Those in the know call this the Door of the Damned, since only defendants use it, when transported from or returning to the jail on the outskirts of town. Today, the defendant is late. The reporters scratch in their notebooks to pass the time, feathered quills fluttering. One reporter in an oversized newsboy cap describes the marble floor to his assistant, who takes down every word.

Every passing day of the trial has hosted a fuller gallery than the one before. The judge hasn't seen so many reporters since the Semele Cadmeid case a dozen years back, when she was just a prosecutor herself. Like that case, the one on the docket today has all the makings of a scandal—sex, violence, a girl to pity and hate—and the whole town seems to be wild with it. Past the fidgeting reporters sit the arresting officers, Detective Nux Arren and his partner Phoebe Gunn. In matching smart dark suits, they scowl at the reporters' backs. For them, this case is not a matter of entertainment or intrigue. For them, it is about justice. They think of the small child they visited in the hospital weeks before, inexplicably diseased, and grit their teeth at the Door of the Damned and the indifferent bailiffs who stand like statues.

On the wooden benches to the judge's left, jury members loll and snooze. As usual, all twelve are retirees. From the corner of her eye, the judge perceives a mist settled over them, but on closer look it is only their wispy white hair in a cloud of stale breath.

The defense attorney's stilettos wobble her back to her seat just as the narrow door between the bailiffs wrenches open, revealing the silhouette of a petite, besuited man, who shuffles in bashfully.

Eyes exaggerated by thick glasses, he raises his handcuffed wrists in a sheepish shrug, winning a laugh from many of the reporters and a few jurors. He once played a very shy character in a famous movie, of which they are now pleasantly reminded. When a bailiff unlocks his handcuffs, the defendant clasps his hands together and bows ironically to widespread guffaws.

“Smug bastard,” mutters Detective Nux.

“Bug smastard,” agrees Detective Phoebe.

“Order,” says the judge with a light tap of the gavel. She too is unimpressed by the defendant’s impersonation of himself. “It is time for the defense to call their next witness.”

“Thank you, your honor,” says the defense attorney, smoothing down her already faultless skirt. “We call Doctor Schade to the stand.”

At the pronouncement of the name, the oaken double doors at the back of the courtroom swing open with an unrefined squeak to reveal a portly man in a brown wool suit, eyeing a golden pocket watch, as if he has been counting down to this very moment. Snapping the watch shut, he walks importantly into the courtroom, where, halfway up the aisle, he pretends to spot a friend in the gallery and waves cheerily. Soon he arrives at the witness stand where, with some heavy breathing and mild cursing, he clambers into the high seat.

“Dr. Schade,” says the defense attorney, smiling indulgently. “Please tell the court your credentials.”

“Certainly,” he clears his throat of a considerable amount of phlegm. “I obtained my MD from Vanderbilt and my PhD from Rockefeller, then completed my residency in psychiatrics at Ford. I specialize in adolescent psychology and have treated over a thousand children in my decades of service.”

Oohs and *aahs* arise from the reporters in the gallery. The malformed baby inside the judge's belly shakes a tambourine, rattling vibrations up her spine.

"Very impressive, indeed," says the defense attorney. "And I assume you are familiar with the facts of the case at hand."

"Certainly," says the doctor, clearing his throat again. Some phlegm sprays from his lips to swing moistly from the bristles of his mustache. "The defendant is accused of having a sexual relationship with his teenage daughter." He gestures limply toward the back of the courtroom, where a small girl cowers in the far corner of the last row, eyes on the floor. The girl, Myrrha, is pale, with her thin hair done up in a pink barrette. No one sits within ten feet of her in any direction, even though the front rows are overstuffed. Turning her attention back to the doctor on the witness stand, the judge vaguely hopes the baby in her belly is not a girl. It isn't, in fact. Not even close.

"And what is your expert opinion on the matter?" the defense attorney asks the doctor.

He creases one corner of his mouth in a knowing smile, as if he and the attorney are in on the same joke.

"This culture has an idea that children are innocent." He rolls his hand in the air, conducting a tiny orchestra. "That they are wholly separate from the world of sex."

"But you disagree?"

"In my experience," says the doctor imperiously, "children frequently desire sexual relationships with adults. Teachers, priests, even parents. Perhaps especially parents."

The judge leans away from the witness stand involuntarily, the bile in her throat rising independently of the baby in her belly, who is now flipping pancakes.

“And when adults indulge in these relationships? Is that a bad thing for the children?”

“It can be,” says the doctor. “But not always. Some children are...” he searches for the right word, wiggling his fingers again, “...grateful to gain experience. Especially from someone who knows what they’re doing.” He winks toward the gallery, earning several hearty laughs and not a few audible gags. The defense attorney keeps her voice steady, though she too has grown a bit green in the face.

“And is there any way to know, doctor,” she continues, “whether such an experience is helpful or harmful for the child?”

“Unfortunately, no,” responds the doctor, raising helpless palms. “You can speak with the children, of course, but children are notoriously dishonest. Manipulative. Sadly, I’ve seen men’s lives ruined over untrue accusations.”

“So, you’re saying,” says the defense attorney, as if working out his logic in the moment, “that even if we were certain that such a sexual relationship occurred, there would be no way of knowing whether that relationship was damaging to the child in question. Then how, doctor, could we ever determine legal guilt in such a situation?”

“Objection,” says the prosecutor, standing up for effect and waving a piece of paper, which happens to be blank. “The defendant is not a lawyer. He cannot speak to legal matters, only medical.”

Several reporters lean forward at this unexpected hiccup in the questioning process. In fact, the lawyers practiced the whole thing together the previous day, with a mop standing in for the witness and a stack of old women’s magazines for the judge. The verdict was a tossup, they figured, but with so many eyes on the proceedings, a few dramatic twists could make both their careers.

“Sustained,” says the judge, motioning to the gallery to settle down. Their fidgeting partially subsides.

“Remind me to look into that doctor after all this,” Phoebe mutters to Nux.

“Remind *me* to look into *this* doctor after all *that*,” Nux whispers back. Seething, the detectives scooch closer together so that their thighs touch.

“No further questions,” says the defense attorney, tripping back to her seat, where she shows her client a surreptitious thumbs up. He covers his blush with his hand, shy as ever.

“Your witness,” says the judge to the prosecutor listlessly. An exhaustion has settled over her since the doctor began speaking, although they have only just started for the day. Her belly throbs against the hard desk. This seat was not built for her. “Let’s move it along,” she adds when the prosecutor continues to pet his silk tie affectionately.

“Ahem,” he says, for effect, rising to approach the witness stand. “Doctor. Where do you stand on the Cadmeid verdict?”

A rush of gasps darts through the gallery, followed by the furious scribbling of reporters’ quills.

“Objection! Relevance?” says the defense attorney, just as she rehearsed.

“The Cadmeid murder was the most important trial in a century,” explains the prosecutor, “with many similarities to the case at hand. The jury members may wish to know where the so-called expert stands.” He indicates the geriatric dozen to his right. The ones who are not dozing gawk through rheumy eyes.

“I’ll allow it,” says the judge, who is distracted by her still cringing esophagus. “The defendant may answer.”

Dr. Schade breathes loudly through his nose, puffing out his chest with authority. His handlebar mustache twitches.

“That girl,” he announces, spittle jetting from his mustache, “got what she asked for.”

“Ugh!” says a reporter, louder than she intended. All scribble furiously, splashing ink on each other’s suits. The prosecutor bounces on his toes, pleased at the reaction his question has elicited.

To the judge’s right, several jury members shake their heads sadly, while a few toss worried glances over their shoulders, frightened by the imagined footsteps of some late consequence. Several of them had been in the courtroom twelve years before, sitting in the jury box or crowding the gallery. They easily recall the headlines: GIRL FOUND STRANGLED, read the *Town Gazette*, followed by, MAGISTRATE ARRESTED FOR MURDER. Then, soon afterward, “SHE *LIKED* BEING KILLED”: MAGISTRATE ACQUITTED. Rumor held that before her death Semele had confided in a brother about her married boyfriend growing violent. But, the jurors reflect sadly, that information was never presented at trial, and he’d gone free while Semele turned to dust in her grave in the Fields of Mourning. Though at the time, the killer—a prominent lawmaker of substantial wealth—had plenty of supporters who believed his story of erotic choking gone awry, by now most had accepted that he probably was guilty of murder. In the years since, a feeling of paranoia had spread through the town, dripping from house to house like bacteria in the water supply. Now parents everywhere sternly warned their daughters and strictly enforced curfews, while on playgrounds boys tease girls with vicious rhymes, all about the terrible fate that befell Semele Cadmeid.

“No further questions,” says the prosecutor, spinning on his heel and returning to his seat.

“You may step down,” says the judge. The doctor grumbles as he pulls himself heavily from the witness stand, irritated that his opinion landed so badly. When he testified at the Cadmeid trial, years

before, everyone had applauded. It was only common sense that a girl who asks for rough sex takes on a certain amount of risk. A man could hardly be blamed for acquiescing to her nymphomaniacal request. But common sense is no longer common, he decides, as he saunters back down the aisle toward the double doors, trying to regain his sense of importance. As he goes, he smacks away several reporters, who try to tickle his bulbous chin with the feather ends of their quills.

“Next witness,” says the judge, rubbing her belly. The malformed baby within rubs back, feeling truly safe.

“The defense rests,” says the defense attorney.

“Ugh!” shouts the same reporter as before, who was hoping the defendant would testify in his own defense. In acknowledgment the defendant looks apologetically at the gallery, where reporters fawn and grin. One reaches forward to tousle his hair.

“Then we’ll have closing statements before the jury deliberates,” explains the judge. “Who would like to begin?”

Town law dictates that the lawyers must agree who will make the first closing statement. Conflicts over priority have grown into feuds that have stalled trials for months and even years. Now the defense attorney and the prosecutor make a show of allowing the other to go first, taking turns bowing deeply until the defense attorney’s skirt threatens to split and the prosecutor’s pocket square tumbles out onto the floor. They settle on a rock-paper-scissors contest, which the prosecutor wins with a well-timed rock, then steps forward to address the jury. Pleased at being spoken to directly, several jurors elbow one another to attention. “What?” one of them calls loudly, upset to be awakened.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” begins the prosecutor. “You have heard a tremendous amount of testimony and seen endless evidence over the past several weeks. But through it all only one fact really matters. And that is that this man”—he twirls on his toes to point to the defendant, who blushes—“took advantage of his only child. The girl’s mother, long dead, could not protect her. Being a child, she could not protect herself. The one person whose job it was to protect her”—here he twirls and points again, silk tie fluttering over his shoulder—“put her in the most danger. That, ladies and gentlemen, is *wrong*. Your intuition tells you it is wrong, just as mine tells me. My innermost, human-most self *screams* it.” He raises his voice, casting an accusing finger at three random jurors in turn. “Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!” Smoothing his hair, he lowers his voice again. “In a moment, the defense counsel is going to get up here and insult you. She’ll go on about *precedent*. She’ll try to convince you, as Dr. Schade tried, that you don’t know what you know. But despite the best efforts of these clever people, you *know* that children don’t seduce parents, just like you *know* that women don’t enjoy being murdered. The defense will tell you to tilt your heads and squint your eyes until your doubt is *almost* reasonable.” He pauses to demonstrate squinting. “But if this whole experiment in civilization—our glorious town—is to be worthwhile, you must *not* believe them. Don’t let the law wiggle itself free from justice. No, you must convict.”

An elderly juror drops his head onto the back of his chair with a soft *bonk* and begins to snore. Beside him an old woman blows her nose into an embroidered handkerchief. Inside the judge’s belly, the malformed baby grips the soft walls of its prison and screams.

The judge groans, unwillingly, and clutches her stomach. Sweat pours suddenly from her forehead, her armpits, the soles of her feet. “We have to adjourn,” she says, feigning calm. “We will hear the defense’s closing statements tomorrow.”

With a feeble smack of her gavel, she shuffles out of the courtroom through a private door and barely makes it to her office before collapsing.

“Odd,” says Nux to Phoebe behind the murmuring reporters.

“Nod,” she responds, nodding.

The two detectives scoot to the end of the row and rise to leave. There is still a considerable amount of chatter in the courtroom, but they are uninterested in anything other than the trial proceedings. When they reach the oaken double doors, the child in the back row catches their attention with a soft sob.

“Isn’t there anything we can do for her?” Phoebe asks, holding back tears.

“There are things that can be done,” Nux answers, “But not by us. And not for her.”

Shaking their heads in disappointment, the detectives leave the courtroom.

Near the empty judge’s bench, jurors rise unsteadily from their seats and jostle like bowling pins. At the prosecutor’s desk, the defense attorney pretends to scold her colleague for his victory in the rock-paper-scissors contest. He offers to buy her a drink, which she accepts. As they walk off, arm-in-arm, the defense attorney forgets all about her client, who waits awkwardly in his seat, hoping to receive direction from somewhere. Before long, several reporters approach him, asking for autographs. To their delight he covers his eyes in embarrassment, before the two muscled bailiffs arrive to escort him back through the Door of the Damned, which he must use for at least one more day.

Later, in their studio apartment, deep in the city center, Nux and Phoebe climb into their shared bed to sleep like they always do, back-to-back. Sleep comes over them slowly, anxiety over the trial pricking their eyelids open every few moments. Eventually each drifts off, though their worries cast

a sheen of sweat over their adjacent bodies. The skin of their backs grows sticky with it, clinging like putty. Phoebe's shoulder blades nestle between Nux's like concentric butterfly wings, flapping rhythmically with their deep sleepy breaths. They undulate. The sticky skin softens and melts and merges. Underneath, the notches on their spines interlock, zipping neatly together. One by one the vertebrae clink like the links of a chain. His trapezius muscle bleeds into hers, squishy nerves kissing. Their throbbing hearts, new neighbors, greet like old friends. Beneath the light bedsheet their skin has grown together into a continuous expanse, a running river of flesh.

In the morning, it takes them a while to master movement in their new shape, and they are late to the courthouse. By the time they roll through the oak doors—they must roll now, being perfectly spherical, minus the limbs—the jury has handed their little paper verdict to the judge, who reads it solemnly. The ritual of justice is underway.

But something is amiss. The judge is no longer pregnant nor a woman. Suddenly the judge is an old man with translucent skin and thin lips. Lines burrow deeply beside his mouth like an oversized marionette. Phoenix rolls down the central aisle. They try to sit in a bench, but their width won't allow it, so they bounce gently in the in-between space.

“What happened to the other judge?” they ask a nearby reporter.

“Died,” he responds from the corner of his mouth.

“Had a baby and died,” adds another in a whisper.

“Baby died too,” agrees a third, nodding vigorously.

A fourth reporter gasps and covers his mouth. “Not the baby!”

“We've got a replacement judge now,” says the second reporter, wiping a tear from her eye.

“Shouldn’t there be a new trial?” asks Phoenix, swiveling involuntarily, so that they have to switch to their other mouth halfway through the question.

“It’s up to him,” says the same reporter, indicating the judge, and openly weeping.

“I object to this whole situation! It is a charade of justice!” wails the prosecutor from his desk, commanding the room’s attention. He pulls his hands through his hair so that it sticks out on either side. “I demand a new trial!”

“As do I,” says the defense attorney. “Or I might, depending on the verdict.”

“There is no need for a new trial,” says the judge, speaking for the first time, in an unexpectedly high-pitched voice. It creeps over the gallery like hisses from a pit of snakes, sending chills up Phoenix’s substantial neck.

“The jury has been unable to reach a verdict,” he continues, refolding the little piece of paper and stowing it within the folds of his robes.

Reporters gasp. Quills scribble furiously. On their benches, aged jurors lift sleepy eyelids, wondering at the fuss.

“As is customary in situations such as this, I will make the final decision as to the defendant’s guilt or innocence,” sibilates the judge. “Fortunately, I have followed this case closely from the beginning and I have a good idea what will constitute justice.”

Phoenix revolves so that each set of eyes can see Myrrha, crouched as usual in the furthest spot of the backmost row. She is pale and trembling and smaller than ever.

“Not only is this defendant innocent of the crime with which he is charged,” continues the new judge, “but he is himself the victim of a crime.”

The reporters' gasps reduce to stunned silence. They gawp at each other, open-mouthed, fish in the headlights.

"There has been an assault, yes. But the defendant is clearly a victim. Every day of this trial, his attacker has loomed in the gallery, intimidating him, reminding him that *she* is in control. With just a glance, she can destroy him. With a wink or a twirl she can bring a man to his knees. And he had to live in a house with her! There was no wife there to manage his impulses—and the mother is not blameless here. This man was set up to fail, destined to sin, doomed to indulge. No, no. The *child* is the criminal."

While he speaks, the reporters find their voices again. Many cry out in anger, while a few hoot and applaud, relieved to hear their opinion from a mouth of authority. Several scribble aggressively, aiming to take down every word and emphasis. The assistant to the dictating reporter writes so furiously that he snaps his quill in half, shouts in frustration, then resumes writing with half a quill.

"I therefore find sufficient legal grounds to sentence the child. Town law is not ambiguous here; the punishment was set down long ago."

"You must be joking," shouts the prosecutor, stamping his feet.

"Your honor," says the defense attorney, fear now shaking her voice. They hadn't rehearsed any of this. "The edict to which you refer was written centuries ago. It has never once been enforced."

"This is unprecedented!" screams the prosecutor with wide, bloodshot eyes. He has pulled his hair out further still so that it stabs in every direction.

"I thought we weren't concerned with precedent?" the judge counters without humor. "As I say, the punishment is traditional. It is age-old. If it was good enough for our town's founders, it is good enough for *you*." He directs the last word at the adolescent heaving silent sobs at the back of the

room. “I sentence the seductress to the Fields of Mourning. There she is to be entombed, living, within the witch elm.”

“No!” shout the prosecutor and defense attorney at once. The reporters have lost all decorum, snatching notebooks from each other’s hands, tearing pages, pricking each other with sharp quill points. Phoenix swivels rapidly, trying to see the judge and the girl at once, until their momentum blurs them like an out-of-control top. Jury members are wide awake. Confused, irritated, and toothless, they rise onto shaky legs.

The defendant, petite beside his gesticulating lawyer, has his hands over his mouth. It would not do to be seen laughing at a time like this. But his chuckles seep out from between his fingers, reaching the keen ears of the judge, who winks.

When the judge smacks his gavel, the two enormous bailiffs leave their door to march heavily to the back of the courtroom, where they grip the tiny girl by the arms and march her back, past virulent reporters and the spinning detectives. They pass the devastated lawyers, the baffled jury, the thrilled defendant, and the satisfied judge, reaching the narrow door used only by the accused and the condemned. Hovering a foot above the floor, shoulders screaming from the men’s tight grips, Myrrha looks pleadingly to her father, who gives her a little wave.

The Door of the Damned slams more loudly than a small door should, casting a silence over the courtroom, which lasts all of a moment. The reporters move first, elbows and knees flying as they spill out of the gallery and tear after the bailiffs through the door. The lawyers, ripping themselves from their stunned daze, dart after them, followed by the tottering jurors and the defendant, whose eyes gleam with sadistic curiosity. The judge, also tottering and also curious, goes next to see justice done, but gets stuck behind Phoenix, who bounces hopelessly against the narrow doorframe. After the judge shoves them aside, they roll back through the gallery to the oaken double doors, through

which they fit comfortably. With the momentum of a bowling ball, they rejoin the group beneath the gray clouds outside the courthouse.

The Fields of Mourning are on the outskirts of town, past the last row of houses and the jail where convicts typically carry out their sentence. On maps the area is embedded invisibly within the town border, neither contained nor excluded, but on the outside of the inside and the inside of the outside. The Fields and the corpses that nourish them are the town's shameful but necessary excrement. There in the center of the meadow, on top of a hill, stands an enormous elm tree, long dead, its bare branches creaking in a never-ending death rattle. The bark has peeled and dried to expose a dull gray under-skin. The worst of the decay is within, where a hollow spreads its absence, chipping steadily away at the tree's once splendid bulk. Near the trunk a rotten gap in the bark reveals the emptiness within. It's here that the bailiffs end their march, depositing the small girl easily into the tree's opening. Inside, there is enough room for her to stand, but she crouches anyway.

The mob from the courtroom arrives then, some cheering, some wailing. The walk has quite wearied the jury members, who lean on their canes, huffing, or sink into the grass for a catnap. The group forms a crescent around the bailiffs and the witch elm, where Myrrha peers out through the crack, shedding tears thick as sap.

"Let her out of there," shouts the prosecutor, who has shoved his way to the front of the crowd. "This is barbaric!"

"This is an insane miscarriage of justice," comes the voice of the defense attorney as she struggles through the crowd, yanking her heels out of the sinking grass with every step. "This child was not on trial."

The reporters all turn to the judge to hear his response, only to find him at the edge of the crowd, in quiet conversation with the defendant. He pulls a piece of paper from the pocket of his robes—the original verdict—and hands it to the defendant, who adds his autograph. They offer each other an avuncular pat on the back.

While everyone is distracted by this disgusting display, Myrrha explores her new home. Inside the witch elm, the shouts outside crumble to low, inscrutable growls. Soon there is only the warm echo of her breath, the creaky sigh of the tree as it adjusts to its new inhabitant. Myrrha places her palms against the smooth, dry bark, sharing her pulse with it. The tree purrs, swelling around her delicate fingers, grasping them gently. She watches her hand sink into the tree wall, then her wrist, and her arm, with a sense of peace that stills her heartbeat almost to nothing. She stretches into the tree like a soft blanket, letting the bark coat her skin, unspool her fingerprints. She closes her eyes. There is no need to see. Her arms, melted into the wood, perceive more than any eye. She flicks her twig fingers lightly, flexes her new wrists. The air outside is cool and nourishing. She sucks sweet carbon from it, lets it dance under her wooden skin, gushes it out through minute pores. The sunlight, hidden from the crowd by gray clouds above, washes over her skin like a warm bath. She thirsts for it. Tossing her head back, she lets her skull crack, split open. The mind which was once called Myrrha leaks into the tree, spills upward toward the topmost bough. There she tosses her face—which is now in many places—toward the liquid warmth of the sun. Her hair, which as a girl she could not feel, now thrums with life. Strands wind outward as tiny dark purple buds, eruptions from the ends of each spindly branch. One bud furls open into a vivid green leaf, the first of countless identical growths, which spring into being, decorating branches long bare. Myrrha arches, groans, settles, arches again, tasting sunlight. Within the narrow hollow at the trunk, nothing of a human girl remains, except a tiny pool of bright red blood, which sinks through the roots into the forest floor, where it stains the earth and infects the drinking water.

No one has noticed the tree coming back to life, since the defense attorney has the judge by the combover. She smashes a rock into his eyes, shattering his glasses. A reporter rips her away, tearing out the judge's last few hairs in the process, while a juror smacks her over the head with a cane. The second swing of the cane misses, landing instead in the broad belly of Phoenix, who is flung backward down the hill, bouncing like an overinflated balloon. Elsewhere the dictating reporter screeches, since his assistant has stuck his trusty quill into his neck, which spurts inky blood like a broken pipe. At their feet the defendant plays dead. He might be convincing, were his body not quaking with laughter. Near the tree, the prosecutor, eager to get involved, bellows a war cry and punches an elderly woman in the face. She teeters for a moment, then pitches forward, spitting her dentures out of her mouth to land with a bite on the prosecutor's pretty silk tie. He screams.

"She was just a child," the defense attorney shouts, before grunting from a kick to the chest.

"He was helpless," the judge declares, punching the air threateningly.

"And where was the mother?" someone else agrees, jumping up and down.

"Semele was murdered!" a bailiff screams, shocking everyone. No bailiff has ever spoken, as far as anyone remembers. The huge man falls sobbing to his knees, leaning on the witch elm for support. "She was my sister."

The mention of Semele's dreaded name tosses the crowd into hysterics. Not caring who is friend and who foe, all punch, kick, and claw as if thronged by enemies. Bones crack and blood flows from noses. The judge palms his eyes, rubbing in the shards of glass. At the bottom of the hill, Phoenix struggles to roll upward, back toward the fray, finding a worthy opponent in gravity. Over and over again they worry their way up the grassy expanse just to gambol helplessly back down.

Overhead, to no one's notice, a dark cloud begins to glow. Something like a star falls fast from it, growing brighter and larger as it nears the earth. The shape lands lightly, still aglow, then raises itself to reveal a huge woman in shining armor. On her stately head, ten feet off the ground, gleams a golden helmet with a brilliant white plume, buckled beneath her prominent chin. On her chest a breastplate rises and falls with each divine breath. Slowly the people notice her presence, dropping their fists one by one, angry expressions falling limp in awe. When she raises her great spear and brings it down to quake the earth, the last of the fighting ceases, all eyes entranced upon the goddess. She opens her radiant mouth and words break forth like thunder, chilling all their hearts.

“Hold back,” she roars, “you People of the Court, back from brutal war!”

Eyes shine with tears at her heavenly presence, greater and more hideous than any human being. Some fall to their knees. Many faint.

“Break off,” she thunders again, “Shed no more bloo—”

Her speech ends mid-word as something like a lead balloon rolls her over. Phoenix, having finally managed to wiggle their way up the hill, has reentered the fight. They roll off the goddess, revealing her to be pressed into the earth, spear sticking straight through her back. She has fallen upon it.

“God is dead!” Phoenix shouts with both mouths, rolling into the thick of the crowd.

Trance broken, the prosecutor bellows his fiercest war cry. Standing back-to-back with the defense attorney, they pummel anyone who comes close with well-timed rocks. Reporters clobber jurors who kick each other's shins. The judge, now blind, is tackled by the bailiffs. He struggles beneath their huge frames, as the defendant, crushed beneath the three of them, chuckles out his final breaths. The crowd swells like a tidal wave as townspeople stream in from all directions, armed

with torches and pitchforks, furious and desperate. Whether in support of or against the verdict, all are out for blood. Brothers claw at brothers, children bludgeon parents, a wife wraps an elegant scarf around her husband's neck and pulls.

All are fists and claws and teeth. All fight for their very lives and the town they call home, preferring to see it burn than fall to the enemy. And burn it does. High above them, Myrrha spreads her wooden limbs, blocking out the sun. She basks.

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