

APPARITION

Literary Magazine

ISSUE 11:
REDEMPTION



COVER ARTWORK
ERIKA HOLLICE

MAY CHONG
REBECCA FUNG
ROSALIE MORALES KEARNS
SAMANTHA MILLS
SAM MULLER
JEFF REYNOLDS
AURELIUS RAINES II

APPARITION LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Samantha Mills, May Chong, Jeff Reynolds, Rosalie Morales Kearns,
Rebecca Fung, Sam Muller, Aurelius Raines II, Tacoma Tomilson

Cover Art by Erika Hollice

<http://www.eriart.net/>

Edited by

Tacoma Tomilson, Managing Editor

Rebecca Bennett, Associate Editor and Cover Art Director

Clarke Doty, Associate Editor

Amy Henry Robinson, Associate Editor, Poetry Editor and Webmaster

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A Word from our Editor

by Tacoma Tomilson

The works we received this submission period trended religious, or leaned on redemption through death or murder. Revenge played a prominent role. While we are always curious to see how our submission calls spark imaginations, the works we selected do not outright deal with those themes. These are multifaceted, heartfelt (and sometimes humorous!) stories and poems, and where the element of redemption is subtle, but by the time you read the last word, the absolution is clear.

The Apparition Lit editors are pleased to present Issue 11:

Poems:

Cursebody by May Chong

Posle Nas by Rosalie Morales Kearns

Stories:

Saying Sorry by Rebecca Fung

Once Upon a Night by Sam Muller

The Limits of Magic by Samantha Mills

The Truth of a Lie by Jeff Reynolds

Non-fiction:

You are the Dream and the Dreamer by Aurelius Raines II

A note to the future:

A Word from our Editor by Tacoma Tomilson

Here at Apparition Lit, we're always looking for ways to improve ourselves as editors, readers, and people. I'd like to share an excerpt from our Patreon blog in which we outline our upcoming plans:

At Apparition Lit, we've been working on several initiatives that will help us create equity in our magazine. Last year we based our Flash Fiction contest on LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC media criticism to promote new and upcoming voices. This year we're focusing on international artwork by BIWOC. This has helped introduce us to new writers and broaden our own mindset.

Our magazine is still small. We can't afford to hire Editorial Assistants, and we've only recently gotten the rate of submissions that needs slush readers. As we continue to expand, we will actively look for BIPOC guest editors, readers, and writers to add to our team. For 2021 (or potentially late 2020), we plan to:

- Hire a BIPOC guest editor (with pay) for each issue.
- Feature essays from writers who identify as BIPOC in upcoming issues.
- Actively recruit BIPOC volunteer slush readers (about 8 hours of commitment a quarter).
- Open up our submissions for simultaneous subs for people who identify as BIPOC and/or LGBTQIA+, since other great lit mags are open during the same period we are.
- Create a "new magazine" initiative and provide assistance and funds for BIPOC looking to start their own magazine.
- Create a rotating mentorship program for BIPOC writers where we can answer publishing questions, help with editing, or just provide a friendly ear.

We will reach out to writers, readers, and editors individually, but our email and Twitter DMs are open to hearing your feedback on what you'd like to see, or if you're interested in working with us.

Please consider supporting us on Patreon and following us on Twitter. Without our barnacled friends, this issue wouldn't exist.

Thank you,

Tacoma Tomilson

The Limits of Magic

by Samantha Mills

There is no magic that can soothe a crying baby.

There are salves for rashes, potions for fevers, incantations for sounder sleep. There are glamours to enhance their toys, spells to make their rattles spark and their dolls blink. Magic can protect and heal and entertain.

But your baby is still crying. This isn't an illness. It isn't erupting teeth. It isn't achy bones or cat scratches or a wet bottom. She isn't too cold, she isn't too hot, she isn't hungry, she isn't tired. Sometimes babies just cry.

And sometimes she's crying because you're crying.

It doesn't do any good to wipe your eyes, because she isn't looking at your face. She's responding to the tension in your arm and shoulder as you walk her back and forth. She's responding to the timbre of your voice, increasingly desperate.

There is no magic that can soothe your grief, so there is no magic that can soothe your baby.

He shouldn't have gone alone.

*

There is no magic that can bring him back.

Once he set his mind to the task, there wasn't a spell in the world that could stop him. But you would have tried. There are talismans to reveal potential futures, and charms to make listeners more amenable, and, if all else fails, wards to block a door.

The Limits of Magic by Samantha Mills

Instead you woke up to the baby's pre-cry snuffling and you stagger-yawned over to her cradle. It wasn't until you were in your chair, wincing at the first greedy tug on your nipple, that you realized your bed was empty.

The nights are always cold in the desert, but that one was positively freezing. A little voice of denial suggested that he might be outside, but it didn't hold sway for long. You knew the truth: his side of the bed had been empty for hours, from the moment your head hit the pillow after her midnight meal. The slightest twitch from the baby roused you, but apparently your subconscious didn't give a damn about your lover.

You already knew what you'd find: the horses gone and a messenger bird caged in their place. He wouldn't leave you stranded, but he *would* slow you down. It was an argument he ended without even giving you a chance to shout.

He should have told you what he was planning to do, but as soon as the baby was born, he got this idea fixed in his head, as though you were suddenly incapable of defending yourself.

But you'd been capable of running away with him. You'd been capable of fighting off the Pyrandian guards, six young men you ate breakfast with every morning before you betrayed them. You had been perfectly capable of calling up the sands on Malkan Road, when the slitherbeasts would have consumed your entire party and ended the escape right there.

And now he's left you behind.

By the time you receive help from the caravan, he has already reenlisted with the Sandurran high command. By the time you track him down on your borrowed horse, he's already dead.

You had a chance to prevent all of this, but you chose to hide.

*

There is no magic that can stop a war. There are, of course, numerous ways that magic can start one.

The War of Red Sands began with an assassination via cursed diadem, a gift from the Czar of Sandurra to the High Regent of Polenka. The War of the Harvest Moon began with the theft of a sandblasted prism capable of

revealing the truth in any written word. Forty people died before the Polenian Guard returned the prism to Sandurra.

The particulars varied, but the conflict was the same: magic. Back and forth, back and forth, Sandurra and Polenka battled for magical artifacts, for secrets, for rare ingredients and ancient texts. But no resource was more valuable than blood, because not even the simplest charm could be activated unless the user was born with glow.

In Sandurra, they tested for it.

In Polenka, they bred for it.

This war, as yet unnamed in the history rolls, began with an illusion: a simple glamour cast by a young woman fleeing the capital of Polenka. She cloaked herself in the appearance of a Sandurran noblewoman and escaped her family estate with her three most loyal ladies-in-waiting. She met her paramour in the dead of night, at the juncture of Midnight Wells and Malkan Road.

She was immediately declared stolen, with her marriage rights revoked and a war party dispatched to bring her back. It was not the first time a gentlewoman had been carried off, but never one so highly ranked: the wife of the High Regent.

You knew the truth, oh loyalist of ladies-in-waiting. You could have gone home and faced the consequences of helping her escape. The shame upon your house would have been alleviated at least a little by the news you bore.

But by then you had fallen in love with a man in desert robes, and he told you all about a curious society living on the roads *between* Sandurra and Polenka. A society of wagons and horses and tents; of traders who spent their days transporting goods and their nights singing around a campfire; a place where your origin did not matter and perfect Polenians did not exist.

You let your mistress run away, and you remained in the desert. It wasn't your problem, after all. One woman couldn't carry the weight of a war on her shoulders. If you felt a twinge of remorse for the women left behind, it was only regret that they could not save themselves.

The Limits of Magic by Samantha Mills

You buried your head with the same futile determination as a bulbeye lizard: your belly exposed to the elements but your eyes firmly shut.

When the fighting began, you considered returning. Your lover was wracked with guilt (in retrospect you should have realized what he would do), but he wouldn't make the decision on your behalf. You were pregnant by then and consumed with worry over the coming child.

You remembered what had happened to your mistress's firstborn. If a highborn, purebred baby could be imperfect, there was no hope for yours, only half-Polenkian and conceived under such stress.

*

There is no magic that can eliminate the ordeal of childbirth, however much you wish that were true.

You were with your mistress that day. All of her ladies attended the birth, weaving pain relief into the charms around her belly and rubbing oils into the muscles of her back. When she was in front of the assemblymen—the speakers and magicians and warmongering politicians—she maintained perfect beauty and calm. Here, alone with her ladies, she was free to cry.

The baby came after a full day and night, terribly pale but squalling the life into his cheeks. Everyone in the room burst into tears, exhausted and triumphant and none more so than his mother. There was still work to be done to ensure her safe recovery, but she held that babe to her chest and ignored the efforts below her waist.

The inspector came shortly thereafter, forbidding in his red robes, and everyone's elation gave way to despair. The child was weak, he said. Milky in the eyes, wobbly, disoriented. The child had no glow. Better that he find his right place now, rather than taste life among the aristocracy before his inevitable rejection.

The baby was sold. Your mistress returned to court two months later, and though she was as composed and calm and beautiful as before, her ladies knew the truth. There would be no second child for the High Regent.

You were never certain if she truly loved the Sandurran ambassador, but you faithfully carried their letters back and forth in the ribbing of your bodice, and you watched her resolve harden like fresh-cooled glass.

There was no question of whether her ladies could stay behind. You would all be imprisoned for your complicity if caught. By casting your lot in with your mistress, you were giving up your home, your family, your prospects. You did not yet know what you would find in the desert.

And all because you had conspired not to marry.

*

There is no magic that can turn a red-cheeked girl into a pale-faced noblewoman. That takes a long and tiresome education.

You excelled at your studies: dancing and fluting, mathematics and astronomy, spells and sand sculpting. The pursuits of a lady. Your father hinted at your coming betrothal, a match that would serve him well in the hall of representatives. You acquiesced, but as the day approached you found you could not go through with it, and you turned to magic for a solution.

You found something: a very old blood ritual to repress the woman's natural cycle. It existed in no book, but was whispered about extensively in the bathhouse. When the time came for nuptial negotiations, you told the midwife you thought you might be deficient. You sounded very worried, which, of course, you were. At the end of the inspection, she stared at your face for so long you thought you'd faint from holding your breath.

It was her field. Of course she knew. She asked, very softly, if you understood what you were giving up. For the first time in your life, you wondered how someone became a midwife, outside the system and yet inextricably tangled up in it.

You hesitated, the specter of your father filled with furious disappointment in your thoughts. You shook him off and thought of your mother instead, fallen in her sixth attempt at that most noble pursuit: birthing a perfect son.

You said yes, very firmly, though your confidence was a lie.

The midwife told your father the bad news: you were not fit to bear children. He had no sons and no marriageable daughters. It was a blow, but only a temporary one. By the time you applied to be a lady-in-waiting, he was married again, to a girl scarcely older than yourself. She seemed eager to fill

The Limits of Magic by Samantha Mills

the nursery—but then, she was the youngest of her siblings and had not seen what it entailed.

Imagine how much different things would be, if you were a boy.

*

There is no magic that can change the circumstances of your birth.

Your mother told you about it often, when you were wrapped in her arms in the nursery. She knew you were going to be a girl by the midwife's auguries, and secretly she was glad. Boys grow up and leave, she said. When your father is gone and your brothers are keeping wives of their own, who will be there for me?

You never had any brothers. You watched your mother grow and shrink, grow and shrink. Three times she carried a boy, and your father was more attentive than you'd ever seen him. Privately your mother confessed: it would be such a relief to be done.

But none of them glowed. The inspector took them away, and they became somebody else's sons. Your mother's sixth pregnancy—which she desperately hoped would yield her second legitimate child—was her undoing. A rupture, the midwife said, from previous scarring. There is no magic that can stop a hemorrhage on that scale.

You left the nursery shortly thereafter, and only then understood the degree to which your mother had sheltered you. In that realm of noblewomen and babies, the machinations of the assembly were watered down to etiquette lessons. Food and shelter were a given, and not dependent upon proving one's worth to a male benefactor.

A lie, of course, because it was your mother paying for your safe upbringing. She hid the truth out of love for you. She meant to be there, to soften the blow when the time came, but you found out by yourself.

Sometimes you fantasize that you could have stayed in the nursery forever and never entered the world of men at all. But there is no magic that can keep you young. Eventually, if the gods see fit to let you live, you become an adult. And then, regardless of the world that raised you, you are responsible for shaping the world you find.

You only wish you had learned this lesson sooner.

*

There is no magic that can make you a good woman in Polenka. That is a lesson passed down from mother to daughter, and what your mother learned from *her* mother was this:

A quiet life is a happy life. Speak little, smile often.

There is grace in forgiveness. There is no grace in resentment.

The home is the expression of the soul, and the woman is its caretaker.

Bearing children is an act of worship and an act of patriotism. Women are the soil in which the seeds of the future are nurtured. It is a responsibility. It is an honor. If there is only one lesson you impart upon your own future daughter, it must be this: be grateful for the man who provides the home you get to keep.

However.

Your mother *lied*.

It is the duality of the lie—the simultaneous burden of the home and honor of the home—that makes it so difficult to resist. If a Polenkian girl questions her fate, she often finds the quickest to rage is not her father, but her mother.

The women of Polenka spend their lives simmering in resentment and perfecting ways to hide it. The worse their burden, the more fiercely they embrace it, because if they pause for one moment, if they look back at the course of their lives and acknowledge what has been done to them, they will collapse with grief.

Instead, they insist that it is right. They insist their lives are precisely as they are meant to be, and they mold their daughters to the same path. They do unto others what was done unto them, and by assuming the mantle of authority that once hurt them, they justify their upbringing.

The Limits of Magic by Samantha Mills

But a cycle can be broken. Painfully, yes, slowly, yes. It will take a generation of mothers to confront the truth of their lives, to acknowledge the years and opportunities robbed from them, to consciously decide not to ask the same from their daughters.

It will take a generation of mothers admitting that:

There is no magic that is worth the loss of your unglowing children. There is no magic that can make you want this life, this home, this silence, this submission. There is no magic that can bury your resentment, that can bring back your youth, that can unspeak those vows, that can unsmile those smiles, that can change all of those unhappy yeses to firm noes.

There is no magic that can eliminate your desire for more.

*

There is no magic that can fix any of those things, so you tuck your sleeping child into the arms of another woman and try not to imagine her distress upon waking up.

You ride home, and as you ride, you weave powerful wards around your body.

By the time you dismount in the central courtyard there is an amber light preceding you, and eddies of sand dance around your feet, attracted to the residual glow. When the guards approach, you warn them: you will break a week's worth of bindings and bring the entire building down with you.

You enter the hall of representatives unmolested, word of your arrival sprinting ahead on bare, juvenile feet. You glance at the errand boy, as you always do, wondering if you'll see a hint of your mother in his face.

There are three dozen men on the speaking floor, your father among them. At first you can scarcely glance in his direction, afraid his anger alone will cleave your defenses in half. You focus on the golden effigy hanging over the proceedings: Father Sun, always watching from his place of prominence behind the High Regent's seat. You want to tear it down. You want to scream.

Instead you tell them a story, about a young woman who was desperate to leave the city. About another young woman who helped her escape and found a different way of living on the long road to a strange land.

They come up quickly from beneath the High Regent's podium: six guards in red gauntlets, their forearms already glowing with repulsive spell-work.

You back away, letting your own work unspool around your feet like lava. You raise your voice and tell them about your baby. Your baby who was born with pale eyes like a Sandurran and no sign of magic. Your baby, who is more important than this cruel quest for purebred Polenkian magicians.

You make it through the door, and you shout to the crowd gathering there. You implore them to send an envoy to the Sandurran court. To ask the High Regent's wife why she left. To truly listen to the answer. Not one of them moves.

The guards are on your heels. You reach deep, unhook the last bit of mental thread holding a week's worth of stored energy at bay. You shut your eyes, and take a breath, and picture your daughter's round little face, one last time.

But you are too late for martyrdom.

The guards are quick, and they catch the flaming whips of your magic before they combust. You are not immolated.

You are arrested.

*

Your father is humiliated. He wants your baby sold, your parentage revoked, your friends investigated for conspiracy. He demands you lead them back to the caravan, so they can retrieve the other women seeking refuge in the desert.

He is voicing your worst fears, the very consequences that kept you compliant for so long. But you had to speak. For yourself and for those who can't.

Your father continues to threaten and shout, but you've had a lifetime of lessons in remaining silent. It isn't very difficult to retreat back into your shell. At last, he leaves.

The Limits of Magic by Samantha Mills

Your breasts ache. Somewhere in the desert, your baby is being fed by another woman. The anger ebbs away, and you are left alone with your doubts. They multiply like sandflies, ruthless and biting: you spoke too long, you didn't speak enough, you should have destroyed the hall when you had the chance, you should have stayed outdoors, not one of them look surprised, not one of them raised a hand in your defense, not one—

When your tears are done, you settle in, as best as you can, and you prepare for what comes next. There will be pain. There will be fear, and lies, and hunger. The shackles on your wrists prevent all but the most rudimentary spell-work.

You're alone.

*

You're *not* alone.

Because that night a face appears in the narrow window, young and girlish, and she asks in a high, curious whisper how a woman like yourself got put behind locks.

You tell her a story, about a young woman desperate to leave the city, and she is rapt. Her eyes are dark pools, scanning your face like a book.

The next night she brings a friend. The night after that, a different friend. Mostly they are girls, but some are boys, and that lodges a different sort of stone in your chest. The girls must want change, but the boys must embrace it.

They're cautious but curious. They're *hungry*.

Your days are filled with interrogation and humiliation, but something else happens after dark. You have become underground governess to a generation of discontent. They pepper you with questions, about history and geography and government and everything you saw in the desert, and you speak, and speak, and speak.

And you listen.

They whisper their grievances, nothing they'd ever dared voice in public. Many have stories of their own, but they also have friends,

acquaintances, rumors shared behind closed doors. They weep for their mothers, aunts, sisters. They weep in a different way for their fathers, uncles, brothers, caught just as surely under the weight of expectation. And some of them crouch even closer and tell you that they don't think they are boys or girls at all, and they describe lives ironed out into unbearable flatness, when the truth was so much more beautifully complex.

You gather up these unhappy children, these brave and shining youth aching with discontent, and you give them the lesson you wish your mother had imparted to you, when you sat on her knee in the nursery and drank her words like milk:

There is no magic that can change the past. It is up to you to shape the future.

*

One night, months later, you are awakened by a glimmer of light. You crawl, disoriented, malnourished, confused, to the window, and what you see there lifts you to your feet.

The hall of representatives is on fire.

There are women in the street.



Samantha Mills lives in Southern California, in a house on a hill that is hopefully not a haunted hill house. Her short fiction has also appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and *Escape Pod*, among others. She wants you to know: all of us are safe, or none of us are.

Posle Nas

by Rosalie Morales Kearns

Three hundred years ago,
when Russian peasants found
an unknown corpse
in the woods, or on an ice floe in the river,
they honored that person as a saint,
made up a name, a life story.
Miracles occurred.
Chapels were built.

Further back, they told tales
of an angry, all-powerful hag
who'll kill you as soon as look at you,
or help you on your mission, depending.

A hundred years ago,
in sparse winter daylight,
a grand duchess gnaws rotted potatoes

in an unheated flat
while ancestral portraits look on.

She comes from a land of
endless pristine forests
nameless saints
angry goddesses
a knock on the door at midnight.

Those who don't speak her language
hear her saying in her soft voice,
Lubyanka, Petropavlovskaya, Butyrka
and wonder, what is this lovely tongue,
those magic words?

The names of prisons.

There are other prisons.
Slava, bogatstvo, vlast'.

She takes down
the portraits in that unheated flat
—grandmother Countess G.,

Posle Nas by Rosalie Morales Kearns

great-uncle Prince S.—
sells the canvases on the black market,
chops up the frames for firewood,
reads the chronicles and the tales
by the light of the flames.

Author's note: *posle nas* is Russian for "after us"; *slava*: glory; *bogatstvo*: wealth; *vlast'*: power.



Rosalie Morales Kearns, a writer of Puerto Rican and Pennsylvania Dutch descent, is the author of the novel *Kingdom of Women* (Jaded Ibis, 2017) and the story collection *Virgins & Tricksters*, and founder of the feminist publishing house Shade Mountain Press. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Nasty Women Poets* anthology, and in *Luna Luna*, *Yes Poetry*, *Literary Hatchet*, *Bending Genres*, and other journals.

Saying Sorry

by Rebecca Fung

Grizila hobbled down the road, wondering again if this was worth it. Another spasm of pain shot up her leg. Bits of silver flaked off her crushed wing. The wind whistled through its ruptured filminess, barely held together with a crude, makeshift bandage, forcing more of the skin to bend and break. Her body begged her to stop. But no, she had made her decision and she would stick to it.

She shook her head to remind her body that her mind had overruled it. First came the crackle of her neck bones, snapping against one another, then she moaned aloud. Was there any part of her that was in good condition now?

Even had the men been less skillful with the aim of their rocks, in her old age she was much less artful at dodging. Her wings could hardly lift her a dandelion's height from the ground. She could still hear them yelling, "Take that, old bitch! And it's not half what you deserve, either!"

All she had done was come clean about how she used to sit on this fence by the side of the road and sometimes throw a stone or stick at passersby. Only for a bit of a giggle, to watch people trip up and drop their parcels. It was a bit of fun. That's what fairies did. There wasn't a lot to occupy her time, and really, that was one of the lazier and more harmless of amusements.

It was funny when a woman dropped a bundle of cheese and followed it headfirst, throwing up a grey dust cloud and bits of cheesy muck. The confused and angry look on her face was priceless. Or when a young boy on his way to the market dropped a sack of potatoes and scrambled after them. The bag split open, the potatoes went in every direction, and the boy didn't

Saying Sorry by Rebecca Fung

know which way to run first. Watching him dart this way and that and his arms flailing like an octopus was hilarious!

It wasn't her fault that one of these men's wives had tripped thirty years ago. Tripped! The human's leg hit the stony ground with a loud cracking sound. Grizila's ears still rang with the memory. It wasn't her fault that the woman was never able to walk again. Not really. Was it?

Some people certainly knew how to hold a grudge. She hadn't known that the woman's injury lasted that long—fairies don't hang around to check up on that sort of thing. This was where honesty got you. You tried to do the right thing and people didn't even appreciate it!

The rocks and the bruises and the broken wing, that's what happened when you confessed.

Before the men throwing rocks, there had been the man in the village. Grizila had told him candidly that fifty years ago, as a young and somewhat irresponsible sprite, she'd slipped a love potion into the tea he made, to inspire him to make false declarations of love to maidens at the village dance.

"Even the ugly ones. In fact, especially the ugly ones, I think that's how I brewed the potion. The ugly ones were to get the most flowery, romantic declarations of all!" Grizila had admitted.

How could she have known that his wife had been one of the girls at the dance and that he'd enchanted her with his best speech of the night? And fifty years later, how could she know his wife was standing nearby, listening to this whole confession?

She hadn't realised how hard old women could slap, either. Ouch! She had a feeling they mightn't be husband and wife much longer. That ugly woman had an ugly tongue, and Grizila, running away fast, could still hear it from quite a distance.

But she'd set herself on this path. The Old One of Fairyland had told her she was dying. Grizila had a weak heart, a heavy heart, and the Old One didn't know how to change that. They discussed how Grizila wanted to spend her final days. Most fairies nearing the end wanted to sit in Fairyland and

drink blossom tea all day. Grizila wanted her last days to be remembered as a worthwhile time in her fairyhood.

"My days as a young fairy were so full of fun, but I don't think they were very... well, meaningful," she told the Old One. "I want to do something special before I go. Maybe write a book or carve a statue. So people will remember me in a good way. Because in the fun times, I think people remembered me in a not-so-good way!"

The Old One nodded.

"I'm not quite sure which I should do," Grizila began. She'd spent most of her life playing tricks, not attending sculpting classes.

"Grizila, what did you do when you had fun?"

"I pranked people," Grizila said. "I wasn't a very nice fairy, to be honest, but I was very good at pranking! I just loved ... being around humans and seeing them do silly things. And I was better at it than the other fairies. I liked that."

"Some of those other fairies played pranks with you?"

"Yes, but many went off and did other things like making blossom tea or floral wreaths or even sculptures. I was the expert prankster among the fairies in my set. Now I realise that isn't something to be so proud of. I know inside it wasn't always the right thing to do, but I don't know what to do about it. People don't think of me so kindly, but I want them to. Making humans cry isn't quite as funny as it seemed back then. But... I just loved being the best."

The Old One looked into Grizila's eyes.

"You have always been the best, Grizila. Why do you think that is?" She held out her hands and Grizila took them, steady and warm. For a moment, the Old One transported her back to those heady days as a pranking fairy.

She had been dancing about carelessly when group of humans had approached and she'd felt instantly energised. Their different shapes and sizes and the expressions on their faces had intrigued her.

Saying Sorry by Rebecca Fung

No matter what tricks she played or if some of them failed, Grizila had always been ready for more, to keep going when other fairies moaned and returned to napping in their rose-petal beds and little leafy hammocks.

"I suppose being around humans is the best thing in the world to me," said Grizila. "They're interesting. I'm at my best when I'm around them."

The Old One nodded. "And you never give up. You're not well. You will need that persistence, that strength if you want to... do something special."

"I need to go back to the people I've pranked," Grizila said. "I work best when I'm with the humans. Except this time, I won't prank. I'll apologise. I'll make it up to them."

"You need to commit with your whole heart to make this journey. Your heart is growing weaker every day. You can feel it?"

"Something heavy is inside me," Grizila had told the Old One before departing. "But I'm hoping it will become lighter as I make amends."

Grizila imagined a beautiful, cleansing process, but apologising wasn't all it was cracked up to be. She visited humans and explained her youthful folly and said sorry in a most sincere manner. Being truly sorry was what mattered, and that's what Grizila had always been taught. *Say sorry, Grizila. No, don't just say it, mean it.* People should acknowledge her sincerity, smile, and make her feel good. She deserved it. She had decided to say sorry when she could be sipping tea in a fairy field!

The humans would realise how much effort a fairy apology requires and open their arms to embrace her. They would be grateful and call her a hero, and she would bathe in their respect and admiration and know everything was set to right. Her body would feel lighter in that warmth.

But it hadn't quite worked out that way. So far, people weren't very understanding. Apologies were not easy. There was the spit and the stones and the curses. Each day, Grizila walked more slowly, and it took more effort for her heart to make its next "thump." Every so often, a cramping in her chest tried to squeeze the organ into oblivion. Now it was her wing, her silly wing, that was collapsing and useless.

Who was next? Ah, a pair of families, and she had invited them to a proper meeting. This was very important.

"Children are very important to humans. This prank needs to be on your 'sorry list,' Grizila," the Old One had said.

Humans didn't have the best sense of humour. Fairies could always see the light side, but humans tended to take life so much more seriously.

Grizila vowed she would apologise thoroughly for this misdeed. No popping in and blurting out an unrehearsed line as she had with the man and the love potion. She sent out invitation cards, duly engraved in fancy script, to both the Fotheringtonworth and Bogg families. However, with her limp and her damaged leg, she arrived at the hall far later than expected and wasn't as presentable as she had hoped to be. Six people sat around the table, watching her stumble in.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," she mumbled as she entered. She had created another thing to apologise for, and she hadn't even got to the real apology. When would her time for apologising end?

Farmer Bogg helped her to a chair, and Lady Fotheringtonworth smiled graciously. The Lady looked like a woman who was used to being the centre of attention, but Grizila was most interested in the children. Hadn't they been just babies when she had last seen them? Now they were young men. Albert Fotheringtonworth and Samuel Bogg. How time flew! As babes they had looked almost the same, except for the old rags wrapped around the farmer's boy and the brilliant gold embroidered cloth around the nobleman's boy. Both had been crying and had looked up at her with those big brown eyes when she'd picked them up. Then she'd made the switch.

"I'm Grizila. I have some interesting—important—news for you," she began. How did one say this delicately? I suppose there wasn't a way. Out with it, then.

She turned to Samuel Bogg. "You're not his son," she said, pointing at Farmer Bogg.

"What?" the two men asked.

Mrs. Bogg squealed.

"I knew it!" Farmer Bogg roared. "It was Big Gareth the Woodsman at the Hay Square Dance, wasn't it? You've always had your eye on him. That's

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why you've had him over chopping wood even though I could do it myself. You've been doing the dirty in the woodhouse for years!"

"Don't accuse me. You'll be sorry when you find out what's in your dinner tonight!"

"The lower classes..." Lady Fotheringtonworth looked at the bickering couple smugly.

"You're not his son, either," Grizila said to Albert Fotheringtonworth. She pointed at Lord Fotheringtonworth. The elegant Lady's face would have dropped off completely had it not been for the remarkable amount of makeup soldering it in place.

"That's not true, Daddy, is it?" Albert asked, but Lord Fotheringtonworth's attention was completely on Lady Fotheringtonworth.

Mrs. Bogg laughed at the uneasy silence. "Woohoo, not so hoighty toighty after all, are you, missus high and mighty with all your jewellery and gold? You've been opening your legs to all the lords and dukes, haven't ya?"

"At least they'd be lords and dukes and not a common woodsman! I would have some taste!" Lady Fotheringtonworth snapped.

"Are you admitting to bedding others? Who? Lord of Featherstone? Duke of Greenlakes?"

"I never confirmed anything! It was hypothetical!"

"Hypothetical humping!"

"Now wait a moment, all of you," Grizila interrupted. "This meeting was supposed to be about me, not you. Could you stop stealing the limelight with your pettiness? I'm going to DIE soon and I need to say..." She coughed. Specks of blood spattered on her hand, and she felt the squeeze in her chest again. *It's really happening. I must hurry up. Time is against me.*

"This isn't about bed-hopping. It's about bassinet swapping. I confess, I swapped these two adorable lads as babies. I took this boy and put him in your cradle and took that one and put him in yours. It was a bit of a joke. I'm trying to put things right."

She giggled. No one else seemed to think it was that funny.

"Your noble blood, sir, flows in this boy's veins," she said, pointing to Samuel. "And the honest heart that loves the land beats in the chest of this young man, Albert."

"The true heir to Castlemaine is that boy in rags?" Lord Fotheringtonworth boomed. "Stand up, boy. Stand up when I speak to you. Hmm. I can see he has a good stature. What a fine broad chest he has! That's my blood all right. What a Lord you will make."

"No!" Albert said. He tugged at his father's sleeve. "I have spent my entire life preparing for ruling Castlemaine! I am a great horseman."

"A great horseman because your real family is from a filthy farm filled with them," the nobleman said. "No doubt you would be good with cows and chickens, too. I don't want an heir whose blood is impure. I'll take this real son of mine and make something of him."

"Do I have to go?" Samuel asked, gripping the elder farmer's hand. "He looks so mean."

"You've always earned your keep, Samuel," said Farmer Bogg. "You're our son and we'll keep you."

"What about me?" asked Albert.

"This... Samuel, is he? He's of noble blood," Lord Fotheringtonworth said. "He cannot stay as a lowly farmhand. I will not have it. He will come to Castlemaine and be brought up properly. You can have a stable of horses all your own, boy, and roast beef for every meal!"

"My own horses?" Samuel asked. He tried to shake off Farmer Bogg's hand and leaned forward. "A whole stable sounds very good. And I do like the sound of roast beef every day. What else?"

"But what about me?" asked Albert. "Those are my horses!"

"Don't you bribe my son away from me!" Farmer Bogg shouted.

"He's not your son and he never was. The old hag confessed."

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"You're not getting your claws into our Samuel!" Mrs. Bogg shrieked. Her eyes filled with tears. She grabbed at Lady Fotheringtonworth's gold necklace and tried to strangle her. "Take that! And that! Oh, I hate you."

"You could have me," Albert whispered. Everyone was too busy fighting over who would have Samuel.

Grizila walked up to Albert and touched his shoulder. She hadn't touched him since that long-ago day she had swapped him for Samuel. Back then they'd both been snug, warm pink things in swaddling clothes, practically identical. Now Albert quivered at her touch, and she felt how different he was from the strong, sure Samuel.

Even in rags, Samuel looked more dignified and glorious by the second. Despite his bright blue and gold embroidery, Albert faded into the room's walls. His eyes began to sting with tears.

Grizila had always liked humans. She loved watching their expressive faces when she was pranking them. Then a deeper feeling quivered inside her. Maybe there was something more than just saying sorry, something she could give him other than her words.

If she left Albert like this, he certainly wasn't going to remember her kindly.

"If you'd like you could come with me. I'm not much. I'm dying. But I'd like to have some company. I don't want to die alone."

Albert nodded. He slowly helped her out of the room, and the bickering faded into the distance.

"I didn't expect it to happen like this," Grizila said. "But I should have. None of my apologies have gone the way they were supposed to."

"Don't worry about it," said Albert. "It's not like Father and Mother are the best people in the world. They won't even notice I'm gone." He sighed and wiped his face on his sleeve.

"I'm really sorry for that," Grizila said.

Grizila limped a little while longer but soon, despite her determination, she begged to stop. Albert collected some leaves and branches and made a strange, makeshift shelter.

"I've never done anything like this before," he said. "At home, we always had a castle and servants, and well, I guess I'm pretty useless at most things."

"No, the roof is just right," said Grizila.

"It's only made of leaves," Albert said. "It has holes in it and won't keep rain out."

"It's perfect," Grizila said. "Look over there. See the dark green leaf shaped like a heart on that bush? And that tree over there with the yellow fruit? Bring me some of the leaves and fruit, and I will turn them into a hearty meal."

Albert did as he was told, and Grizila mustered up the bit of fairy cheekiness she had left in her to give the ingredients new life. Not just a few yellow fruits and leaves, but a feast of warm vegetable and beef pie, grilled fish, roasted carrots and beans, a spread of colourful rainbow cupcakes, and hot herbal tea in little mugs.

"Eat up because we need to travel soon," Grizila said.

"You aren't well," Albert said. "You should rest. If you keep travelling, you'll make yourself sicker."

"I'll keep getting sicker anyway. I need to keep going. I need to apologise."

"You didn't tell me what all these apologies are about. Have you swapped other children, too?"

Grizila shook her head. "No, but I have done many things I should say sorry for. When I was young, I played some bad pranks. It was just for fun, but it was wrong. I wanted to make up for it, but most people haven't been understanding."

"I know what you mean," Albert said. "When I was little, I had a governess and put a frog in her pocket as a joke, but she didn't think it was

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funny. I said sorry, but she was very cross and never forgave me. She called me Dirty Bertie when my parents weren't around."

"My pranks have been much worse than that. I swapped you and Samuel, and I am sorry."

"It wasn't the right thing," conceded Albert. "But if Mother and Father and Farmer Bogg and his wife were nicer, it wouldn't have turned into such a mess. They don't want me, and they don't care. Maybe I'm just someone no one could want."

"Nonsense." Grizila reached over and gave him a hug. She told him everything—about the Old One, the pranks she had played in her youth, the men on the road who had thrown things at her.

"That's so cruel! It's so much worse than Dirty Bertie. Surely they should see that you were only trying to do the right thing!" he said. "How can people be so ungrateful?"

Grizila smiled. "That's so... good of you, Albert."

"You're good too, Grizila. I know you are. People have been awful not to give you a proper chance."

Grizila felt the hard and heavy squeezing of her heart loosen and become less painful. So this was what it felt like to make a friend. It had been a long time.

"I have to keep going. I said I'd make things right, and I will."

"You're the bravest person I ever met," said Albert. "Far braver than all those soldiers Father talks about commanding. I'll help you get there, Grizila. Let me help you with your wing."

Albert tried to re-patch the wing. Grizila grumbled that she was never going to fly again at this stage of her life so maybe they should just rip it off. The fragile pane was shattered in so many places, and she wondered if it would ever properly regrow. There was only so much a fairy could do. The ribbon bandage was falling off. It trailed in the dirt and never properly covered all the gaps in her wing. While the wind whistled through the gaps, new holes had formed.

Albert took his beautiful, embroidered jacket and tore it to make patches for the holes in Grizila's wing. Grizila showed him how to collect flower pollen and turn it into a fragrant, waxy glue with a quick enchantment. Soon she had wings that glistened with patches of blue and gold.

"It's so beautiful, so stylish," she cried, and for the first time in a long while, she laughed and flapped her wings a little, forgetting she was old and weak. She put her arms around Albert and swayed from side to side, and he began to smile and laugh, too.

"Grizila, you're beautiful. These colours are truly you."

She looked in his eyes, and he didn't seem so distant. "I'm glad to be all dressed up because I've got someone important to see," she said. "Let's get going."

Albert nodded. "All right. But promise me you'll let me look after you, and you'll tell me when it aches. Then we can stop for breaks and some water. Who are we seeing?"

"Someone who reminds me of you," Grizila said. "Someone very kind. That's why I think this prank was the worst of all. Perhaps you won't think I'm a good person after this."

"It can't be that bad."

"It was. Now that I've met you, it's even more important I see her, Albert. Look how good you've been to me. Oh, I shouldn't have done what I did!"

Albert said nothing. He took Grizila's hand and let her lean on his shoulder. As they hobbled down the road, Grizila poured her heart out about the kind woman, Annie.

Years back, she'd been flying. Her wings were young and strong. Grizila was a little too carefree, and she hit a branch and fell in a pile of dung.

She screamed, for not only did the dung smell absolutely disgusting but the fall had not been an easy one. The ground below the smelly stuff was hard; she thought she might have broken something.

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"Are you all right?" a woman's voice said from behind her.

Did she look all right? She was screaming and covered in filth. Blood streaked her face where the branch had scratched her. Grizila curbed her sharp tongue and let the woman take her into the house, fix her some tea and cake, and clean her up. She allowed her arm to be bandaged.

"These are delicious cakes," Grizila said.

"I've always wanted to start my own bakery," Annie confided. "But it's one of those dreams, not for the likes of me."

Annie chatted with Grizila, plied her with cakes and tea, and kept changing her bandages. It was a pleasant visit, but when Grizila was back to good health, she was itching to leave. Life was too short to be hanging around in one place. There were sparkly things to see and pranks to play, and Grizila only cared about frolicking, flittering from one place to another, and flying as fast as a young fairy could.

"I'll pay you back well. You've been very kind." It was an offhand comment, a vague memory of etiquette; Grizila did not think about what it really meant.

"You don't have to," Annie said.

"Oh, but I will."

With the flick of her wrist, some well-chosen herbs, and a few chants, Grizila had left a pile of fairy gold in Annie's backyard.

Fairy gold glittered more than ordinary money, and Grizila had a knack for making piles of it. However, after it was made—sometimes it took hours, sometimes months, depending on her recipe—the gold transformed into something else, like mouldy bread, piles of sand, autumn leaves, or dog dung. It was amusing to buy a little cake, a piece of jewellery or a sparkly scarf and know that a few days later that merchant who tried to rip you off with their exorbitant prices would open their bag and have nothing but some sand or the foul stench of animal faeces.

"You gave that Annie woman animal faeces?" said Albert. "After she rescued you from a pile of it? Oh, Grizila!"

"I know. It's hard to explain," Grizila said. "Making fairy gold is a habit. I just—I wasn't even thinking about it. It was the same when I switched you and Samuel. That's how fairies are brought up. We aren't supposed to think, we just do, and then we laugh. It's a glorious, happy life, but ever since I was told I was at the end of it, I've been thinking. My life was so full of fun, I thought there could only be good memories. But they seem sort of empty. I heard that Annie tried to start a bakery with the gold I left, and she got in trouble because it wasn't real money. I'm truly going to make it up now. I know words won't be enough."

"Life was fun for you, but I guess it wasn't so much for other people. I suppose the same could be said for the Lord of Castlemaine."

Grizila was silent. The whole point of pranking was to poke and to stir, not to make sure everything was comfortable. Comfortable would have been boring—or would it? She rested her head on Albert's steady shoulder. Even when he expressed disappointment in her, he was still her friend. He looked at her warmly and held her firmly. Grizila had many fairy friends flit out of her life, great for a laugh and a prank, but none of them here now. Not one of them had ever looked at her the way Albert did.

"My pranking days are behind me," she said. "I'm very sorry. About what happened to you and to Annie, especially. I know just saying sorry won't change things back for you."

"I'm all right," said Albert. "I feel really bad about Annie, and I'll help you make it up to her. I don't want to be like my father—whoever he is, nobleman or farmer. I don't want to use people. That's what he does, thinks of them as tools."

"I'll make her up a pot of real gold," Grizila said. "It's the least I can do."

When Grizila and Albert arrived, Annie's yard was full of litter, overrun with greedy rats. There was paint peeling away from the wooden boards, the windows were dark, and the plants were dying.

"This place looks dead." Albert toed the parched grass. Grizila wished he hadn't said that word.

"I'm going in anyway," Grizila said. She took a long, fallen tree branch and swept rats aside in her fight to the front door. "Shoo! Shoo!"

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"Do we have to go up here?" said Albert, wrinkling his nose. "This is disgusting! She's gone away, Grizila. Maybe we can leave her a note. If your hand is hurt, I'll write it out for you."

"It doesn't have the same meaning at all," Grizila said. "Are you with me, or not?"

Albert groaned. "I'm with you. But be careful. That rat almost hit me in the face."

The door fell in easily, and Grizila called out, "Annie! Annie!"

There was no answer.

"Maybe she's, you know..." Albert's voice trailed off. "It's been a long time."

"She can't be," Grizila said. "I need to tell her I'm sorry!"

The place smelled of mould, and Albert held his nose as they searched each room. It wasn't at all like the beautiful mansion he grew up in. But when he thought of Annie, he pushed past his revulsion. They opened a door, and a new horror greeted them. A nest of cockroaches was disrupted, and a cloud of dust billowed in their faces. A disintegrating shelf of rotting food fell to the floor. Albert wiped cobwebs from his hair as he passed through the doorway.

Finally, they found Annie. She was lying in bed among tangled and grimy sheets. Her body was skeletal, her skin was light grey. She did not seem to recognise Grizila, but she did not order her away. Albert found it hard to match the dull, grey thing on the bed with the picture Grizila had painted of the bright, kind young woman who baked such delicious cakes. The stench around her was foul, not the enticing smell of fresh baking. His first instinct was to run to her and straighten out those bedclothes. Grizila walked to Annie's side and bent over her face.

"What happened? Why are you here, like this?"

Annie writhed. "If only I could be out of my misery," she whispered. "You're the first people to visit me in, oh, God knows how long. Whoever you are. I don't care. I was certain I'd die alone."

"I'm sorry, Annie. So sorry. I came here to bring you gold..."

Annie moaned. "Not more gold! I hate gold. I started my business. I made promises, and I paid them. I always keep my promises. Then people said the gold turned to crap—literally. I didn't know what they were talking about, but they wouldn't listen. They beat me and ransacked my house. I have nothing but enemies. No one has trusted me since. Everyone curses my name. I haven't been outside this house for years. When I got ill, the doctor would not see me. He said he didn't want to be paid in dung."

"But I could give you real gold! Not dung!"

"Please, no gold. I hate the bloody idea of it!" Annie's tiny frame could barely let out a sound above a whisper, but it was forceful. "Now I will die in pain, and I just want it to be over."

Albert looked at the two old women. "Grizila, money will do nothing for her now. Apologies are useless, too. There's only one thing she could possibly want." Albert placed Annie's gnarled hand in Grizila's. "Someone who cares."

Annie's hand slightly tightened its grip, and a small smile curved on her face. Grizila looked up at Albert. "Thank you. Thank you for being my friend. I wanted to make things right for you."

"Thanks for being mine, Grizila. Don't worry about me now. You've taught me something special. I want to be the kind of person who cares about other people. I'm glad I'm not Lord of Castlemaine. I really am."

Grizila nodded and coughed. More blood appeared on her arm and the back of her hand, but she did not let go. *It's time. I've done what I wanted to do. I'll make these last minutes mean something.*

"I'll stay with you, Annie."

Grizila pressed Annie's fragile fingers against her cheek. Soon the only sound in the room was their breathing and an occasional cough. The coughs grew raspier until it was only Grizila coughing and Annie's hand went limp.

Grizila kept on holding till her own breath dissolved into the air.

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Rebecca Fung is from Sydney, Australia and loves to write a range of fiction stories from fantasy and horror to children's fiction. She loves owls, mandarins and chocolate and can often be found on the sofa with her face buried in a book. She has published a children's fantasy book, 'Princess Hayley's Comet'.

The Truth of a Lie

by Jeff Reynolds

The mule died of thirst before I reached the border, not long after I started the final leg, traveling south west from Ol Negolat. It was cheaper to ship mule embryos to distant worlds than parts to repair floaters and other vehicles, so most people used mules. Now I didn't have even that. I walked the last eighteen kilometers through the night to avoid the sun's heat, the air so clear the stars rode my shoulders. I reached the outskirts of the town of Shroun as dawn pinked the sky.

The two-hundred-meter-high wall loomed over the town. A black line cutting through the desert east to west on the southern side of the little community. I hunched my shoulders and ducked my head as if it watched me and I needed to hide. For all I knew, guards there tracked all heat signatures within a few kilometers, so perhaps they *were* watching. It didn't matter. I needed to cross, so they'd see me soon enough. I prayed Jackson had gotten the message I'd sent through diplomatic channels and would be waiting for me on the other side.

I prayed I'd make it to the other side.

I drank from a small fountain in the square in front of a closed bar, a flickering fluorescent beer sign painting the street crimson. When I had my fill of dirty water—better than no water at all—I walked to the border station and rested with my back against the cool, concrete wall until the sun rose and brought the day's heat.

Nine o'clock came and went, the time told by the bells ringing from a small prayer chapel down the street. I waited as people trickled passed, glancing at me with as much interest as they would a bush or a rock. I was patient because I had to be. The border officials would come when they wanted, not in a rush to open at this or that hour, despite the schedule

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posted next to the door. The pace was languid here, measured in easy breaths and slow strides.

A little girl walked past with long, black hair. She wore a clean, white dress and held her mother's hand. She flashed shy smiles up at the sun of her world, the way Sophie would smile at me.

*

I opened her favorite bedtime book and sat on the bed. My weight wrinkled the blue blanket covering her tiny body.

"Are there white rabbits, mommy?" she'd ask, eyes wide.

"Of course," I'd say, and kissed her forehead. "If you're lucky, you can follow them down into a magic hole as well, but you must be fast to catch them."

*

The emigration office opened as noon bells rang. A small man with a fat belly pushing a white shirt out over his trousers glanced over and waved me in. In the building he pointed at a metal chair where I might sit. He sat behind the counter and picked up a fan, waved it in front of his face. The ceiling fan above didn't move. A door marked the wall to the counter's right.

They let me wait for a few hours in the stifling reception area. I spent the time staring through the dirty window at the landscape north, blue-red mountains dotting the horizon, and recited *The Three Musketeers* silently until the fat man rose and opened the other door to speak to someone. When the conversation ended, he turned and looked at me. He jerked his thumb at the door. I stood and tucked my bedroll under my arm, reassured myself the rod remained inside, the fabric wound tightly around it like a swaddled child.

He led me into a small office outfitted with a chair and desk, an old vidphone half-buried beneath a pile of folders and papers. A man sat behind it, bright eyed and clean shaven.

"A vu kushoy?" he said, nodding at another chair across from him. The fat man closed the door as he left, and I sat.

"Your name?" he asked, switching to my language from Koshian.

"Jenneck Martin."

"You wish to cross the border," he said. Not a question but a statement.

"Yes."

He held a piece of paper, fingers bruised and calloused. "It says here you came to Kosh nine years ago seeking asylum."

"Nine years, three months, seven days." They'd known me before I'd entered.

"The scanners ran facial and retinal patterns when you entered," he said, as if he read my thoughts. Maybe they did that, too. "We are not so simple a station as you might have preferred."

"I did not say you were simple."

"But you cross here instead of the city of Ambooyo. Why?"

I shrugged. "It was closer."

He grunted, seemed to think for a few moments. "The real question is why are you heading south again?"

"My brother has been ill. I'm going to visit him."

He looked at me with watery brown eyes and scratched the stubble on his chin. "You know if you go in you might not be let back, do you understand?"

"I know."

"So, I am wondering why you would seek asylum in Kosh and now return south. Things have gotten very bad there you know."

"My brother is ill," I repeated. We had practiced this, over and over, Gabriel and I, until the lie became smooth, easily repeated. I said it so often it had become the truth by way of repetition. My brother is ill. I received an official notice through diplomatic channels, per the inter-colonial agreement on family separation. I'm going to be with him as he recovers. I wish to see my family.

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"Now repeat it," Gabriel said each time I told the lie. He held my hand and peered into my eyes as he asked, and I repeated. Again, and again. Until I was satisfied with my memory of it and the time had come.

He pressed the rod into my hands. "Go on. You gain nothing more by waiting."

"I'm sorry," I said. It hurt when I looked at him. It hurt he did not understand why I had chosen to leave. Sophie was not his, but he had loved her as I had. He'd loved me.

"The longer you wait, the more I wish you would change your mind," he said.

"I know," I said. "But they need our help. They have daughters, too."

*

Sophie smiled and held the book up when I came in to say goodnight. "Read, mommy."

I turned to the page and read. "There was a table set out under a tree in front of the house, and the March Hare and the Hatter were having tea."

*

I tell myself the truth again.

The man stared at me as though he waited for a new reply. I said nothing. I held my bed roll in my lap and he glanced at it and nodded. "What is that?"

"My bedroll." I kept my hands still.

"Let me see," he said, reaching over the desk. My heart beat faster. *I'm going to be with my brother.* I handed him the cloth bundle.

He undid the old leather belts holding it closed and unrolled it, spreading the contents across the desk. A few articles of clothing; a small plastic baggie containing beef jerky and salt pork; a vial of nutrient supplements; my empty water bottle. The metal rod clattered onto the desk and rolled off the edge, banging against the floor.

I wish to go see my brother.

He bent over, grunting as he took it from where it rested against the wall. He turned the silver rod over, noting the markings on it. Crude numbers near one end; a horizontal slash, finer than a single hair, that ran around its circumference near the midpoint. So thin it was almost invisible. You could only see it if it caught the light just so.

"What is this? A club? A weapon?"

"I use it to hold a tarp up when it rains, like a tent pole." I said. *My brother has been ill.* Hidden sensors monitored my respiration, my heart rate. They would smell the lie if I did not bury myself in the truth of it.

He waited to see if I would flinch, show my nervousness, blink too often, twitch my lips. I sat stoic. The rod meant nothing to me.

"I think perhaps I will keep it." Again, his eyes played over my face. I shrugged.

He turned it, flicked a blackened fingernail across the numbers written near the end as though he could erase it. The marks were molecular lasing. They looked like chalk in this case, as though someone had crudely marked the rod for use in a project. You couldn't erase them with a fingernail. "What are these figures?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know. Construction markings maybe." More lies, repeated as often as the lie about my brother, to trip off my tongue when needed. *I think they are construction marks. The rod is a tent pole. My brother is ill.*

"You stole this from a construction site?"

"I took it from a vacant building that had fallen down," I explained. "I didn't think anyone would miss it."

"You could use this as a weapon," he said, swinging it, air whooshing in its wake.

"Yes," I said, nodding.

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"We can perform forensics, make sure you haven't hit anyone on the head with it," he said, placing it on the desk. "Maybe you're a thief and you stole from them?"

I shrugged once more. "You may. I am grateful I've not had to use it that way."

"The roads are safe these days," he said, "at least on this side of the wall. Are you sure you do not want to stay here?"

"I miss my family," I said. "My father and mother are gone; Jackson is all I have left." I held my father in my memories. A picture taken a few minutes before he died. He stood on a metal beam high above the ground, the unfinished wall stretching to the right, scaffolding and cranes to the left. My mother first showed it to me when I was six and I had many questions about him.

"Keep it in your thoughts," mother told me. "Memories are truth, even false ones."

*

"Good night, mommy," Sophie said.

"Good night, my bunny."

*

I held onto my father's image along with Sophie's. His death. Her with her book.

"I am very sorry for what happened to your father," he said, nodding at the computer screen. He knew all of me. "Many workers died because their colonial government didn't care about safety, all they cared about was turning in on themselves, isolated behind a vast, black faraday wall so no one could reach them. But the wages were good; who could turn them down? I lost two cousins in three years, and only one was returned to his family for burial. We never learned where they buried the other."

I nodded my thanks for understanding, the drip of one tear running down my face. All the better to help the illusion. No, the truth.

He sat back. "You know how bad it is now, do you?"

I nodded. "Still," I said, and shrugged. "What choice do I have?"

"Some towns, they don't even allow women to work, that's how bad. They censor literature. They are word eaters. No books they say. No vids. They wear sack cloth and ashes and claim they are holy."

I shrugged again. "I don't want to go, but I want to see him and make sure he's alright. Please. He's all that's left of my family."

He drummed the desk, watching my face. Then he slapped his keypad. Out in the front room something whirred. "I have been directed to allow humanitarian passes." He smiled sadly. "We are not without compassion, Ms. Martin. I have granted your travel request, as well as provided authorization to return should you wish."

Should they let you was what he meant. They might not even let me through. They might kill me.

"You will be required to declare any fruits or vegetables," he continued, "any books or other contraband, when you enter. If you fail to declare these items and they are found on you, you will be arrested, tried. Maybe hung. I hope you will reconsider your plans."

"I have no such contraband as you have seen. Thank you."

He waved away my words. "Do not thank me unless you are able to return. I do not think I'm doing you any favors by letting you cross. But family is family."

*

A dirt road led to the wall's entrance, flanked by concrete barricades. Duproalium fencing stood behind the barricades, topped with silver barbed wire. Squat guard towers flanked the entry, and men with rifles watched as I walked into the cool shadow beneath the massive metal barrier. They wore black uniforms and helmets, their eyes covered with goggles, as though they wished to hide from words they might see.

I passed through a small door. A corridor led forward, closed doors on either side, fluorescent lights illuminating sterile, white walls. Other refugees

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lined up in front of a window where a scrawny man with pimples and too-white teeth waited for us behind scratched glass. I got in line, waiting. Patient again. Clutching the bedroll to my breast, the precious rod hidden inside.

When my turn came, I stepped to the yellow line and handed him my authorization.

He stared at the screen. "Do you have anything to declare? Are you carrying any contraband or illegal goods?"

"No."

"Any books, movies, digital media, music, tapes, magazines, tracts, images, microfilm, subdermal storage, memory implants, or other restricted items?"

"No."

"You are aware that all contraband, including but not limited to books, music, movies, must be declared and examined?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to Sascaloon to see my brother, he's been ill," I answered.

"Father's name?" he asked, though he had it on the screen and the papers in front of him.

"James Adisa," I said.

He scanned the readout. "Illegally immigrated here in 2137 on a colony freighter, married into his citizenship. Interracial marriage, Reformation Catholic, one mulatto kid." He looked at me for the first time and shrugged. "Guess that's you."

I flinched. "He was a legal immigrant. He had an access chip. He married a citizen. A New Baptist."

He tapped the screen, leaned closer. "Not legal after the Citizen Pride act passed. You're lucky your mother was a full citizen back three

generations, or you'd have all been expelled and not allowed a return access card."

I said nothing. I held my father's picture in my memory, the truth of him. Standing on the wall, smiling. Why would he come where he wasn't wanted? The same reason as me perhaps.

*

"Why did she go down the hole?" Sophie asked. Her eyes closed and she lay her head on the pillow. She'd be asleep in a moment.

"Because she had to," I said. "It was an adventure." I pulled the blanket higher and tucked it under her chin. The sparse bedroom, with its exposed slats and the framed picture of a unicorn, had grown cold. I shut the window on the night beyond, the landscape lost in deepening shadows.

*

"Where's your daughter?"

I blinked and realized he'd had to ask me twice. I opened my mouth, but there were no words. I shook my head, unable to force the admittance through my clenched jaw. Sophie. My bunny. *My brother is ill, my brother is ill, my brother is ill.*

He watched me until the terminal beeped, then glanced at the screen. "She's dead? Well, that's what happens when you go live someplace with poor health services, lady. You probably deserved it." His voice held no malice. He stated facts, the truth of his lie. Never mind the knife twisting my heart that I could not save her. That all I had left was this trip.

He stamped my paper and waved me to go through the door. "Step off." He turned to the next person in line. That was my dismissal.

I followed the others to where guards waited. My fear surged, but the place stank of fear, so no one noticed. There were a dozen other crossers, and each had the same wide-eyed look, the same bloodless faces, like they were all one with the same parents. They took our packs, our bundles of old clothing, whatever we'd been carrying. They stripped us to our skin, pushed us into a single room together.

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I thought of the distant past as we curled our bodies up, alone in our togetherness, each trying to hide their naked shame. I thought of nudity forced on supplicants by a country eager to purge its people of prurient thinking. I thought of showers, and gas chambers, and dead bodies, until the water ran.

*

Sophie in the tub, playing with a rubber duckie. "Do rabbits swim, mommy?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, bunny. Do you think they swim?"

She thought about it as she pulled the duck under the water, released it, giggling when it popped back to the surface. "They must swim," she said at last. "How else can they escape?"

*

The other travelers shivered as they wrapped their arms around their nakedness. I watched them, blinking back the water. Then I stood and let it wash over me, taking away the dust and filth. I spread my arms and tilted my head back, my eyes closed, and let the water cleanse me.

The guards looked at me with strange expressions when we walked from the showers. They'd seen my display and it marked me in some way that upset them. I covered my breasts with one arm, put my hand over my crotch, trying to match the other emigrants' frightened modesty. My moment of rebellion gone, shattered like a looking glass smashed against an unyielding surface. I should not have let myself stand out.

They took us to separate small rooms with no doors. No windows either. One shelf attached to the wall held folded clothing. Not my clothing. "Where are my things?" I asked the faces peering through the opening at my body.

"We'll dispose of your clothing," one guard said, unemotional. "It stank like you'd never showered. Koshians are disgusting. You can pick up the rest of your items at the exit."

I said nothing. My heart thrummed with desperation as I dressed in the outfit they'd provided. A heavy, gray, ankle-length skirt. Undershirt, long-

sleeved blouse to go over it, buttoned to the neck. A white skull cap. I had trouble pulling it down over my thick curls.

"Wait a minute," another guard said. He stalked into my room as the first guard watched. Both men were young, scowling at me for slights I'd never committed. He took my chin, turning my head back and forth. "Your hair is too long," he said, and took electric shears from a clip on his belt. They scratched along my scalp, the tickle of tight, black curls brushing against my neck as they fell. He twisted my head back and forth until he finished.

*

Sophie's hair ran long down her back, thick like mine, but straight. "Will it hurt?" she asked, watching the shears.

I placed it in her little fingers and curled them around the cold metal. "No, of course not, bunny. Your hair is just hair; it doesn't feel pain like your skin does."

"Rabbits don't feel pain," she said, sticking out her chin. She held the stuffed bunny close to her chest. "You can cut it."

*

"There, now you're a citizen again," the guard said. "You should consider a skin bleach to improve your color. You're too dark. Come with us."

I followed them into the hall, where the others waited. The women dressed as me, the men wearing dungarees and checkered shirts. I bit back questions about my bedroll, the rod. The guards would wonder, and they would grow suspicious. Sweat trickled down my sides, but I said nothing. *I'm going to be with my brother. He's been ill.*

The guard who had cut my hair took me by the shoulder and elbow. My mind wandered, worried about my things. They'd probably scanned the rod. Found it a solid metal bar, no more extraordinary than that. But what if they kept it? What if they'd found something more? What if they knew? I forced my thoughts to repeat my truths.

Lying in bed next to Gabriel, naked, warm, arms wrapped around me. The tickle of lips pressed to my forehead. "Repeat," he said, brushing away

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my tears. "You must repeat. If you are going to go, I want to make sure you get there."

"I am going to see my brother who is ill. He's all I have left of my family."

Another kiss. "Repeat."

"Why?" I didn't want to play this game anymore. I wanted to remember Sophie. I wanted to cry. I wanted to tuck her in and read a story, her favorite story. The book waited for me on the nightstand.

He kissed me. "Because if I cannot have you here, I need to know you live." He stopped talking, gave a watery smile. "Your brother needs you. All the other Sophie's need you. Now, repeat." *I need you, too*, his eyes said. He told his lie instead.

"I am going down the rabbit hole. I am going to see the red queen."

The guard handed me my water bottle and the bedroll. I had to choke back my sob of relief as I tucked it under my arm. He opened a door and pushed me through it. I blinked, blinded by light, staggering as the door thumped closed behind me, the ringing sound of metal slamming metal. I reached forward and took a step, felt a metal bar against my hands, and clung to it until I could see it was a railing.

I squinted until my eyes adjusted, took a long, shuddering breath. I stood on a platform, fifty feet above the ground, a steep stairway leading down to a gravel lot. A road passed close by, and a short way north rose the tiny town of Soone. I came through the hole to the here and now. I'd lost Gabriel. Lost Sophie. The emptiness overwhelmed me, and I stood, unmoving.

*

Sophie held the metal bar and turned it over. "It's so heavy," she said.

"It tells a whole story," I said, taking it from her. "Many stories."

She squinted at me. "How does it tell a story?"

"Through potions and magic," I said, smiling. "Drink me." I tickled her, marveling at the beauty of a young girl's laughter, the way she squirmed on the tatty sofa.

*

I forced myself down the steps, holding the rail tightly. Trash lay strewn around the wall's base, pieces of food wrappers and cans, plastic bags, blown there by the wind. I felt alone beneath the gray dividing line.

I sobbed and wrapped my fingers together, a moment to pray. To give thanks. I crossed the hard, baked ground to the asphalt roadway and walked towards Soone.

"I am going to see my brother who's been ill."

*

"They won't let you go back," Jackson said. "They never let people leave any more."

He'd picked me up before I made it to the first home on the south side of Soone. He drove a thirty-year-old floater with no air conditioning, so we kept the windows down as we drove south. I held the bonnet in my lap, letting the moving air caress my scalp beneath the stubble of my curls.

"Why did you decide to do this?" he asked. "I didn't think you'd want to leave Sophie."

I'd been expecting the question. I thought about it for a while. The Unifiers had come to me after Jackson's message passed through channels and they'd offered me a chance to help them as a smuggler. But that wasn't the reason. Try as I would the truth wouldn't come. The words on my tongue were the lies I'd been speaking for the last six months. I'd open my mouth and they would come forth, marching from my lips like the dead rising from a grave.

Sophie was dead. I'd never see Gabriel again. My brother is ill.

"You look well enough," I said instead.

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"I'm getting better. Lots of people contracted the Haemorrhagia and died. But I'm a doctor, so they took good care of me."

I nodded. "I'm glad."

He hadn't got my messages, or he would have known. The Koshians relayed messages about his illness, but my own colony hadn't told him his niece had died. *They are word eaters*, the border official had said. I decided not to burden him.

He took me to a lab, hidden in the mountains near Skall. The road passed through town, and turned up Dead Mule valley. I laughed to keep from crying, and when he looked at me, I said, "The journey through the looking glass begins and ends with a dead mule."

"What?"

I shook my head. "Not important."

They'd hidden the lab beneath a cabin up a steep dirt track that wound its way through a narrow canyon. He parked the floater behind the building and led me inside an empty room, through the trapdoor in the floor. Below they'd built sterile corridors and fluorescent lights, technicians prepping machines. A lump clutched at my throat. It reminded me of the wall. My skin crawled with goosebumps.

He glanced at me as we waited, then took my hand. "Jen, you won't ever see her again."

I squeezed my brother's hand and tried to smile. "She's better where she is." I couldn't tell him what had happened. Those words—*Sophie is dead*—was a truth I carried for myself. It was the only truth I had left.

"What about Gabriel?"

I didn't answer. "Are they ready?" I asked. *He will be by her side, and will read to her every night before bedtime as she clutches her stuffed rabbit to her chest.*

He looked through a window into the sterile room beyond, white walls and stainless-steel equipment, and nodded. "They've got the measurements from the bar and have entered them into the system."

The rod floated in a chamber, held at each end by slender fingers made of diamonds, their points finer than a human hair. The same type of fingers that had held it when the mark had been etched into its surface. The technician checked the temperature, humidity, the magnetic field intensity, the laser measuring system's position, the mass. He compared values with the numbers on the metal bar, etched into its molecules.

"We're ready," he said, and pressed his tablet.

The lights dimmed, and the laser pulsed. "Tenth significant," the tech said. "Rising. The encryption mark is at zero point five plus."

The decimal point ran out like an endless train, unspooling as the laser measured the exact percentage of the rod to the right of the hairline mark. One hundred thousand places, a million, four million.

"Translation?" Jackson asked, turning to look at a screen on the wall beside the window, his muscles tensed.

"Coming in now," the technician said. "Computer confirms recovery."

Jackson relaxed, and he breathed a long sigh. "We'll get the pub system warmed up. Once we've cleaned up the texts, we'll get them ready for distribution. Digital readers, PQ files, comp audio, subdermal implant chips. Even print copies."

Every three decimal points a character, upper case or lower case, a punctuation mark, a line return. Millions of decimals points became words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters. The first lines displayed for us to read. I hardly noticed the tears that ran down my cheeks as I held Jackson's arm.

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank. . .

✧

"I miss you, mommy," Sophie said, as I tucked her frail body beneath the sheets.

I smiled and turned to the last page and read.

The Truth of a Lie by Jeff Reynolds



Jeff is a writer from Maryland who works for Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Lab, home of New Horizons and Parker Solar Probe. He's only a software licensing analyst, though, and doesn't do any of the fun stuff like building space probes or meeting Brian May. His work has previously appeared in Escape Pod, Daily Science Fiction, and Andromeda Spaceways Magazine. You can find him on twitter @trollbreath42.

Cursebody

by May Chong

(CW: body horror)

In some warm place, a heart
is fated to become kingfisher
and bones, pillars under sky.
Body a rich harvest
for future sons to reap.
Gleaming rivers woven from blood,
a left eye sun, a right eye moon.
Even a monster's death
heralds winged wonders. But
look what I am made of, look
what they made me.
I will not stoop to pretend
I was ever useful.

Go, bury my unlovely face

Cursebody by May Chong

away from the sun. I am already
tangled with the dark earth,
bare fingers bursting
with sleek maggots. The gleaming viper
emerges from my eyes, unblinking
as the sword. See my tongue
uncouple from its roots and squirm
into hagfish, lamprey, lightning-gutted
ribbon worm. Limbs honeycomb
with gleaming king cobra eyes,
all the better to devour
other snakes. Ears shatter
with the weight of all words
into rag-toothed barnacles.

From my collarbones swarm the shrew
and weasel, shrill and ravenous.
My mouth breeds fire coral,
blood-breaker with roots.
My femurs become unyielding
belian trees, my dirty toes
datura blooms. Backbones blossom
into ipoh and manchineel.

See, my nails
are touch-me-not cone snails,
and centipedes uncoil from my teeth.
Guts split and spray flies, a cloud
of rove beetles with blistering rage
in every drop of ichor. If you dare
now, come crush me.

Every fallen eyelash erupts
into a shriek, every drop
of sweat a jade stinkbug.
Each artery a flatworm, each vein
a hawkmoth, built to part the bloom.
Every wild hair a bristling koel, too
brown and female for soothing
serenades (to who?)
like I: glass screaming
in a feather coat.

And my voice, the thing
you wished dearly to die,
will ring in songs

Cursebody by May Chong

of summer cicadas.

Remember what you did. I will

laugh last and loudest in the air,

the water, the soil that yields

only to me.

This cursebody belongs

to nobody. It leaves the world

all things awkward and eerie,

fear given legs and bellies.

Owed to none, friend to those

who have looked into

the stadiums of monster teeth

and wanted fangs to bare in turn,

even once.



May Chong is a Malaysian poet, speculative writer and 2019 Rhysling Award nominee (for her poem in Apparition Lit #1, Esprit d'escalier). Her verse has previously been featured in various regional and international venues including Strange Horizons, Anathema Magazine, Eye to the Telescope, Sine Theta Magazine and Longleaf Review. When she's not at the keyboard, you'll generally find May behind the mic doing spoken word, or outdoors looking for neat birds/bugs/Pokemon. She tweets at @maysays.

Once Upon a Night

by Sam Muller

The bonsai, a miniature banyan, is a little out of line. I move it an inch to the right, equidistant between the pen holder and the soapstone owl.

Perfect.

The desk is tidy. The shredder has done its work. Notebook and phone are slumbering with fishes.

They will go through the house with their unique brand of thoroughness. They may leave no sign of their violation; or they may leave a maze of a mess behind, stage-setting the post-mortem—an armed robbery gone wrong.

My throat feels as if I've swallowed a bagful of sand. I head to the kitchen for some water. Just a sip; I can't afford a full bladder.

The sound of a vehicle rips the night's silence. I wait for it to stop, disgorge. It races past. Silence shrouds the night again.

Why did I go to the park? Would I be working on a mathematical dilemma now or reading a book or sleeping, had I not taken fate's fork to that wasteland of trees?

I drink the water, one sip at a time. No, the park wasn't the turning point; it was a landmark on the road.

*

Invisibility—attribute of gods, desirable to man—held no fascination for me. What intrigued me was its antithesis, a visibility so potent that nothing could conceal it.

Once Upon a Night by Sam Muller

I mused about it in the university journal, a light-hearted commentary on the possibility of creating a material that would defeat every attempt at concealment. A material visible through any covering, natural or manmade. I called it *The Über-visibility possibility*.

Two weeks later, Colonel M, the governor of the province in which the university town was located, called on me.

He came unannounced, except for a perfunctory knock on my door. I was working on a research document and looked up expecting to see a colleague or a student.

When the tall uniformed figure strode in, clicked his heels, and closed the door behind him, I understood the meaning of that standard cliché: *my heart fell to the floor*.

The colonel smiled. There was nothing gloating in that smile. It was a normal smile, as though he was so used to my kind of reaction from everyone whose privacy he invaded, he had ceased to see anything abnormal in it.

He wished me a good morning and handed me a sealed envelope. He pulled a chair and sat down, telling me I should read the letter now.

I tried to pick up the letter opener and realized the meaning of another cliché: *my fingers were all thumbs*.

Five thumbs mangle-opened the envelope, revealing a single sheet of paper: a paragraph, a sentence, an invitation: the president will see me at 5pm today.

Today: October 26th—I knew what the day was supposed to hold, a lecture at 11am, a lunch appointment at 12.30pm, a tutorial at 3pm, a lecture at 4pm.

Life's ordinary doings must vacate the stage when confronted with the extraordinary.

The Colonel stood up, clicked his heels again, walked to the door, and held it open.

"The helicopter is waiting," he said.

*

Throughout the ride, and the long wait for the appointed hour, I wished I had brought some music or a book, wished I could get a canapé or a cake past my dry throat, wished I could stop drinking glass after glass of iced water.

Most of all, I wished I could stop remembering the grainy photos of the man and the woman who had been my colleagues, who vanished one ordinary day, reappeared months later in a conspiracy trial, and vanished again into whatever black hole those guilty of unspeakable crimes end up. I clung to the knowledge that when a petition asking for clemency for my former colleagues landed on my desk, I sent it away unsigned.

The water was weighing on my bladder. I hurried to the visitors' washroom. Behind its closed door I felt safe. Then I thought of hidden cameras, of someone somewhere watching my desperate struggle against a recalcitrant button, and had to clap my hand over my mouth until the bile returned to where it came from.

*

The beetle browed, bespectacled and mustached visage was familiar. I saw it almost every day, everywhere, papers, television, posters, internet, books...

But seeing it in flesh and blood was another experience.

My first thought was that he was old. In the pictures, the salt and pepper hair makes him look distinguished, ageless. Face to face, you see what pictures hide, a hint of a wrinkle, folded flesh rising above the shirt collar. And behind the ever-present tinted glasses the shadow of a squint.

The President smiled, making an expansive movement with a muscular hand, indicating the three chairs facing him across a table that was full of papers, yet orderly.

He expressed the hope that I was well looked after by his people.

My yes didn't sound like a yes even to my own ears.

He leaned back against his chair. "I read your recent article."

Once Upon a Night by Sam Muller

That was when I noticed the magazine on the table, open at my piece.

My thank you sounded quite like a thank you.

"Interesting piece."

"A fantasy, Sir," I said.

"When I was a boy, many of the things we take for granted now would have seemed like fantasy." He chuckled, a strangely high-pitched sound.

"Professor, my life's work is to forge a new future for our beloved motherland. In that task, I need both practical men and men of vision. I have enough of the former but not enough of the latter. That was why I was delighted by your piece."

I stared, trying to make sense of the words, failing, floundering, lost.

The President nodded. "We are busy men, Professor, in our different ways. Let me come to the point. I think extra-visibility is a great idea. I want you to set up a committee of experts to study how this visionary concept can be turned into a useful reality. And I want you to head this committee. Money is no problem; neither are non-monetary resources. My secretary has already talked to the university. You will be given indefinite leave, fully paid of course. And for this project, you can name your own salary."

Is this what drowning feels like? I wondered, this sense of being submerged by a force of nature, helpless, hopeless.

"Let me reassure you, Professor, that I don't believe in politicians trying to control experts. In the pursuit of this project, you will have all the freedom you need. I have only two conditions: speed is of essence and so is secrecy." He pushed his chair back soundlessly, got up and held out his hand. "I wish you all the luck."

I stood up, my chair creaking even against the thick carpet, clutched at the table edge with my left hand, and held out my right.

*

The blue sea runs until it meets the blue sky.

I wanted to say the words out loud. I didn't, because they sounded trite, and I wasn't alone.

"The sharks come almost up to the beach," the President said. He sat straight in the rattan chair, an incongruous figure in track bottoms and t-shirt.

I nodded. Over the last three years, I had become an expert in the art of conversing with the President. He often made remarks for which he didn't expect an answer. He never did that in his office. But here, at his retreat, a headland shielded from curious eyes by the ocean, a river, a lagoon, and a carefully tended wood, he allowed his iron control to relax, to be himself.

"Some more tea, Professor?" The President never used my name. He never used the full names of any of us working on Project Ü. It was always Professor this or Doctor that. His tongue would linger on those academic handles, as if they were the icing on a cake.

I accepted the tea, even though I didn't want it. That was another unwritten rule, when the President offered you tea or sandwiches (watercress or mango-pickle), never refuse.

The President refilled my cup and watched as I struggled with the tongs, almost dropping the cube of brown sugar on the pristine white tablecloth.. "Anything on your mind, Professor? Nothing wrong with the project I hope?"

My fingers gripped the bone china handle. "No, no."

"The first test will happen as planned?"

"Yes, Sir."

He leaned forward, friendly, confidential. "A personal matter then? You need something? Money perhaps?"

The words rushed out. "It's about Dr. K's pension."

The narrow forehead creased. Beneath the bristly moustache, the thin lips morphed into a straight line. "I hear his wife is becoming a problem."

Once Upon a Night by Sam Muller

"His widow, Sir," I said, replacing the still full cup carefully on the saucer.

"An unfortunate accident. He was rather inebriated at the time, I hear." The President chuckled. "Drunk as a skunk was what the police chief said."

Forty one days ago, the wife-turned-widow sat by the coffin, straight and tearless, telling each visitor, "He never drank." A mantra, a challenge.

I tested each word before allowing my tongue to say them out loud. "His death was a shock to her. Sir. She's not in her right mind. You know what a bereaved woman is like."

The stare continued, like the sea, until it reached whatever place it was going. "I know what women are like, my dear Professor. That was why I didn't want any involved in this project." He shifted the heavy gold wristwatch up and down. "She was a radical during the university years."

"Everyone's a radical in university, Sir."

The colorless eyes swooped on me. "Were you, Professor?"

"No, no. I had no time for politics. I..."

He smiled. "Exactly. I chose to trust you with this project not only because it was your idea, and you had all the necessary qualifications. Expertise is important. But loyalty is the only indispensable quality. I don't mean that you have to sing my praises. All I ask is that you don't oppose me. Do you understand the difference?"

I gulped and nodded.

"I fear this lady was exerting pressure on her husband. Wasn't he asking too many questions in the last several months? Didn't he visit you at home to ask you how the extra-visible paint will be used? Didn't you tell him that was a question for politicians and not scientists?"

There was a vein of fire in my throat.

"My advisors told me that he should be eased out of the project. I was reluctant. He was a brilliant physicist. His only fault was not picking his wife carefully." He stood up. "Death erases life, so it should erase life's mistakes as well. I will advise my secretary to attend to the matter of the pension. I hope

the lady will forget her delusions and devote the rest of her life to her fatherless children. I have some work to attend to, but please Professor, do sit and enjoy the view."

I didn't sit again. Once he was gone, I walked up to the shade of an ailanthus and stared at the sea, no longer calm, a little restless.

"Are you waiting for the sharks, Professor?"

Colonel M loved cats and walked as silently as one, boots notwithstanding. He was the liaison between the president and the committee, the link between the experts and the paymaster.

I half-turned, the sea still in my eyes. "Why would sharks come here?"

"For the same reason birds come to a bird feeder." He laid a hand on my shoulder, light, friendly, and something else. "You won't see them now. They come only at night."

I frowned. "Do sharks feed only at night?"

He shrugged. "The helicopters come only at night."

*

The first test was an eighty percent success. Success seemed within reach. A second test was scheduled for later in the month.

The accident happened in between. It made headlines, the tragic death of the widow of the noted physicist (who died four months ago in another accident) and her two children.

The funeral was a scant affair. The family, her parents and his brother, looked as if they too had been hit by a mega cement mixer. The mourners stood in ones and twos, avoiding each other's eyes. Not a word was said, only an occasional sob. No viewing, because there was nothing left to view. A brief religious service then straight into the merciful fire.

I stared at the four men carrying a coffin that just one of them could have lifted.

Three plus one is four.

Once Upon a Night by Sam Muller

The attendants closed the door of the crematorium. The handful of mourners scattered like leaves caught in a vicious wind.

I clutched my umbrella and joined the hurrying herd. It wasn't raining, but the sky was gray, funereal.

A sandwich bar drew me in because it had artificial light and people safe in their own ordinary worlds. I bought a cheese sandwich, but my gravelly throat turned eating into a kind of torture.

Torture.

Three plus one is four.

Did someone mutter that accidents were kinder? Who? Where?

Was it me?

The waitress eyed me warily. I wrapped the uneaten sandwich in a paper serviette and went out, allowing my feet to take me wherever they wanted.

They took me to the park.

The park had been abandoned some years ago, because the municipal council lacked the funds for its upkeep. It was now a square of wilderness at the edge of this university town, all symmetry obliterated by a profusion of branches, leaves and vines.

Did she ever come here recently?

She would have loved this wilderness.

Three plus one is four.

Forgetting, that was the true cue to happiness.

I pushed my way in, found a reasonably intact seat, and sat down, dumping the umbrella and the cheese sandwich beside me.

Did we sit on this very seat?

Forget.

Three plus one is four. Or is it zero? All gone, vanished, empty?

A rustle made me turn, to see a bushy tail vanishing into the undergrowth.

A dog or a fox.

There is no life without forgetting. Only death. A cement mixer, for example.

Four plus one would be five. No, four plus one would be zero. Why see, when blindness is beguilingly safe?

I forced myself to get up. I'd go after the dog or fox. Walk about in this wild place until I was calm. Then go back home. Forget the past. Live in the present. It has served me well all my life.

"You care only for figures," she had said in parting, kissing my cheek, and then laughing, "Mathematical ones."

Did the President know? That day, when he mentioned her radical university days, did he know?

What was there to know? A moment of light in an infinity of dullness? A starburst of chaos in an otherwise orderly universe?

The sound brought me back, high-pitched, like the President's chuckle, a bark, not a laugh.

I stopped, realizing the meaning of yet another cliché: *rooted to the ground*.

The fox stood, barring my path, barking. Behind it was a child. A girl, raggedy hair, dirty pinafore, eyes as wild as the park. She clutched at the cheese sandwich with stubby fingers.

Small, like the last of the three coffins.

My feet turned into wings. I fled.

Once Upon a Night by Sam Muller

"What went wrong?" The Colonel's cheeks were flushed, his eyes dilated.

I met his eyes. "That's science; things go wrong all the time."

"The paint was supposed to be indelible. It can be as extra-visible as hell, but if it goes off at one rub, what's the point?"

"Depends on how you mean to use it."

His eyes narrowed. "In whatever way necessary."

"How?"

"Why the sudden interest, Professor? You never wanted to know before, and this is the time not for questions but for answers. If I were you, I'd focus on giving the paint a little more permanence."

"It's not vulgar curiosity. If I know what kind of surface it will be used on, for example paper or human skin or- Oh!"

The Colonel's fingers closed on my arm, like a vice. He bent his head, until the cinnamon scent of his aftershave clogged my nostrils. "You are not a bad man, Professor. And I like you. So let me give you some advice. Stop asking questions. Stop thinking. Just do the job you were hired to do." He turned on his heels, strode ahead, and stopped saying over his shoulder, "And stay away from funerals."

*

Life went on.

The park was cleared for a multipurpose development project, mall, offices, apartments, restaurants, cinemas. Trees felled and taken away. Homeless trees, homeless fox, homeless girl.

Three plus one is four plus two is six...

How many trees?

Is a continuum countable or uncountable?

*

The third test replicated the results of the second test, with minor variations. The Colonel stared, first at the blank spot, then at his stained finger, stood up, and left.

Everyone else followed.

Two days later, I applied for leave to attend an international conference. My application was refused.

I could have run then. But I had heard enough about the uncertainty and the squalor of fugitive existence to know it was not for me. Our options depend on who we are. I was a mathematician who made an unplanned turn and tumbled into a parallel universe of non-accidental accidents and shark-feeding helicopters.

I continued to work, ignoring the way a room would fall silent when I entered, the eyes that never met mine, the stares that always followed me, so sharp that they felt like arrows on my back.

I worked harder than ever, counting every minute spent on eating, every hour spent on sleeping a waste.

Professor, my life's work is to forge a new future for our beloved motherland, the President had told me the first day we met.

I too had a future to forge, a future not of presence but of absence. After all, what is mathematical life without zero?

When I left the lab last evening, I had no doubt about the fire. I knew it would be more than enough to pay my debt.

I just hoped it would stop there.

*

The doorbell chimes, one polite ring, reassuring in its normalcy. I wonder how many people open their doors, lulled by such rings, only to confront monsters clad in everyday working clothes and expressionless faces.

I walk to the door ignoring the books I will never read. On the wall, the landscape of Van Gogh's final self-obliterating madness watches me.

Once Upon a Night by Sam Muller

I look through the peephole. Two men with forgettable faces stand under the porch light.

Panic hits, a visceral blow. I think about making a dash for it. Only for a second. I am a bad runner. And no one will come to my aid even if I manage to reach the crowded parts of the town. People have become adept at not seeing what they are not supposed to see. And in many a paradise, there is none more invisible to the good subject than the traitor.

I should know, because not so long ago, I too was a good subject.

I open the door wide, for the jasmine-scented night, and for them.

The two men stand where they are. From the outer darkness, a third man steps out. A hand falls on my shoulder, light, friendly, and something else.

"The helicopter is waiting, Professor," says the Colonel.



Sam Muller loves dogs and books, and spends much of her time trying to save one from the other. Her work has appeared in the Truancy Magazine, Deep Magic, and Cosmic Roots and Eldritch Shores among others.

Interview

Artist Interview

with Erika Hollice

Acts of redemption can quell the fires around you or incite them. When we commissioned the artwork back in February, the Australian bushfires were still fresh in our minds. The fires seemed endless; the haze of orange and burnt black wood was apocalyptic.

For our cover, we imagined a woman exiting a portal. The world around her is on fire but she remains collected. Her cool-toned magic protects her, and if she wanted, she could save the entire world. Magic lends itself to grace, so we searched for references of Black ballet dancers for the pose the woman would hold.

Magical places, unique character designs, and battles with larger-than-life stakes immediately grab my attention. And even though the characters are living under supernatural circumstances, their personalities and insecurities and flaws are completely relatable. I've always loved that.

Intrigued by the concept, Erika let us know that painting magical effects and striking poses were well-suited to her talents. One look at Erika's portfolio will confirm this strength three-fold. Erika's art is often jewel-toned with sound colour choices. After a few issues with covers that strayed toward the cool-end of the colour spectrum, we wanted an artist who would add pops of brightness to our standard teal palette.

In Erika's art, worlds come to life with her use of light and shadow. She excels at painting warriors and magicians--powerful characters who aren't afraid to look the viewer in the eye. Daylight and the night's dark are used to equal effect. Learning Erika's background in game design explains her comfort with mise-en-scene and establishing full characters within a piece. Mise-en-scene is the french term for stage setting--the placement of items on a stage to tell

Artist Interview with Erika Hollice

a further story. On the whole, it's comprised of five elements: setting, decor, lighting, depth of space, and costumes and makeup. It takes a skilled artist to render this 3-D format into a 2-D painting.

I spent a lot of time studying a variety of art styles, working with more contrast & color, and developing more flexibility. I wanted to grow my own personal style, without being totally bound to one method or aesthetic. I consider that one of the most important lessons I've learned during college.

Erika's growth as an artist came from her education, where she collaborated with peers and began networking, and also from her hobbies. Erika is one of the hardworking few able to let hobbies influence a career. In 2016, she worked with Jacqueline Miller to produce a Dragon Age fan deck. They combined their talents to create a passion project after graduation.

It was our first time making a physical product from the ground up; all of our work beforehand was strictly digital or virtual. Despite those challenges, it was a fun experience! We were blown away by the positive feedback from fans, and we plan to do another project together in the future.

The next year, Erika was a contributing illustrator with *Arcana Zine* and *Fortitudo*, two curated Dragon Age publications that donated proceeds from their issues to charity. Friendship and collaboration drive Erika's career. Though she enjoys her solo work, collaboration allows Erika to continue leveling up her skills and her career as she pursues more passion projects and large-scale design work.

Working in creative spaces boosted my comfort and confidence on both a professional and personal level. I've become a much better communicator and team player, and I owe a lot of that to my career path and the peers I've worked with over the years.



Interviewed by Rebecca Bennett

Find the full-length interview with Erika Hollice on our website

Essay

You Are The Dreamer and The Dream

by Aurelius Raines II

I fear some speculative fiction writers have lost faith in their work. When history is being written, your work can feel unimportant.

But your work redeems itself.

I have always felt an impulse to justify speculative fiction. Growing up in the 80s and 90s, speculative fiction was not the sexy juggernaut that it is now. We take the way the internet unites us for granted. There was no social media displaying people in cosplay. It was easy to feel isolated.

I had the feeling that my love of speculative fiction was not just a luxurious pastime, but a waste of time. The word “real” got thrown around a lot. As in: *I only read about things that are real, or Your aliens and spaceships have nothing to do with reality.*

So when I talked politics, I never talked spec-fic. I just talked about history, news, and philosophy. The time I spent reading and watching speculative fiction did not seem justifiable. Honestly, I shared the sentiments of spec-fic's detractors: Speculative fiction was not to be taken seriously.

This is why I always found myself a bit ashamed of what I read and wrote. I didn't share my stories as freely as I share them now. I did not want to be seen as silly or childish.

But then, I saw Benny Russell in the middle of the office at *Incredible Tales*. He was on the cusp of a breakdown.

You Are The Dreamer and The Dream by Aurelius Raines II

"You can pulp a story, but you cannot destroy an idea! Don't you understand, that's ancient knowledge. You cannot destroy an idea! That future, I created it, and it's real! Don't you understand? It is REAL! I created it and IT'S REAL!"
"Far Beyond The Stars." Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, season 6, episode 13, Paramount, 11Feb. 1998.

Benny had a vision of a future where a Black man, just like him, is the Captain of a space station called *Deep Space Nine*. The publisher tells him that his story will not run because no one will believe in a Black captain.

In the pilot for the original *Star Trek* series, Gene Roddenberry was told that his first officer could not be a woman. No one would believe that a woman would be left in charge of a ship. Thirty years later, Eileen Collins commanded NASA's Columbia space shuttle.

Writers of speculative fiction have always imagined better worlds. Even when they had to challenge their own ideas about what could be. Asimov's Susan Calvin was not only a sought-after robopsychologist but the leading authority in her field. Her character was introduced in 1940 when women were not even hired to work factory jobs, and their college degrees were seen, primarily, as ornamental.

This is where speculative fiction redeems itself. It imagines, plays, and alters the reality in which we live.

In these times, this type of dreaming is necessary work.

We need to recognize the reality that we live in is composed of dreams. We should spend time composing the biography of that future. Trust. It helps with the hopelessness.

In the last year, I have become convinced that the police force, as we know it, is an artifact of a past devoted to protecting the rich and the oppression of all others. I think we should abolish the police force. My son was the first to talk to me about abolition, and like so many others, I dismissed it as extreme and irresponsible. The murder of LaQuan McDonald changed my mind.

After spending a lot of time in arguments and exhibiting facts and plans, I came to a realization. Part of the reason that we have such a hard time envisioning a world without police officers is that the police force has been part of the story about civilization. Police officers are often the heroes of those stories. They exist in the near and far future. *Caves of Steel*, *Minority*

Report, or *Almost Human* are all stories about the future where the Police are here to save us. The policing is very familiar to what we have today. The best cops are the ones that circumvent the rules and do what they have to do to catch the bad guy. Even our superhero stories are built upon the assumption that the police force is not as effective as it could be because they do not “punch hard enough.” Crooked cops are the exception and sometimes the best cops. The story is being written this way when the reality, for so many people around the world, is that the police force is the foot on the neck of the oppressed.

But what if we told a different story about law enforcement?

It is easy.

We imagined rockets to the moon. And we made it to the moon. We wrote stories about automatic cars. Now cars can drive themselves. Artificial Intelligence, cell phones, smart watches, video calls, flying suits, and airplanes were all made from the ether of imagination and sparked a reality. Why not peace officers?

Recently, I started to write a story about a crime. The hero of my story is a cop. They are not a conventional cop. This protagonist is my vision of what a functional and helpful peace officer looks like. I got rid of all the cliches we rely on when we think about these stories. I am reimagining the weapons, transportation, structure, and even the uniform the officer wears. This will be a tense story. There will be serious danger. The peace officer will triumph. The community will be protected. I am dreaming reality.

This is why speculative fiction is not a waste of time. Speculative fiction is a prime forum for reimagining our future. Science fiction can make the world we want to live in. All we have to do is imagine it, write it, get people to read our ideas.

After his breakdown, Benny is being taken away in an ambulance. There is a preacher in the back of the ambulance with him. Looking at Benny as if he were a treasure, he says,

“You are the dreamer and the dream.”

So are we.

You Are The Dreamer and The Dream by Aurelius Raines II

As I sit in front of my computer, a fully literate descendant of enslaved Africans, an educated Black man who has made his dreams his work, a man who has the privilege of time to write these words down, I realize that I am my ancestors' wildest dream. And yet, none of this is enough. I am aware that I am still not free. I see that others are not free. There are still realities to be synthesized.

So I sit, and I begin the way all revolutions have begun.

I am the dreamer. I write the future.



Aurelius Raines II writes and lives in Chicago with his wife, Pam, and his two sons. He likes to write about things that aren't happening, in hopes that they will... or won't. His short stories and essays have been included in the anthologies *Dead Inside: Poetry and Essays about Zombies*, *Black Power: A Superhero Anthology* as well as *Apparition Literary Magazine*, *Fiyah Magazine* and *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler*, which was the winner of the Locus Award in Non-Fiction. In his spare time, he teaches Physics to high-schoolers by showing them how to use science to survive the end of civilization.

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