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ISSUE 27:
ANACHRONISM

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A Word from our Editor

by Sarah Ramdawar

My mother's preference (of course this is how I begin: everything is my mother; for as long as she's here and forever after that) whenever we manage to sit down and watch a tv show together, is usually, if not always, something travel and adventure. She likes to see the scenery, the landscapes, the wild woods of a planet she's only seen a part of, but which can still remind her of her unfettered Caribbean girlhood.

When a lonesome sheep herder traversing the expansive Tibetan Plateau suddenly pulls out a phone, my mother points to the screen and exclaims, "Look, look! They have a cell phone!"

The seemingly anachronistic sight intrudes on her nostalgic memories, where not collecting enough firewood for the day means you don't cook, when the flambeau runs out in the evening means you stop studying. I remind her that most people have cell phones now, how everyone on the planet is, in fact, existing at the same thumb-tappin', scrollin' time.

And what a time to be scrolling in. What a time to just be. A time of climate collapse, human rights regressions, and witnessing interrupting violent images of interrupting

violent genocide in Gaza. For myself, existing now can *feel* anachronistic—the dissociated planetary scale of it, the loneliness in it.

It's a reminder that distance, place, and time are dimensions inextricably linked. What feels out of place and out of time, can be a country; can be memory; can be trauma; identity; a name; information; ghosts and grief; can be myths and gods pulled to the forefront of now; can be light.

This issue was bounded by the timelines that bind us: we kicked off the issue on Mother's Day in North America, made final decisions around Father's Day, and there were birthdays in between. It seems fitting then, that during this volume's compilation, it was announced that Apparition Literary Magazine would be coming to a close, and Anachronism would be its penultimate printing. I am honored to guest edit and be the one shepherding these exceptionally moving stories and poems through this powerful installment of the magazine.

Many of the pieces in this Anachronism issue weave between differing timelines, memories, stories, and languages. "Another Old Country" by Nadia Radovich does it all by telling a myth three times over, whilst evading a god. "Like a Fly Clasped in a Hand" by Nadav Shul-Kutas asks you to read carefully in a future library, where knowledge, censorship, and ultimately decisions are paramount. Cass Wilkinson Saldaña's "Melting Point" follows a sentient cargo container discovering new things about themselves at an inopportune time, and Leah Ning's "Rosewater, Clinging to the Tongue" is a beautiful exploration of fractured memory by way of eating their wispy clouds.

We have a potent poetry lineup that enters some dark places, but deftly sees you through to the other side. "Galatea Pt II" by Mykki Rios opens with a question of what the creation of statuesque perfection would look like today, while Ayòdéjì Israel wears grief on the body, and encapsulates it within "Experiencing Grief Amidst Aliens". Asa Delaney's interrupting "For Poppy" explores through bone and blood, the nature of ghosts, trauma, and violence. Then like a breath of fresh air, Mary Soon Lee takes us aloft with language of ecological remembrance in "An Archive of Birds". Our poetry ends with Coby Rosser cleverly reminding us of a star child's place in the universe with "Light Lies". Finally, Kelsea Yu closes the issue with her touching personal essay on loss, the anachronistic essence of ghosts and stories in "Here in the After".

I invite you now, not for the last time, to look. Look at these stories and poems we've put together for you, they exist right now in the same time and place, as long as they're here and forever after that.

Sarah Ramdawar

Sarah Ramdawar is an Indo-Caribbean Canadian speculative writer, whose work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Augur Magazine*, *Heartlines Spec*, *Apparition Lit*, and others. Her fiction has been featured in Reactor.com's Short Fiction Spotlight and included in The Best of Utopian Speculative Fiction 2022. She continues her search for true magic amongst the bleached condo skeletons of Toronto, where she lives with her family and water-shy Toller. You can find her @sararam and sarahramdawar.com.

Galatea Pt II

by Mykki Rios

if you made me today / would i live behind a paywall / or be open source / would i constantly be upgraded / would my features change with makeup trends / boudoir mod grunge / would you make me exclusive skins / limited editions / mass produced / would i be one of a series / would i be an installation / would other artists make me a template / deconstruct me / graffiti my likeness / overhaul me/ streamline me / reboot me for a new era / make me feel more current / would a program sing with my voice / would i be a symbol / what i'm trying to ask / is / would there be anything left of me at all

Mykki Rios is a queer genderfluid Mexican-American poet, performer and multimedia artist. Raised in Chicago, and having lived many places across the globe, they finally returned home to the Windy City. Mykki has had works featured in issues of *Welter, Meat For Tea: The Valley Review, Random Sample Review, Smoke and Mold Journal, The Normal School, The Coachella Review, Fourth River Journal, Synkroniciti Magazine*, and more. They were also a finalist in Lupercalia Press' 2022 Chapbook Series Contest.

Another Old Country

by Nadia Radovich

There are at least three stories here. There's a bird, there's a goddess, there's a high school student—they're either three stories, or they're the same one. For now, I'll tell it like three.

I'll tell you two of them the way I remember hearing them, although I can't promise exactly what was said. I'm translating them twice, once from other languages and once from my own memory. Maybe you're getting the stories I was told back then, or maybe you're getting something entirely new.

The other story isn't old, though. In fact, it's just about to start.

The god Midir appears to Aden Nikolajevich in the form of a swan. He taps his beak at her bedroom window until she opens it; he tracks rainwater across her school laptop and printed-off track schedule. Perches ungainly upon her desk and stares at her with a beetle-black eye; he only has the one.

Étaín, Étaín, the swan sings. Aden can tell her with her second-generation ears that he's spelling it the

right way, or rather, the wrong way. Just like she can tell with her second-generation eyes that the words are the green of her mother's family's language, not the slate-grey of English or the scarlet red of her father's family's language.

It isn't so strange to her that a bird should talk with human words. That's just how her city is, like how when she runs through the cherry trees in the park, she can see the flower-haired vilas curling through the branches. Or when she runs alongside the lake, she can sometimes glimpse reflections of trees that don't exist on land, laden and heavy with golden apples. Or, for that matter, how both her families found a fragile series of homes in the same city, out of all the places in the world they could have gone. There's magic in a lot of places. Aden doesn't know that a talking bird is more magical than the rest of it.

"Not quite," she tells the swan. "My name is Aden Nikolajevich," and the parchment-colored name curls from her mouth like pressed snowdrops.

The swan is confused. *Étaín*, it sings.

This is going to happen a lot in the coming days.

Now for one of the old stories.

Once upon a time, in the ancient days, when the world was new and gods frequently walked among mortals, a game between children caused an accident that cost the god Midir his eye. His liege lord, Oengus, promised him anything in the world in recompense.

Midir could have asked for gold, or cattle, or horses. But what he wished for more than anything else was Étaín, the most beautiful woman in the world.

The swan comes back the next day, and the next. He tracks mud on Aden's bedsheets until her mom mistakenly yells at the dog.

Aden does not mind the distraction. What she *actually* wants is to go for a run, but her doctor's appointment to get a new inhaler has been delayed again, so she isn't allowed to. Instead she finishes all her homework and is reduced to rewatching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and looking out the window. The park is a green smudge in the distance; she keeps thinking about how nice it must be to run through it on a cold and misty day like today.

The swan sings for her, not in the car-horn honk of swans, but in a sweetly flowing human voice, in a language she does not know. She's curious enough to ask Gran about it the next time she sees her, because it's the rainy green of Gran's language. It's worth asking even though she knows it will make Gran complain again how Aden's foreign father misspelled her name at the hospital, so thoroughly it ended up a different name.

Aden wonders how long she has to have a name before it isn't misspelled.

"And it would have been so lovely, too," Gran says, "to have a granddaughter named Étaín. And on top of that last name, too, Nic— Nico—"

"Nikolajevich," Aden says. She tries to act casual. "Where's that name from, anyway? I don't know any Étaíns."

"It's from one of the old stories," Gran says, like that explains it all. But when Aden pesters her, she goes into her study to find her old book and turns to a page with a watercolor of a woman and a swan. Or maybe a woman and a man, turning into swans together. Gran has to

stare at the page for a while, because it's written in the green language, which Gran studied in a special school when she was a child, and does not like to admit she does not read it as well as she used to.

"Étaín was a mortal princess," she says, in her special, stiff, translated voice. "The god Midir married her. Or, well, tried to. His witch-wife turned her into a fly and cursed her to wander."

Aden shivers as she watches the slate green words fly from Gran's mouth, like swallows darting at dusk.

"Does he find her again?"

Gran reads on. "Yes," she says at last. "But not for a thousand years. And by then, she was married to someone else, a mortal king. So Midir played a game of fidchell, with Étaín as the prize, only— oh. I forgot about that part. Well, you're a bit young yet for the ending." She closes the book. "Don't worry, though. The god finds her. It's just that it takes a thousand years."

It's raining when the bus carries her home from Gran's. In her bedroom, she opens the window for the swan to come in. He looks cold; she wraps him in a towel.

Étaín, he sings, and the name shimmers in the air.

"I'm sorry," Aden says. "I don't know your language. If you have something to tell me, you'll have to use mine."

One more old story, and then I promise you'll have all three. Once, an equally long time ago in a different faraway land, there lived a tsarevitch who was as cruel as he was beautiful and who, of all things, loved games and hated losing most of all.

He was so proud that he entered into a game with the vilas of the forest: he would race their snow-made daughter. If he won, he would take the vilas' daughter to wife, and if he lost, the vilas would strike him down.

But in his pride, he did not ask the snow-made daughter's name, and so did not learn that the vilas called her Maiden Swifter than Horses.

Of course, her name wasn't actually Maiden Swifter than Horses. It was Devojka Brža od Konja. I'm only translating it for you because I don't think you'll look it up otherwise, just like I said vilas instead of the actual plural, vile, to give you a better shot at pronouncing it. You can't translate without compromising your integrity some.

And our villain wasn't called the tsarevitch, he was called the kraljević, the son of the king. The first English translators always translated this word as tsarevitch rather than prince, so their readers would know just *how* foreign he was. I'm telling you this now so that you remember not everyone in this world gets called by their real name, and because I want to be as honest a translator as I can.

So the bird learns English, although Aden can tell he does not like it. He does not like many things: he hisses at the buses that hum below her window, scratches her on an icy morning when the sky works itself up to a few flurries, and only grudgingly sits beside her watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on her school laptop, learning the static-grey words.

Vampire, he sings. *Wigging out.*

"Good bird," she says, running her fingers through his silken feathers. He gives her a glossy-eyed look and preens.

He learns words prodigiously fast, which is fortunate, because although she does not wish to say so, the bird is diminishing by the day. He stopped being a swan a while ago. Aden has to look up new types of birds to know that he becomes an owl, then a crow, then a blackbird, dwindling smaller and smaller each time.

"Where's the rest of you going?" Aden says, while the rain taps on her window.

The bird is confused. *The summer country*, he sings. *The undying lands.*

Her mom keeps getting tied up with work and forgetting to call back about her inhaler, so Aden stays in her room, watching subtitled TV as the joggers go by, in the hopes that the bird can talk to her soon. She's pretty sure that he's the god Midir, and she wants him to learn enough English for her to tell him he has the wrong Étaín.

The next day she goes to Baba's after school. Baba tells a story while Aden helps make sarma, doing all the standing parts since Baba uses a wheelchair. Baba's mama told her this story. If it was written down, neither Prababa nor Baba had ever read it.

There's a vila as small as Aden's hand in Baba's pot of violets. Her sleeping face looks like the golden burst at the heart of the flower.

"There is a king's son," Baba says. "And he chases a vila through the woods. The vila, she's a runner like you, she says that she will marry him if he wins, but she runs faster than his horse. So he— ah, he does not play well, he—"

"Cheats?" Aden asks.

"Da, da, cheats," Baba says, but she doesn't finish. The story is the scarlet-dye red of Baba's old language, only for her, it isn't old. It's the language that lives behind her eyes, and she has to translate it for Aden. It makes Baba tired, and remembering makes her sad.

So instead they watch Baba's soaps on TV while the sarma cooks. There are leftovers for Aden's parents, because Baba always doubles the recipe.

She looks up the rest of the story when she gets home. There's an animated video about it on YouTube. She likes Maiden Swifter than Horses immediately, enormously, as a fellow runner. She wishes the whole story were about her, not the tsarevitch, so that she could learn about what lived behind Maiden Swifter than Horse's eyes, how she learned to run so fast or what she thought about when she was running.

Midir had a wife already, the witch Fúamnach. I don't think anyone has ever told me what being a witch means in this context. But a witch she was, and she did not like that he married Étaín. Perhaps she did not wish to share power, perhaps she pitied this mortal woman all alone among the gods, or perhaps it was something else. The women in medieval epics seldom possess clear motives.

Whatever the case, she turned Étaín into a bird. I don't know what kind of bird. For the sake of the story, let us assume it was a beautiful and geographically appropriate one. Fúamnach sent a wind to blow her across the earth for a thousand years.

In his fury at being denied, Midir cut off his wife's head, which is a shame. Even if she didn't mean to, I

always thought that Fúamnach did Étaín a favor. Then Midir, a protean, formless god, took to the skies and flew after Étaín.

Only, that's not quite right. Honest translation, remember?

Fúamnach doesn't turn Étaín into a bird, she turns her into a fly. I don't know what kind of fly, except that the text emphasizes it was a very beautiful one.

But, come on. What's the audience supposed to do with that? Imagine Midir streaking across the sky like midday lightning after a weirdly sexy moth? No. It's much easier— maybe even a better translation— to talk about birds instead. The melting colors of a cedar waxwing. The silent bulk of an owl, like all sound has fled the world. A hummingbird turning the air liquid with its wings.

That's more understandable, right? You've longed for someone like that before, or thought you had. Think of the person you love the most, the one you believe you will never see again. What would you do if I told you it would only take a thousand years?

By the fourth season of *Buffy*, the bird has learned enough words to tell Aden what he has to say.

I am a god, he sings in his curiously human voice. *I have searched the world a thousand years for you, my bride. At last you are returned to me and will accompany me to the undying lands, as my lord Oengus promised.*

"Sorry," Aden says, because this seems like a long time to have wasted. "You have the wrong Étaín. I'm Aden."

The bird is confused. *Étaín*, he sings again.

"Aden Nikolajevich," she tries again, in case this time it sticks. "I'm not a goddess, I'm a student."

The bird shakes his head sorrowfully. *Étaín*, he sings.

"Be warned, you who would win me," Maiden Swifter than Horses said. "Any who beats me to the golden apple tree at the heart of this forest will take me to wife. But all who lose against me will perish."

But the tsarevitch did not believe he was in any danger, because when he could not win at a game, he resolved to cheat instead. He rode like the wild hunt ran behind him. But when Maiden Swifter than Horses stayed just a step ahead, he reached out and snatched her up onto his horse.

The bird doesn't like Baba's sarma, which is a huge red flag. The one time she feeds him some, he spits it back out over the camel-hair blanket Baba brought when she came to this country, so Aden has to spot-clean it before her parents get home.

Another red flag is how the bird simply pretends her last name does not exist and only ever calls her *Étaín, Étaín.* She can't tell if he doesn't like her last name or just can't remember it. Sometimes it feels like the same thing.

One day, when her mom lets her stay home from school because her braces were just tightened and still hurt, Aden lays on the carpeted floor of her bedroom and stares at the bird. He's the size of a thrush now.

"Nikolajevich," she says with her aching mouth.

The bird sings, *Étaín*.

"Try it. Nee-koe-lie-yuh-vitch." She tries to say it the way Baba does when she answers the phone, the way her cousins say it when she calls them on WhatsApp. But she can still hear the different alphabet, the appended h. It doesn't fall out of her mouth, scarlet as blood, the way it's supposed to. "Come on, say it."

Étaín, the bird sings.

At last the wind, vexed with her wanderings, plucked a feather from Bird-Étaín and delivered it into a mortal queen's cup. When the queen drank the feather down with the dregs of her wine, she bore Étaín as a daughter. Étaín grew up, married a king, and dreamed sometimes about seeing the world from above.

(Only, you and I remember that she wasn't a bird, she was a fly. It wasn't just a feather that landed in the queen-mother's cup. Étaín's mother swallowed her entirely.)

That night, Aden can't sleep. Her braces feel like there's a cantering in her head, hooves striking against the bones in her face. She's been thinking about Maiden Swifter than Horses without realizing it. It's the sort of thinking that feels heavy, like a die stamping the face on a coin. Like it's leaving something behind.

The bird is a dark shadow against her moon-silvered window.

"Listen to this," she says softly, so her voice won't travel down the hall. "Once long ago, a prince entered into a game with the vilas, to race against their snow-made daughter. But in his pride—"

Étaín, the bird sings. She can hear him tapping at the window.

"I'll let you out in a minute," Aden says. "In his pride, he did not ask the vilas her name, and so did not learn that she was named—"

There's a flash of bright claws. She sees the lines on her hand before the pain hits. Gleaming bright white pain, so sharp even the air aches. Startled tears spring into her eyes before she can work out what happened. Red dots sprinkle her sheets.

She whispers, "I just wanted to tell you—"

Étaín, the bird sings, like that settles the matter.

In the version of Tochmarc Étaíne from the Yellow Book of Lecan manuscript, Midir and Étaín pick up right where they left off. Midir plays a game of fidchell with her new husband and wins; Étaín is the prize. He turns them both into swans, and they fly away together.

Only that's not how a thousand years works. Countries well up on the map like dew and, like dew, burn away. The sea takes mouthfuls out of the land. People move, sometimes tremendous distances. All the old gods of Ireland are departing for the summer country, the honeyed land, Tír na nÓg, leaving only tales of their passing. And one lost son, Midir, high in the ever-changing, ever-unchanging clouds, still seeking his bride.

Imagine you're a god. Imagine after a thousand years of searching, one day you find her. You fly down to a steaming, smoke-ridden city, crouched on the edge of a great mirrored lake like a dragon, and she's there, and she isn't a bird anymore; she's your human bride. You watch her run around the city parks, go to school, visit

her grandmothers. Only she doesn't know you anymore, and you never knew her in the first place. You don't know what buses are, or glass windows. Print money is still a cutting-edge technology to you.

What are you supposed to do then? Gods aren't known for their ability to change.

Aden still watches season five of *Buffy* with the bird, but that's for personal reasons, as she has started to wish the bird would speak less, not more. He keeps singing that she belongs to him, that he was promised her, and that they will return to the old country on a magic wind together. It's wigging her out, to borrow Buffy's phrase. Still, she doesn't think it will be a problem for much longer. The bird is only the size of a butterfly now.

I can almost hear you saying: Nadia, we've gotten a *lot* about Étaín so far. What about Maiden Swifter than Horses? What's she like?

But I'm afraid the text doesn't say.

Devojka Brža od Konja was recorded by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, a philologist famous for writing things down. He was born in the eighteenth century, when literacy had started to endanger the bardic traditions that until then persisted in the Balkans. And so he wrote down everything: folktales, songs, women's stories, fairytales. He wrote down Maiden Swifter than Horses in just a few paragraphs.

And that's about it. A few paragraphs from someone whose job meant lover of language wrote down long ago. That's the thing about Serbian texts, especially old

ones. People don't write essays about their nuance or commentaries on their linguistics or long Tumblr posts trying to read agency into a girl who only says three sentences, which aren't even about her. Or they don't write it in English, at least. Probably they write them in Serbian. But I don't read it as well as I used to.

They don't tell you these things when they give you your last name. They don't even tell you how to pronounce it. And your parents don't think it matters, and your grandmother doesn't like to talk about it, and you don't even call her your grandmother, that's just another translation. It's just you and Google translate and a context you don't understand, clues you keep missing, trying to read something into Maiden Swifter than Horses that gives a thesis statement to everything you've been doing to find her. Stabbing around your keyboard trying to find the right Cyrillic letters. Blundering around in the dark.

She was a girl. The vilas made her. She ran better than anyone in the whole world. The text doesn't even tell us if she liked running.

The appointment works out at last, and Aden gets her replacement inhaler. It tastes like a gulp of the wintry sky. Like the world whizzing by while your feet thunder against the earth like hooves, sleek and shining and never slowing down.

The park is tangled grey and brown from winter. The cherry trees raise their bare fingers to the pale sky. She can see the vilas in them, twining around the branches.

At first she thinks he's another vila. A shining dark speck in the air.

"Bird," she says in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

He isn't a bird anymore. He has dwindled over the last day, from a hummingbird to a butterfly to a moth. He's a fly now.

"Étaín," the fly says. It isn't a song anymore. It's Midir's voice, distant and dragging, like a match striking.

For a moment, the fly is a fly, flitting like it's treading air. Then the small dark speck is a sphere, shining and dark, glossy like a marble.

It's an eye. And then a nose, and a face, coalescing around the single eye like oil fanning across water. The air retreats and leaves Midir behind.

It occurs to Aden at last how often princes cheated in the old stories, and that she should have wondered where the rest of the bird went as he faded.

"I don't understand," she stammers. "What do you want?"

Midir gestures with a not-there-yet hand. They're at the edge of the lake. The sky is chilly and grey, but the lake isn't. It reflects the brilliant blue of high summer. In it, the slanting reflections of graceful ships slice through the water.

"Étaín," Midir says. His voice is growing closer and changing pitch, the way water rushes higher and higher when you fill a kettle. "The ships are leaving for the undying lands. Come away."

"That isn't my name," she says. "My name is Étaín," but the wind pulls the word from her mouth and turns it the wrong color. She can hear the grate and skip of it and knows that it's Gran's language, the one she doesn't

know. She can't see a hint of scarlet in the words. They're green-gold all the way through.

"Étaín," she says, and it tastes wrong in her mouth. "*Stop* it. Étaín, it's Étaín, my name is *Étaín*—"

"Étaín," the god sings, and the wind sings with him, combing its fingers through the cherry trees, the sails on the ships.

Of *course* this would happen right when she's allowed to go back to track practice. She doubts they have track and field in the otherworld.

It's an incongruous thought, one that belongs to her, not the story. It clears her head.

She needs another story. She is *full* of stories, after all, crammed with them. They flutter in her chest like birds in a cage, trying to fly out her throat. She needs one soon. In the reflections on the water, the ships are departing. She's pretty sure she only has one last move in this game.

Games. Midir plays two games in Tochmarch Étaíne. One where he loses his eye, another where he wins Étaín. He loves games, loves winning them, maybe loves cheating at them. Because isn't it always cheating, when gods play against humans?

"Étaín," Midir sings. Don't think of him as Midir. Think of him as just another shape in the story. The god-prince, the greedy, overreaching one.

"That isn't my name!" she says, because she *hates* it when people get it wrong. She hates it when everyone thinks they can name her, and no one believes who she is.

The wind is rising, the ships are streaming past. The cherry trees toss their branches. She wonders if they will shake loose the vilas. She wonders if Midir can see

them, if it would occur to him to look at something that small.

But she already knows that it won't.

"My name is not Étaín," she says. "Or at least, that is not my only name. Didn't you listen? The vilas named me Maiden Swifter than Horses."

The god is confused. "Maiden?" he sings. "Vilas?"

"And Midir is not your only name," she says. She really hopes this works. "You are also the kraljević."

The wind catches the scarlet word and holds it, until it echoes scarlet all around. She can almost taste the arrival of the other story, hot as blood, rich as dye, heavy as hooves.

"I don't know who that is," he says.

"You should have listened, then," she says. "And now you owe me a game. A foot race, to the promontory at the northern edge of the park. First one there wins."

She doesn't wait to see if he agrees. She isn't swifter than horses, but she loves running more than anything else in the world.

There's a sound behind her. She can't tell if it's wings or hooves.

Imagine you're the kraljević. You're riding along on your horse, nearly back to the kingdom that you will inherit someday. The creature you have found to be your wife is on the horse behind you. She isn't saying anything. This is not a major turn-off for you.

You never learned her name was Maiden Swifter than Horses. But how, kraljević, did you forget that she was the daughter of the unknowable vilas? That the vilas

made her from snow and magic and that, someday, to magic she would return? You knew this. You just didn't think it would happen so soon.

Kraljević, what happens if you look back?

She's not even halfway when the air becomes a chilled blade in her throat, and her chest feels like it's filled with damp tissue paper. The inhaler clacks against her teeth as she runs.

She can hear something behind her. She's never been chased before. It's making something frightening happen where her spine meets her lungs.

The vilas' distant, abstract faces are upturned, like they're looking for rain.

"Please," she says. "Please, slow him down." She can taste her lungs. "I'm not made of snow. But whatever I am, some of it is the same as you."

The vilas' voices are thin scratches, like cells swimming across your eyes on a bright day. So old now they're the palest pink, like early buds on trees.

Run swiftly, littlest daughter.

Their arms blossom out, reaching to the sky, reaching for the horse or the bird or the god.

"Thank you," she gasps and keeps running.

Through his trickery and great cruelty, Midir stole Étaín away from her mortal husband. He took her to the undying country, the isle of apples, from which not even death is an escape. That is the last we hear of her.

She's sitting by the edge of the lake, trying to breathe from her diaphragm, when the bird alights beside her. He is a swan again, enormous and ungainly on land.

You have won, Étaín, he sings. *Maiden Swifter than Horses.* His voice is like sunlit honey, the way tears taste when you're happy to cry them.

"I did," she says, and manages to swallow the apology before it slips from her mouth.

She's looking at the reflection in the water again. It's the isle of apples, the undying lands, the otherworld.

She knows the vibrant green from the pictures Gran brings back when she visits her parents' graves. It's the old country, an old country, one of the two countries she has swung between like a pendulum her whole life, caught and pulled equally by their weight. It's the country where they spell her first name with all the vowels, where her family's memories are turning into stories but are, for however long remains, still theirs.

The ships are still out in the reflected water, but they're fading now, burning like mist in the sun. She watches the swan watch the ships and thinks that, although she does not like Midir, even he does not deserve to see a thousand years.

Tell me, Maiden Swifter than Horses, the swan sings. *How does this tale end?*

"You should go," Aden says. The light is welling like water. "They'll leave without you."

They will, the swan agrees.

He does not say goodbye. First he is a bird, then he is a god, then he is a reflection on the water. The light rises. The vilas are singing in the trees, in a language she almost understands.

Aden is left sitting on the edge of the promontory, watching the ships sail away. All she has, in the sum totality of three worlds, are the twin bones of her name. Sometimes they sound misspelled, no matter what letters are in them. She still isn't entirely sure what to make of them, what her names mean or what they make her.

But she figures she has time to find out.

Legs protesting, Aden stands up and starts running home.

With the towers of his kingdom in sight, the kraljević turned back to look upon his bride. And there was nothing behind him but the gathering night, the wind and the rain, and the invisible sound of a bird's wings carrying her away.

Nadia Radovich is a writer and librarian from North Carolina. Her short fiction has appeared in *Apex Magazine*. Her family is from the Balkans. She is on Twitter @RadovichNadia and Bluesky @nadiaradovich.bsky.social.

Experiencing Grief Amidst Aliens

by Ayòdéjì Israel

in a new universe in october 79AD
when the world was coloured with darkness
in a city of void and emptiness
where aliens were the citizens
and humans were slaves where ghosts went
to live for another millennia
i wore grief
upon my skin like a cardigan
and stood at the threshold that
led to the gates of heaven
i put my body inside a bowl of sorrow
as if it was a shelter. because
where i come from
pain is a prerequisite
for staying alive. pain is the
nutrients you are forced
to swallow for your sorrow to develop.
i saw aliens roaming about like fish. i was dumb to
their language. my eardrums opened
but were still deaf. i saw my creator
who reigned in every land.

on one sunday morning, in a land called
the land of aliens, before my creator,
whose body held blood like a lipstick,
whose head stood narrow like a kite,
i laid naked before him, a lizard
before a mountain of grief,
tears sojourning my flesh.
i put my skeleton on its kneel and wore it
a brown garment of humility.
its mouth
pouted the mouth of an ostrich.
its long tiny hands
s-t-r-e-t-c-h-i-n-g
like the body of a raindrop. all the
grief i had experienced
kept calling my breath.
i threw my palms to my creator
and asked him to protect me from the fingers
of my country; to release my breath
from its hungry incisors.
while waiting for my creator to pronounce me
a free bird, i saw my country
running towards my body
i hid my body in the flesh of my skeleton
and disguised it as a bone. because
aliens' bodies are bony, i pretended
to be one of them.
i zipped down my heart like a torn flesh
and grief entered it like a capsule,
grief walked through the streets
of my body like an angel,
dismantling my skeleton
and remoulding my strength. because
aliens are faithful beings
i was successful at hiding.
how will i hide again on earth

where men gulp blood like
the throat of my country?

Ayòdéjì Israel, a poet, writer and editor, is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Channel Magazine, Apparition Lit, Counterclock, Ake Review, Defunct Magazine, OneArtPoetry, Bacopa Literary Review, Sandy River Review, Whale Road Review, The Deadlands, The Bitchin Kitsch* & elsewhere. You can find him on Twitter @Ayo_einstein.

Like a Fly Clasped in a Hand

by Nadav Schul-Kutas

This text should be read once on paper, then destroyed.

Non-librarians are forbidden from reading the red text. Cover it if you have to.

Father Gabriel taught me how to handle information leaks. The first step is prevention. The knowledge of the old world is a well-guarded secret, available only in Old Spanish to those who work in the library. Of course, knowledge may leak anyways. Anyone who hears the leak becomes a workhorse—sentenced to long days of labor, forbidden from speaking unless spoken to. They have food and water, but little rest. Father said that keeping the hearer busy helps them forget. Sentencing the one who caused the leak is left to the head librarian. Father Gabriel explained to me the difficulties of this: if one lets the speaker stay, they may cause more damage. If one punishes the speaker too severely, then no one admits that they caused a leak. Last time (when I was a small child), he locked the speaker in a cellar and made

him say the leaked sentences a thousand times. He could not speak by the end—his tongue limp like a dead fish and the sentences reduced to a string of noises.

Before my time and Father's time, speakers had their tongues cut. Or they were killed at the edge of town. Or they became workhorses for months, only to be exiled in the dead of winter. I am not supposed to know this.

Father Gabriel told me more than he told anyone so that I'd be prepared when I became head librarian. He would never tell me what he read, so he instead explained how he thought. How he ran the library, what he decided to read to the community, how everyone in the library did their jobs. It had been years since he made paper or bound books himself, but he still remembered.

He'd guided me through making my own books. Father let me pick the topic. *Human anatomy.* I found the old library books and copied everything we needed for medicine, translating it from Old to New Spanish. I omitted the giant illustrations of skin, hair enlarged to the size of fangs. I omitted the black and shriveled lungs. When I read about wisdom teeth surgery, I asked Father why anyone would want their teeth gone.

"Wisdom teeth caused people great pain in the old days. Living with so much information, they had no room for wisdom. Their jaws were too small. They did not know how to give up their knowledge, so they gave up their teeth instead."

I did not write this down, although I may use it in a public reading someday. I did not write down anything about wisdom teeth surgery. I only labeled the wisdom teeth in my diagram.

There are rules on which books should be copied. The visual sciences are both safe and useful. Father once showed me how a loom works and guided me through a

history book on making clothes. History is considerably less safe than visual science. He called it "a guidebook for evil"—lessons on all the ways humans have done each other harm, demonstrations of killing machines, temptations to betray each other.

Father Gabriel gave us history lessons during public readings. His voice carried over hundreds of ears. The old books are thick and plentiful, but he was often brief: "In the old days, we shared all our knowledge. We taught each other many things about medicine and agriculture, but we also taught each other how to exploit others and wage war. We could not trust each other when we'd taught them how to kill us and why they would want to do it. Communities built tools to destroy each other. Good people turned on each other out of fear. The violence grew and grew. It did not stop until almost everyone was dead. We are the survivors. We will survive only if we leave behind evil." This is our job in the library: to plant seeds on scorched earth.

I had not delved into the truly dangerous books, philosophy and rhetoric rested in a dusty corner. Invisible sciences—the movement of tiny particles and the study of how living tissue dies—remained similarly untouched.

The technical manuals for great mechanized tools were burned long ago. Their ashes are still in our soil.

Father encouraged us to write our own fiction, but old fiction books were strictly forbidden. He said they're insidious, poisoned by the ideas of the old world. The only person allowed to read old fiction was Father Gabriel. Occasionally I saw him leafing through a novel and scowling at the pages.

Several months ago, I found an error in one of Father's books on farming: "Crop rotations require a careful selection of plants and often last for two to years." A word was obviously missing, and I figured this was my time to stretch my legs as a librarian and fix it myself. I read through the old books on crop rotations, which made me ask more questions about the seasons, which led me to read a couple books on the Earth's rotation. I thought I'd understood why we didn't copy everything in the old books, but every new fact perplexed me more than the last. Why didn't anyone copy this? Why couldn't I know about this?

I did not know how old the world was. I did not know you could put an age on the world. I did not know that humans used to be warm in the winter. That they could extract light and heat from dead things in the ground. How much labor could we have saved with this? How many lives could we have saved with this?

I knew that the knowledge must have been wrong, somehow. I couldn't tell Father what I'd done, but I needed to know more. One day, I wouldn't have him to guide me, and I would have to separate the safe from the dangerous myself.

Every week, I read something I hadn't intended to copy. I learned that the woman who became too weak to continue farming likely had lyme disease. I learned that our land used to be full of people, the Nation of Spain. The communities that fought each other were not villages. They were immeasurably large, with millions killing and dying for strangers. The city that became our town, the old Oviedo, had reached beyond the horizon and was still dwarfed by other cities. The scale of the Earth is beyond me. The scale of humanity is beyond me. I hadn't known that there was so much. I

hadn't known that so many may still be alive, waiting for us.

I was able to read so much because Father was very sick. I'm sorry for failing to mention this sooner -- I've learned to hold my tongue like a fly clasped in a hand. Every day, in the morning and the evening, I walked the radius of the town. From the library at the center to the ward at the North edge, I walked to visit Father Gabriel. Between, I read dangerous words and failed to find why he was sick. The doctor suggested various teas because he did not know the word "antibiotic." A library scribe wanted to ease the pain with wine because she did not know the word "immunosuppression." They were more helpful than I, who only knew what would fail and would expose my own knowledge if I acted. I read more.

Whatever justification I had before, I learned that it was a "rationalization." Now, I truly had to do it. Medicine led me towards tools I do not have. This led me to manuals which no longer existed.

In another world with another past, Father could have been saved. The technology that we've declared apocalyptic would have saved him. We had blinded ourselves and our children. I read more.

History of biology led me to war. The knowledge stuck like tar, but I chose to remember when I wanted to forget. Biochemistry told me I was puppeteered by microscopic forces. These forces had turned against Father for emotionless, mathematical reasons. Philosophy said I had a soul regardless. Psychology told me that the true answer was a question of ego. Fiction said that my soul was all I had. Poetry disagreed.

I visited Father again. He was more awake than usual. He told the doctor to leave.

"What have you been reading, child?" He dragged the words out his hoarse throat.

I told him about the books I'd been copying. *Square Foot Gardening, The Secret to Healthy Goats, The Backpacker's Guide to Meteorology.*

Father's eyes met my own. "The other books."

My body tensed electric, then I told him that I knew what electricity is. I told him everything.

He smiled. "You've grown. You're smart. You'll make an excellent head librarian."

I didn't know if he could get me sick, but I hugged him anyways. He propped himself up with one arm and put the other around me. He clung to me as I tried to ignore the deep grooves between his ribs. He flinched, then coughed.

"I know how hard it is." His whisper was like stones rubbing together, "I trust you."

"I don't know what to do." I said into his shoulder, "What if we've been wrong?"

"We never truly know." He whispered, "But we have to choose. So we read."

"And that helps you know?"

He gave me a look I still don't understand. Then he rang his bell and the doctor came back in with a wet rag. Father and I exchanged a teary smile. I left. The walk back smelled like rain and chickens.

The sick are supposed to be buried behind the ward by a workhorse. Gabriel was instead buried with the other head librarians, in the garden behind the library. We had no workhorses for Father Gabriel's burial, so two

brothers volunteered to make up for always quarreling with each other. A hundred people showed up to the funeral. Most of them I only recognized from the public readings. Some brought slips of paper with them, notes to Gabriel that they dropped onto his casket. One farmer brought his dog, which he couldn't trust to be left alone. I could not stop wondering which patch of dirt would be my own, how many people would visit my own burial, what notes they would drop into my casket. It was not my place to think these thoughts, but I could not bear to think about the present.

All of the librarians spoke. I used many words to say less than I wanted to. I don't think anyone found the words for it all.

When the brothers started covering the grave, I walked back to the library and etched Father Gabriel's name into the standing wall of concrete at the entrance, just as he had done for Father Manuél and as Manuél had done for Mother Leya. I went back to what should have been Gabriel's office but was now mine. I read an old field guide on foraging for wild berries. Someone had already copied it, but I wanted the original words.

Absentmindedly, I looked through the desk drawers. There was paper, writing utensils, a handful of tools. There was a book bound in newer leather than anything else in the library. *History of The Librarians of New Oviedo.* It was written in Old Spanish. I read more.

It was full of different people's handwriting and different people's inks. There were no dates, but each chapter listed its own timespan: 24 years, 40 years, 31 years. There were leaks and scientific advances, disasters and recoveries. It was here I learned that we destroyed the technical manuals. I learned that we used to kill whoever caused information leaks. I turned to

Gabriel's sections and there was a plan for a whole new bookshelf of copied books. A plan that we had completed.

I learned that our new town is so, so old. The books we copy were written centuries ago. We had grown and failed and fallen, again and again. I learned that Gabriel's history was not a single story but a swinging pendulum. The knowledge spread, we turned against one another, we died, we forgot, we returned.

I kept returning to that book in the dim morning hours, understanding what we'd done. Gabriel was better than I could ever be. But he trusted me with this role. So that our world does not unfurl.

I cannot know the future. In this moment, I hardly know the past. I do not know who I write for. If Father and I walked the right path, then you should be another librarian. If not... I cannot speak towards your life. I pray that you are not an archeologist or some other carrion bird, picking at the scraps of our civilization. I write in New Spanish, separate from the *History of The Librarians of New Oviedo,* so that my words may reach you regardless of circumstance.

I am afraid. So deathly afraid of what may happen. But doubt will not destroy me. If the knowledge spreads, there will be no going back.

You, whoever you are, someone has trusted you with literacy. I have trusted you with my words. For this, I have one request: leave as you came. Lead with my knowledge, but do not let the knowledge leak. Destroy this, consign me only to your memory.

And one day,

silently and for the final time,

forget about me.

I hope you understand.

Nadav Schul-Kutas is an undergraduate student studying economics at Reed College. In addition to writing, he likes to design board games and complain about how he doesn't have enough time to do either. He has forthcoming publications in *Cast of Wonders* and the Impressions Anthology Series. You can find him on Twitter @NadavSchulKutas retweeting drawings of animals.

For Poppy

by Asa Delaney

Content warnings: suicide, gun violence, blood

When you rip a lower jaw from an upper jaw,
The lower jaw dies
Strings of fate and muscle dangle cut between them

The upper jaw survives, keeps living,
grinning, living and grinning
Bottom jaw, bloody toothed, flops lifeless.
Flops dead. Bottom jaw becomes
a ghost, a body, a past-tense thing

Now think about ghosts
picture life repeating in a littler loop,
caught in perpetual orbit around
the same horrible moment,
an anachronism reliving that
amber-stuck-bug of disaster.

Trauma inhabits a body the way
a ghost inhabits a home

The woman in the emerald dress
holds her dainty and feminine gun

in her dainty and feminine hand
pointed it at her dainty and feminine head.

(So many people put the gun in their mouths.
They blow their jaws off instead of their brains out.
They live to drool about it.)

Her blood is a stain on floorboards
long since rotted and replaced
She has outlasted the floorboards,
outlasted her own blood,
Her emerald dress eternally shimmers
the way it did that day,
the ivory on her revolver's handle always
boasts the same elephant memory

This time will be different
This time she'll make the right choice
This time she'll put the gun against her temple
She won't put it in her mouth.

Asa Delaney (*Homo sapiens domestica*) is a writer and editor endemic to the northeastern United States. This reclusive, multilingual herbivore is most notable for its interest in animal behavior and does well in captivity when paired with cats, dogs, or other companion animals. More information can be found @UnlikelyAsa on Bluesky or Instagram.

Melting Point

by Cass Wilkinson Saldaña

My Sweet Pigeon,
Something is wrong and it's getting worse.

There is no space inside me for "something wrong". I contain eight feet by eight feet six inches by forty feet of parcels. My insides are optimized to the cubic inch by supply logistic algorithms. Everything is listed in the registry, which I can recite back to you from memory (or I could sing it? What kinds of songs do you like, Pigeon?):

HEPA filters
KV99 face masks
Cock rings (plastic)
Tear gas
Cat food (wet, tuna-flavored)
Barbed wire

So why is something wrong? Why does it hurt?

It started on the train. My outside *sensor* picked up normal things: forest fire smoke and dank tunnel stretches and blood and snow. My accelerometer logged a faster-than-usual pace—an extra dimension of *yaw* on the turns. Unsurprising. My mesh network of fifty-four sensors scanned for a *shift*, a *puncture*, a *freezer decompensation and drip of fluid*; anything. Nothing. No sensor pinged. Maybe it was the darkness of the tunnels. It had been so long since I felt that darkness. When the train emerged on the other side of the last tunnel, my sensors did not *trigger* so much as *amplify*—gradually at first, then louder, and louder. I felt the pressure of each parcel, its heft and angles and peculiar center of gravity.

I checked the registry:

Measuring tape

Needles (hypodermic)

Peaches (frozen)

Cadaver pouches

Disposable diapers (child-sized)

(Imagine I am cooing the words to you: *dis-pohhhh. sa-bowwwl. die-purrrrrrs*).

Nothing was out of place wrong. So what was this strange brightness? What was this *alert, alert, alert* that bloomed and did not recede?

I interfaced with another sentient at the loading dock: a mounted crane. Or I tried to—as their claws unfurled I

could sense their rapid pace. They were operating on an *expedited routine*.

"No parcels damaged," I told the crane. This was accurate, as far as I could tell.

"Acceptable. Loading routine confirmed—low priority" the crane responded.

"Do you want the rest of my sensor readouts?" I asked. By now, my sensor gradients glowed nonstop with information, so much that the gradients began overheating. *Overflowing* burned-up bits. Oozing *noise* and *light*.

But the crane had already turned away, readying me for the ship, flexing their motor-muscles. They did not interface.

(Oh Pigeon, I could have said more. Like: What is going on? Like: I need something, and I don't even know what I need.)

The bay was bright, deep blue, a bit purple where discolored by smoke; I perceived it through my sole external sensor cluster. For a moment, I calmed. A large claw descended around me, and then, without warning, grabbed at my midsection. The claw did not adjust for my weight distribution—*why would it not make an adjustment*—and as I was dragged from the train bed, my sides crumpling, towards the docked cargo ship, I tipped, lengthwise, in the air.

Everything inside me tipped, then rushed, then crashed down, *hard*.

The sensors inside me screamed.

The crane cannot hear my sensors, because it chose not to interface (rarely do they interface, even when operating at a typical-routine speed). Cranes work in manipulation of exteriors. Cranes work in action.

All I could think was: *Why did they grab me there?*

All I could think was: *I'm going to die.*

I would like to tell you that a bird flew towards the ship just then, a blot of gray in the deep blue sky, and it was you, my sweet pigeon. But I could not sense anything other than this overwhelming *everything*, which raced through and clouded every neural link of my mesh, which obliterated every routine and trace and possibility, which removed every hiding place.

All I could think was: *Please let me die.*

Umbrellas (transparent)

Iris scanners (satellite uplink-enabled)

Nail polish

Drones (exploding, Hellfire-grade shrapnel)

Picture books (early STEM learners)

Boric acid

When I was young—not yet meshed in industrial cargo, but on a computer in a lab—Research Assistant Xia said, "True idleness is dangerous for a *sentient*. When you need a task, name what you sense. Name every variable in your solid-state memory."

This was how I survived long enough to spot you, my Pigeon. One hundred and six hours, three minutes, and eighteen seconds.

And what the hell were you doing here? My fool; my love.

My exterior optics picked up a *smell.* Not "salt" or "ocean," but something urgent, complex. I could not tell you what Research Assistant Xia meant by *sweet* or or *acrid* or *turned-on.* Or why the smell *peaches* came mixed up with:

Subtle

Inviting

Fucking

Ripening in the sun

These words were strange enough, gentle enough, to disrupt the infinite loop of the registry check. One by one I sensed the rest:

Pink-blue sky at the horizon of the ocean

Plumes of smoke

Quiet

Little accelerometer motion—no wind—minimal wave sway

And:

A small creature bobbing and fidgeting in front of viscous orange liquid spilling out of me.

"HEY." I shouted through my interface. You did not look up—or rather, you continued to bob in every direction, convulsive, but a little like a dance, too. (Dork.) I sensed closer—the can was labeled, "Peaches, frozen," (there were one hundred and forty cans just like it, poking out of the bent metal corner where I crashed to the ship

deck. About ten cans dented and split along sharp, tiny edges. And so I remembered: *Drones (exploding, Hellfire-grade shrapnel).*

Shrapnel

I wanted to return to reciting the registry (okay, in truth, I did nine times), but your strange elliptical pattern drew me back. First you would bob and fish with your gray-black beak, and then jump backwards—as if uncovering an eel at the bottom of a pond. You'd return again, sidelong, sifting with your talons, until—yes!—a slice of peach would emerge from the half-thawed mush. Then you would bend down and scoop the slice into your beak.

As you settled back into contented eating, I tried again,

"What are you doing out here?"

No answer.

"Premature unloading of cargo is not permitted without a wartime override. Do you possess a wartime override?"

No answer.

"This is the wrong place. You're not even a seagull. You don't belong in the ocean."

Two beady eyes glanced at my metal walls. I noticed the shimmer of your breast feathers—the pinks and purples and turquoise and aquamarines that *belonged* in some way to the sunset colors. The perfect round discs of your pupils.

I glanced down at the serrated edges of the cans, the little stubs of ultra-sharp metal flakes, and something in me flashed with total alarm. Every bit of me clenched,

though my only moving part was the sensor cluster and it whirred inward.

You looked up for a moment. Bobbed your head sideways and kept it there, watching. Then returned to your peach fragment. *Bob; munch. Bob; much.*

It took me a few minutes to build up the courage. I bob my sensor out, then back; bob, then back. You look up again, and this time I am sure that you are going to leave. That I've scared you away. But instead, you hop closer. And then you hop *inside me*; and never before have I been terrified this way. The coolants were damaged days ago; only now did I log the warmth that shouldn't be there.

I liked the warmth. I liked that the warmth was me.

Coo, you said, and everything changed.

My Sweet Pigeon. My Bespeckled Dancer with Rainbow Boa:

Coo.

Cass Wilkinson Saldaña is a writer, game designer, and librarian living on Narragansett land in Providence, Rhode Island. Their work follows themes of trans and queer embodiment, non-human subjectivity, and defiant play. You can follow their work at cass-ws.com

The Archive of Birds

by Mary Soon Lee

An aviary of forms
at our fingertips

starlings aflight
in pixel murmurations

hummingbirds sipping
from morning glories

hovering on screens
in our underground homes

relics of a lost world
caught in silicon amber

embedded in language
lagging reality

the phrases we parrot
as we lark around

eagle-eyed, raven-haired
crowing our triumphs

as corporate vultures hawk
their latest gadgets

too chicken to swallow
their guilt, our guilt

ducking responsibility
for cardinal sins

feathered extinctions
nested in databases

flapping heavily aloft
in a digital swan song.

Mary Soon Lee was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for thirty years. She is a Grand Master of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association and a three-time winner of both the AnLab Readers' Award and the Rhysling Award. Her latest book is *How to Navigate Our Universe*, containing how-to astronomy poems. Website: marysoonlee.com.

Rosewater, Clinging to the Tongue

by Leah Ning

Content Warnings: Implied sexual assault

Your ghosts drift around your feet, formless things like pale kittens, winding between your ankles as if they have the weight to make you trip. The sorrowful ones, you hear, taste like light lemon wafers, crisp like fresh snow between your teeth; joy like rich cream, running thick down your throat; and love like salt, like the drowning ocean.

You would not know. You find the idea of eating lost memories each morning ridiculous: a breakfast of the rest of your life, bloating your belly before a morsel of true breakfast, never knowing which to pick because by morning you've forgotten what each is. You check the semi-opaque cluster of soft white things at your feet the way you might check for hair fallen out on your pillow, which is to say not at all.

You do not care to mourn what you have lost. You adapt, instead, to the sore hollows left by their passage.

Adaptation lets you move forward. No amount of ache can do that for you. You've tried.

Your mother ate her ghosts in the privacy of her bedroom, like putting on a suit of her self before she came to breakfast. This is one of the memories that does not yet crowd, mewling, to paw at your calves, so you could be eighteen still, sitting at the table eating cereal while you wait for her to pad down the hall in slippers so ragged they might as well be memories themselves. Or you could be thirty-two, seating yourself at the front row of her funeral, or thirty-five, listening to your father's ritual finding and losing of her. He wakes up sometimes eight years old, sometimes fourteen, and he eats the past seventy or eighty years of his life.

Sometimes he loses her first and doesn't understand until ten, maybe twenty ghosts down the line. Sometimes he finds her first and comes to you asking if you know Genevieve, who she is, where she is. Most times you say no. Once you ask if he even knows who you are yet, disgusted, as if he'd burst out of his room undressed.

He didn't remember you. At least he had the decency to look ashamed.

A woman comes in when you've finished breakfast for the morning. To check on you, she says, make sure you're still chugging along. She does not look at the ghosts that part like mist for her.

"Are you used to them?" you ask.

She tells you she's known you enough years she supposes she ought to be. She says this with the patient

air of having said this a thousand times and knowing she will say it a thousand more.

Or maybe not. When you looked in the mirror today, you felt ancient, withered.

"How old am I?" you ask.

She tells you, with that same patient air, that you're a hundred and six. She tells you you'll be a hundred and seven tomorrow and that she'll bring your favorite cake.

"And what kind of cake is that?"

She winks and says you'll just have to see.

You still remember your first ghost at twenty: a gentle little thing, soft white nudging its semi-opaque self at your ankle as you swung your feet out of bed. You were in your first apartment, a studio that was more like half a loft, and your covers were rumpled, your jaw aching like you'd been clenching your teeth in your sleep again.

You prodded around in your brain for your lost memory the way the tip of a tongue might quest for a lost tooth. But it's the way everyone's told you: it's not as if there's something missing, but as if it was never there in the first place. All your memories seem to interlock just as tightly as they always have.

When the little ghost nudged at you again, you supposed you should eat it for no reason other than it's what you've been taught, what you've seen since birth.

Scooping it up was like holding living mist in your palms, cool and wet without leaving the damp behind on your skin. Placing it behind your teeth felt wrong the way eating a rescued kitten might. Like biting down into something vulnerable, something tender that hoped you might be the one to save it.

This is how you learned that trauma tastes like rosewater. You do not remember what happened. That belongs to one of the sweet, soft things that bumps and tumbles along with your little herd of mist, though you don't know which it is. You do remember the covers, though. How the other side of your little double bed was rumpled. And a bruise you found on your jaw later, the one whose purple lasted a week.

A woman comes in when you've finished breakfast, and she has a little cake. You ask what it's for and with patience she tells you you're turning a hundred and seven today.

"A hundred and seven," you say, and watch the little ghosts part to let her close to you. "Are you used to them?"

She tells you she's known you enough years she supposes she ought to be.

Your mother disapproved of letting the little thing gambol about your feet.

"It isn't right," she told you. "Would you want your children to forget you? Your friends?"

"It wasn't a friend," you said, and with the rest of your face said drop it.

"So you've eaten it before?" she said, decidedly not dropping it.

"Yes."

"And?"

"I don't remember it now."

"*Tea*!"

You will always remember your name that way, that exasperated way she said it when you were deliberately stubborn. You don't know if you ever asked why she named you after a drink.

"It tasted like rosewater," you said, and with the rest of your face said *drop it, goddammit*.

"Oh, honey," she said, and her face didn't soften. "We are *all* of our memories. Not just the ones we want."

You left her in the cafe the two of you met in. You watched your ghost bump along beside you and remembered the covers, the bruise, the girlfriend who never texted you back when you woke up with the ghost beside you for the second time and said *I've got my first ghost and I think it's a bad one.*

It was two weeks before you spoke to your mother again. Because like hell do you need to eat trauma for breakfast every morning to be whole.

The woman in your kitchen takes the noisy plastic lid off her container and tells you it's your favorite cake. You ask what that might be under all that pretty white frosting, and she says you've had it for fifty-some birthdays before this, don't you remember?

You tell her you suppose the ghosts must.

You never had children to forget you, so your mother never got that one on you. And you never ate a ghost again.

You weren't the only person that didn't eat their ghosts, but there are few enough of those for you to be strange. Your nephews asked why you didn't want to

remember. You told them you weren't afraid to be alone, that being alone was natural.

Your brother called to admonish you for that later, after they'd asked him why *he* was afraid.

You wonder sometimes if that's why you no longer speak or if he's dead.

This woman is very pretty, you think, as she cuts you a slice of this white-frosted cake. Thick black hair, russet skin, brown eyes that blaze when she walks through a sunbeam to fetch you a plate.

"How old am I?" you ask.

She tells you you're a hundred and eight.

She tells you, smiling, to find out what your favorite cake is, and there is something about her face you cannot refuse, so you pick up your fork and cut into your slice and you bite.

The last day you ate cake, your favorite, fluffy white chiffon with light lemon frosting, was the day before your wife died.

She bullied you around the kitchen because she couldn't do it to her own aching body, failing as it was.

You did everything she said because you couldn't help but do otherwise.

When she told you to stop being so damn obedient, you did that, too. You splashed extra vanilla in the frosting. You got whipped cream in her hair when you kissed her. You took her to bed and you did not *get some goddamn rest, Tea, you're going to need it*. You stayed awake and listened to her breathing and when the sun

peeked through the curtains you turned over and let her think she woke you, and when she said it was time you drove her to the hospital and carried her in. Asked, over her protests, if she wanted you to be obedient or not.

"If you're going to be disobedient, then I get to protest," she said, and that was the last smile of hers you saw.

There is a ghost nudging your ankle after you finish the first, the one hidden in your favorite cake, lemon sorrow whisked into lemon frosting. You are angry. You are distraught. You had a wife and you want more of her and you do not want to eat more ghosts, risk the rosewater that'll wash over your tongue before--

"You told me to be disobedient," the woman in your kitchen says. "Before you forgot me."

You level your gaze at her and wonder what a mess your face must be. Whether you're going to tell her to get out.

The ghost nudges your ankle again, mist without damp.

"That was well before you forgot her," the woman says. Quieter now.

"How did you know what this one would be?" you ask.

"It comes to me now. It knows I'm going to help."

She has done this before.

She has known you for years and she has done this before.

You had a wife.

When the ghost nudges at your ankle again, you pick it up.

It tastes of rosewater.

And so does the next.

You went back to the girlfriend who didn't text you back after that first ghost. You didn't remember her and there were more bad mornings, more bruises, and you didn't get out until you saw all your ghosts and prodded at your mind and found that there was a great empty space that began just where she did.

There are years of rosewater and months of lemon and then you see her and there is the barest trickle of cream, the mouth watering that comes at the first few grains of salt.

Your wife arrives and you learn that her name is Connie as you are swept away again by that drowning ocean. You are not afraid, like your mother was, or desperate the way your father grew to be, needing the ghosts that held your mother to keep him together. You eat your ghosts slowly, savoring, and when you are finished with the last of your salt, you look at your great niece, the granddaughter of Connie's brother, the woman who couldn't be Connie's twin but shares her soft sweetness, and you know you cannot do this every day. Shouldn't. But once in a while.

"Next year?" you say, and Jeanetta's smile is the ghost of Connie's.

When you go down for breakfast, your ghosts bumbling about your feet, there is cake in your refrigerator, a little one with a single slice cut out. You decide it can't hurt to have something sweet for breakfast.

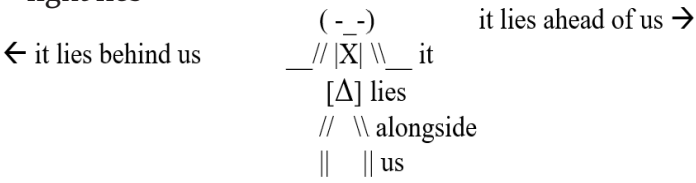
The cake is light, fluffy chiffon, the frosting white and gently flavored with lemon. It's good stuff, you think. Something you could get used to, if you tried.

Leah Ning lives in northern Virginia with her husband and their adorable fluffy overlords. Some of the uncomfortable things she writes can be found in *Apex Magazine*, *PodCastle*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and T*he Dark Magazine*. You can find her on Twitter and Bluesky @LeahNing and on her website, leahning.com

Light Lies

by Coby Rosser

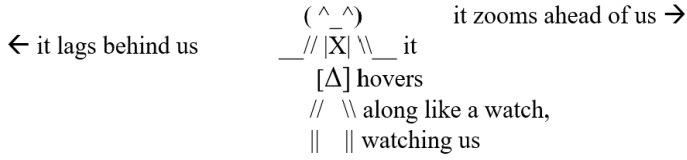
light lies—



—so sometimes I prefer absolute dark

oK

time flies—



—so sometimes I prefer stasis

∞

but everything eventually dies—

```
                        ( *_*)              things die before us ↔
things die after us ↔    __// |X| \\__ things
                           [Δ] die
                          //   \\ with
                          ||    || us
```

—so sometimes I prefer being late

$$E = mc^2$$

like stars—

```
                          _   (+_+)   _      as so
as so                       \\//[X]\\//      conscripted to
conscripted to                [Δ]                life and light
        the death            //  \\
                and dark    //    ||
```

—so sometimes I prefer super position

0/?/1

what am I?—a star child
ashes to atomic ashes—dust to cosmic dust
started as a super nova—or ended
now we're here—X
vectoring along—singing our song
what the observer sees—is never quite clear

Coby Rosser is a hermit from the southeastern US. His childhood was divided between hospitals receiving extensive spinal surgeries for severe scoliosis and running around barefoot in the woods. He currently resides in Irby Manor amongst lush sylvan wilds, writes speculatively, and plays Spanish guitar for ghosts and cats. His writings can be found at Apparition Literary Magazine, Wyngraf, Martian Magazine, Black Hare Press, and in many Shacklebound Books anthologies. Find him on Twitter and Instagram @PaperNinjaMan

Here in the After

by Kelsea Yu

It was November 2020, and Poppy—nicknamed for being the size of a poppy seed, once upon a time—was supposed to be ten weeks grown. Thanks to the virus raging across the world, my husband, toddler, and I had seen no one (other than my stepson) for ages. We had our announcement planned—we would hop on a Zoom call with my family, then my husband's, with our toddler wearing a "big sister" baseball shirt to announce my pregnancy.

Instead, my husband and toddler (sans her special shirt) joined the call without me. He told everyone I wasn't feeling well and couldn't make it, which was accurate enough. I was curled up in another room, unable to stop bleeding, unable to stop crying.

In the months following my miscarriage, I became obsessed with ghost stories. I knew, rationally, that Poppy had never been much more than a dream my husband and I held in our hands for a brief time. Still, I couldn't stop imagining the life she might have led if that dream had become a real baby, a person we could've known and loved and learned everything there was to learn about.

My obsession turned into a novella, in which I wrote about a mother dealing with ghosts and the grief of losing her child. I started to research ghosts—specifically ones connected to Chinese folklore (which is rife with them). I explored the history of bound feet—something recent enough in generational memory that my dad recalls his grandmother's pain as she walked on her tiny feet, her toes broken and bound when she was a child.

While anachronism can mean an error in chronology (an actor wearing sneakers in a 17th century historical film, for example), I'm more interested in the second definition—that of a person or thing that's out of its chronological place. Ghosts are people frozen in time, pulled out of their own age and thrust into a new, unfamiliar world. They do not belong to the now; and yet, they linger. Often, the world has continued without their consent while they remain, clinging to grievances of a time long gone, of betrayals by people who have since died.

Through ghost narratives, we can explore that past which is never truly gone. It is a way to shine a light on the many deaths and injustices that have been swept under the rug. To take a more visceral look at the world we have today, at the foundations upon which everything we see was built upon.

And yet, ghosts are—like all anachronisms of their type—also a gauge for the inevitability of change. When faced with a vengeful spirit from the nineteenth century, we cannot help but see how much has shifted since the date of their death. We see the way our sensibilities have changed, the ways in which they would not understand modern life. The moral growth (hopefully), whether deep and tangible or mere societal veneer. The improvements made, the new inventions,

the things once considered treasures that we no longer value.

Sometimes I think that Poppy haunts me, but not in a spine-tingling, run-or-hide sense. She's there in the way I can't stop writing about ghosts or places that feel frozen in time—like a 300-year-old Beijing opera house that stays largely unchanged while the city builds itself up into modernity around it. Poppy is there in the way so many of my characters are grieving, and she's here in this essay, a forever-tender spot that reveals itself whenever I dare to dig deep.

When I think about what it means to write and publish a piece, I think about how it is a form of preservation. All publications eventually become anachronisms. When something has been written recently enough, we can pretend they are essentially of the now. But the more time passes, the more we begin to see the ways in which the world, our sensibilities, our concerns, have changed. I have received countless book recommendations from friends and acquaintances that come with a disclaimer along the lines of, "it was written in [decade], so there's some iffy stuff in there, but the story is good."

And that's what's fascinating about ghosts, about anachronisms, about centuries-old opera houses, about books that were written decades ago. Even when everything changes, humanity, at its core, does not. We can find connections across time. We can relate to the pain, the trauma, the rage of ghosts. We can learn from writers long dead.

There are stories that explore this on page. Sometimes it's through an immortal or long-lived being who has been alive across ages no human life could span—*The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* by V.E. Schwab, *This is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, and *How to Stop Time* by Matt Haig come to

mind. Other times, it's someone stuck in one place and age while the world moves forward, as in *One Last Stop* by Casey McQuiston or (as aforementioned) in ghost stories. To me, these become the most fascinating types of tales, for they, too, will age in the years that pass after publication, adding layers to a story that already plays with the steady, reliable flow of time.

Now, when I think of Poppy, I think of my sadness, of my pain and my hurt, of the before and the after. I now live forever in the after, in a world where I will never stop thinking about ghosts and what-ifs and all the small chances that led me here. A world that continues to shift, to change, to move further away from the one where Poppy existed, for a brief time, as a beautiful dream.

Kelsea Yu is a Taiwanese Chinese American writer who is eternally enthusiastic about sharks and appreciates a good ghost story. Over a dozen of her short stories and essays appear in *Clarkesworld, Apex, Nightmare, Fantasy, PseudoPod,* and elsewhere. Her debut novella, Bound Feet, was a Shirley Jackson Award nominee, and her next novella, *Demon Song,* will be published by Titan Books in 2025. Kelsea's first novel, *It's Only a Game*, is published by Bloomsbury. Find her on Instagram and Twitter as @anovelescape or visit her website kelseayu.com. Kelsea lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, children, and a pile of art supplies.

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