

APPARITION

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ISSUE 17:
CHARM

TERESA MILBRODT
GRETCHEN TESSMER
NAETHAN PAIS
NELLY GERALDINE GARCÍA-ROSAS
CRYSTAL SIDELL
JAIME MARVIN
GUEST EDITOR - LAUREN RING

COVER ARTWORK
ERIKA MOLLIĆE

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Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas, Jaime Marvin, Teresa Milbrodt, Naethan Pais, Crystal Sidell, and Gretchen Tessmer

Guest Editor: Lauren Ring

Cover Art by Erika Hollice

Edited by

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Thank You to Our Sponsors and Patrons

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A Word from our Editor

Lauren Ring

When I was a child, I had a little charm bracelet. It was made of smooth nickel hearts, which I never swapped out for other charms, and had a sort of flip-over clasp whose mechanism I could never describe but was endlessly fascinated with. I would clasp it and unclasp it, over and over again, craving the silent satisfaction of the latch catching just so. The metal wore down under my touch. The charms lost their luster. My wrist grew as I did and the bracelet itself was eventually misplaced, but even now, my fingertips can feel the sense memory of that tiny click as everything fell into place.

Imagine, if you will, this issue of Apparition Lit as a charm bracelet that the editorial team has strung together. We have chosen for you:

- a gold-plated clock hand for “Tea and Owls,” in which all the charms in the world cannot stop the inevitable.
- a clay figurine with a smudged-off face for “Creek Bed Charms” and its reminder of impermanence.
- an iridescent raindrop for “She Calls,” where we follow the twin currents of memory and desire.

- a shard of glass, dulled with age, for “The Goblins of South India” and its many cycles of cures and suffering.
- a wind chime’s brass sail for “Charm of Goldfinches,” where each piece, each bird, painstakingly forms a whole.
- a miniature snow globe for “Silver Bells,” because a bell would just be too easy, wouldn’t it? Kathy would have picked a bell. God, she’s so insufferable.

Each author and each poet has brought their unique perspective on the theme of charm, but there is a thread of fate that winds through each piece, a sense of forces beyond the protagonist’s control. Sometimes that force is as grand as a dimensional rift, and sometimes it is as mundane as another person whose path has diverged. In the face of this push and pull of fate, this relentless destiny, the protagonists all respond... in entirely different ways.

As this issue’s guest editor, I am honored to clasp this issue closed and send it out to all of you lovely readers. I hope you are charmed, I hope you feel seen, and I hope you enjoy.

click!



Lauren Ring (she/her) is a perpetually tired Jewish lesbian who writes about possible futures, for better or for worse. Her short fiction can be found in venues

such as F&SF, Nature, and Lightspeed. When she isn't writing speculative fiction, she is most likely working on a digital painting or attending to the many needs of her cat, Moomin.

Tea and Owls

by Teresa Milbrodt

Itold you it started with the nub on my right hand that became my sixth finger. I'd wanted to be a baker like my aunt before she passed on but that nub got longer, sprouted two joints and a fingernail, and everything went to shit after that. I'd been an apprentice for some months at the bakery where my aunt had worked, but when the sixth finger came along folks said, "You're the new cure woman. We need one since Essie is getting old."

It was better for people to assume benefits to the sixth finger—in some places they would run you out of town as a witch if you were lucky and ready the pyre if you weren't—but fortunate or not, I went to pieces. Back then I couldn't have told you mint from pennyroyal. Pathetic. I enjoyed the heat from bakery ovens and the sprinkle of flour on my apron, but I couldn't stand the smoky wood-burning stove that my aunt and I used to boil water for tea in our cottage. I hated the grit that found its way under my fingernails when she dragged me out to forage for this or that herb. The knowledge my aunt tried to pass on had sifted out of my head, but I hadn't stopped to think whether she might have been directing me away from a baker's path. I was keen on

my own intentions even after that sixth finger, but folks in town had other ideas.

Essie lived down the road, had been a schoolmate of my aunt's, and was kind enough to share her books and notes with young and impatient me. I flipped through quick-like, thinking if I did a bad job they'd let me back into the bakery. But when my little girl cousin came to me with a stomachache, I knew to get rosemary and lavender.

After she drank the tea and bounced home feeling better, I cursed myself for this wretched way of knowing. Not long after, Essie stopped by for tea and a chat as she'd done when my aunt was alive, and gave me an extra mortar and pestle. The bowl was black, smooth as onyx, and smelled of rosemary, but I could only grimace and ponder how much I missed the polished wood bowls and rolling pins of my beloved bakery. The mortar and pestle were far smaller, but triple the weight. Essie wasn't the sort to lecture, so she nodded at my dour expression, patted my hand with her own six digits, and left me to pout.

I ignored the mortar and pestle as long as I could, but the smoky fire of my little stove refused to bake bread and every loaf ended up hard as rock. I gave them to the twittering squirrels outside and tromped through the forest collecting herbs that seemed promising—don't ask how that came to me—but I hung them from rafters to dry and told myself they made the place smell good. I missed the perfume of yeast that wafted through the bakery, though my rolls were better fit to hammer nails than grace a table. When the harpy showed up one day, sitting nice as you please on the fence post and nibbling one of my discarded loaves, I knew for certain my previous dreams were postponed.

“You think you’re so smart,” I muttered to the harpy as she preened her feathers and smirked. I brought out tea for both of us since it was only polite to share with guests. I had to admit the harpy had a delicate way of handling china cups with her claws.

Next thing I knew I was getting visits from the dead almost every evening, their filmy forms sheer as lace. I didn’t mean for those rejected buns in the yard to be a call for communion and conversation—that’s why people took offerings to the graveyard for goodness sake—but apparently the door of a cure woman was open to the dearly departed even when it was closed. You remember Harriet, the lady who worked at the dry goods store, and Lizzie, the former church organist. Nice ladies, just not ones I thought might show up in a haze with bits of unfinished business. I invited them in for tea as well, and I don’t want to say I advised them on haunting methods, but I might have made a few suggestions.

I grew into the profession because I had to, but I never asked for this to happen.



The harpy didn’t try to scare people off, she just sat on the fence post, ruffled her black feathers, and knitted her eyebrows when folks came to call. Her talons were the most fearsome bit about her, dark as worn iron and sharp as a new pitchfork. She didn’t scratch my fence post, but the way light glinted off those claws hinted at the damage they could cause to wood or flesh. I don’t recall Essie having such a creature, but she and the harpy gave each other a nod of recognition on the increasingly rare times she tottered to my cottage.

Only people who were serious about cures would walk past the harpy to my door. I invited them in and put on the kettle—they deserved that much for getting past the harpy—though I couldn't always grant them what they wanted. Sometimes I was a doctor of the body, though there were apothecaries in town who people frequented for headaches and gout. More often folks came to me for delicate things, matters of the head and heart, though everyone knew I didn't play favorites or dabble in love potions. That got complicated, and I couldn't have anyone blaming their ill-fated marriage on me.

The most difficult part was figuring out what people actually needed, which usually wasn't what they asked for. Sometimes it wasn't something they could express in words, like the lady who said she didn't want children, and she wanted to be happy with that choice.

"I'm not sure what would do the trick," she said. "A contentment brew?"

I sipped my tea. It was good to have a cup in hand because it gave me something to do. I'd made potions for folks who wanted a child—again, don't blame me for the results—but this was new. I settled on a charm to help her ignore gossips. Some folks had a gift for sloughing off whispers but that was a rare trait. After I was struck with the role of cure woman, my friends from the bakery became insufferable with their questions about the mechanisms of my job, things I didn't understand myself. I didn't trust what they might be saying about me while tending the ovens, and I envied their ability to leave the daily cares of work beside the sacks of flour. Increasingly I kept to myself, sewing clothes and tending my garden and going on foraging walks, muttering reminders of how I was weary of village life where words were slung like arrows. When I made my

weekly trip to the store, I saved only enough time for a how-dee-do and a peppermint stick while the grocer weighed my coffee and sugar and flour, then I was off again.

I didn't kid myself. Even if plants suggested themselves to me in the forest, I wasn't a natural. I looked for answers in books more than I figured most cure folks did. And sometimes I got questions like yours.



I don't know if you saw the harpy the first time you came to my cottage, because you were so distraught. I offered mint tea then asked your name, knew you needed to calm down before we could try conversation.

"I don't want to turn into an owl at night," you said after the first few sips.

"What's wrong with owls?" I said. Forgive my insensitivity, but I was in a mood and could only think about comparative misery. You had to pick a few mouse bones out of your teeth, but weren't plagued by a dead organist banging on your door at three in the morning, angry that her grandson was going off to war. The dead were the only people who could be reasonable about death. It wasn't that the organist thought death was bad in and of itself, but she didn't want her daughter to grieve needlessly.

Given that lack of sleep, please understand I was a bit cross when you explained how difficult it was for you to catch voles all night then repair watches during the day.

"I nod off at the workbench," you said, brushing hair back from your eyes. "And the job is monotonous. I need to become something else entirely. I don't care what."

“But you must have some preference,” I said. “Being a snail is much different than a tree or beagle or bookkeeper.”

“Just not a watch repair person or an owl,” you said before you started crying into your tea. You weren’t the first person to weep in my cottage, which is why I made extra tea. The mint was soothing, and I added a hint of lavender to clear the mind. As you sipped I couldn’t help but admire your trousers. They appeared loose and comfortable, far better than the skirts I had for hiking through the forest, though your white blouse was already speckled with dirt. After composing yourself you admitted that you were good with your hands and fiddly little gears but you hated being trapped in the shop all day, glasses pushed up your nose and shoulders bent over your worktable. You earned a pretty penny, and your father had been proud, but you were at your wits’ end. I couldn’t tell if your voice was scratchy from crying or disuse, but we both spent time working in solitude and perhaps words felt as strange on your tongue as they did on mine.

When I asked if you could return the next day and continue talking, part of me assumed I’d never see you again. Often people were irritated when I couldn’t produce a cure on command, but you came back again, and again.

“I like the tea,” you said, and I enjoyed our chats. It was one of the few things about my job I relished. We had many entertaining evenings when you told me about your customers, folks who came in with their watches quite dinged up, only they’d never tell you how it happened.

“I’m worried about mothers who are bringing in old watches for me to repair,” you said. You knew they were tokens for sons who’d signed up for the military.

We were agitated over that fuss, but your voice couldn't be heard over uniformed men with gold badges who came to town for recruits, and I could do little to change the mind of anyone who visited my cottage already set in their desires. What mother could stop a young son from seeking glory? They could only hope those heirlooms and charms could be talismans to bring soldiers home.

“My best hope is that a watch could block a bullet,” you said, but no one was safe as long as military folks kept telling young men they wanted to be soldiers. Telling towns that war was the right thing to do. Folks started to believe it after a while. Repetition was its own kind of magic.

If I hadn't enjoyed my job before, I despised it when even more mothers came asking for good-luck charms. Perhaps they felt a timepiece wasn't enough and they wanted some bauble or sachet or other lucky piece in every pocket that wasn't already protruding. Charms were meant to counter the heavier weight of fear, and I should have told them an easy and foolproof solution was to keep the boy home, but those mothers were caught in a tizzy of glory. That, or they went along with the fervor of their sons and husbands because they didn't have a choice, cloaking worry with a thin veil of pride. I fashioned protective pouches to be worn around necks or tied to belt loops or carried beside bags of gunpowder, and handed them to mothers with the warning that a charm was not immunity from bullets. They nodded and didn't believe me.



Even with the tea we shared after the dinner hour, I wasn't supposed to enjoy your company so much. But

you were the only person in town I told that I didn't care for my job.

"Too many folks get annoyed when I say I don't have all the answers," I said.

"You're my best hope at not being an owl," you said. "And the tea makes me feel better."

We read Essie's books for some sort of conjuring trick that might work, but even though I learned new ways to treat gout and melancholy and quell the urge to overindulge in spirits, we couldn't find the right combination of words and potions to stop your nightly transformation.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's not your fault," you said, but your tone suggested you wanted to know whose fault it was.

"Perhaps we can try again tomorrow?" I asked. You nodded at your empty cup.

"I have so many books," I said. "One of them must have the answer."

"One must," you agreed, allowing me to pat your hand across the table. Would you hate me if I said I was secretly pleased, since the delay meant you'd continue to visit?

I spent so much time alone, though the harpy was good company. She seemed interested when I discussed cures, tilting her head thoughtfully and pursing her gray lips. I needed to bandy around ideas with someone after my clients left. Often I was jealous of the harpy, who didn't seem to mind being a harpy and therefore a harbinger of doom. When I remarked on that, the harpy lifted her cup with a delicate iron claw, sipped her tea, and looked at me thoughtfully, as if to ask why

she would ever mind being a harpy. A fair question, but I envied her certainty.



I worried I could only disappoint you, but you wanted to keep paging through Essie's old library. I thought it was three-quarters hogwash, but we had a fine time exploring spells. Maybe it was flirting when you dared me to try a metamorphosis chant.

"I want to see what I could become," you said.

"I can't manage a magpie," I said. "Maybe an apple pie."

You rolled your eyes and turned the page, jostling me with your elbow, but you were smiling. I shouldn't have been so thrilled by those tiny excuses to touch your wrist or knee when we sat side by side. Ours was a laughter that could have turned into crying too easily. Sometimes you were so exhausted when you stopped by.

"My shoulders ache, my head is throbbing, my eyes hurt, I'm going to spend the night chasing voles and I only have the workbench to look forward to tomorrow," you said.

I made tea, aching because I wanted you to be happy. Perhaps ours wasn't a romantic love, but a love between people who felt much the same way, caught between trying to do our best and wanting to escape. I wished I could master those fairy spells that were supposed to make the evening last forever, make the clock turn backward so you didn't have to become your feathered self after the moon rose.

My heart twisted when you started yawning, frowning.

"I suppose I should leave soon," you said.

“Not another cup?” I asked.

“I’m on the clock,” you said with a sad smile. All your smiles were sad. I didn’t know how to be in love with someone who was so despondent.

The world felt cheerless, and the town made us angry with its war and refusal to question. I had just as many people as before coming to my door for cures, but they needed herbs to quell their nerves and upset stomachs. They claimed the bitter powders sold by the remaining apothecary in town did little for their maladies, but in passing they asked me what I saw of their future in the tea leaves.

“I don’t practice that art,” I said, stuffing another packet or pouch into their waiting hands and bidding them good day. Why did I have to provide those charms that soothed the minds of mothers? What good would it do to stop snatches of destruction and save singular souls when my kind of magic couldn’t stop the war itself? That was another reason why I despised my job. I could not uproot the biggest problems, or call Essie’s ghost back long enough to tell me what to do. When I managed to conjure her a few times, she hemmed and hawed.

“Even the best cure person has to make things up as they go along,” she said, twisting her hands in her apron before she told me good night and walked into the hearth.

“You’re doing the best you can,” you said. “What people ask of you.”

I’m sorry I could only offer a paltry token, the amulet to help you say the things your customers wanted to hear: They had brought in a lovely piece of the best quality workmanship, a perfect heirloom to pass to the grandchildren that would keep time for years as long as

it was properly wound. Did you wear the amulet for even half a day before you returned it to me, more disgusted with the job than before? You'd spent the day laboring over another cheap pocketwatch and told a mother that you were sure her son would return from the war in perfect health with medals galore.

"Silence is better than that," you said.

"I did the best I could," I said softly.

"You did." You opened my palm and dropped the charm inside. "Thank you."

I wanted you to be dramatic, kiss me or curse me, something more than close my fingers over the amulet. How long did we stand there until the harpy started muttering? Another person at the door, requesting a love potion that I refused.



"I don't like smiling all the time," you said.

I snorted. "You think I want to make a living off chants and dead frogs?"

You laughed—the first time in a while—and gave me that quick kiss on the cheek. By then you knew I was younger than I looked, that stress had rendered my hair gray before its time, but people only thought that made me look wise.

We weren't doing anything special, just sitting on the bench with one of Essie's books spread across our laps, when I put my arm around your shoulders and you let yourself lean into me. I felt the tremor in your body that I knew was a pair of wings trying to burst free. If only the soldiers could become owls and fly from the battlefield. Some people believed everyone became

owls after they died. I was never certain about such transformations.

I was never certain about magic at all. If you're certain about magic, you have no business practicing it.



I visited your shop once. You were different there. Polite but cool.

“Thank you for stopping in,” you said, glancing at me from the bench. “It’s a busy day.”

“I brought a packet of tea for you,” I said.

“Please put it on the table,” you said, the loupe back in your eye as you bent over tiny gears, the metal guts of your latest patient.

“Of course,” I said. “Good day.”

“Thank you,” you said quietly before I closed the door.

You wore a mask at work. I understood as much as I didn’t like it. I appreciated the way you confided in me when we had tea at my cottage, saw it as an honor, though I suppose you couldn’t tell just anyone that you were an owl. Since your shop and residence were at the edge of town I assume it wasn’t difficult to maintain your secrecy, though I imagine you had to leave the window open in the loft so it was easy to exit and enter. It would have been lovely to see you take flight, launching yourself from the sill into my forest, but I knew too much of your pain to have said such things.

I was upset with myself for thinking about you too much. Wishing for those visits. Did we have much in common other than dissatisfaction with everyone else in town? Was that enough to sustain something meaningful? You can’t put two misfits together and expect things to work. But I tapped my fingers on the

table waiting for you. I knew you'd leave someday, decide you didn't need me, and I wouldn't be able to protest that I needed you for some reason I couldn't name.

Sometimes I thought you could stay with me since the harpy liked you, ruffled her feathers cordially when you came to call and listened almost as intently as I did to your work day tales, but you would have been bored as hell in my cottage. You wanted to be elsewhere, those larger towns and cities where you could lapse into anonymity and another self.

I still don't believe in love potions. Or that any good will come of them.



What would I have meant if I said I loved you?

What would you have meant if you said it back to me?

You listened to my rants in those dark times after the war, when too many people who'd lost sons and brothers came to my door with hankies bunched in their hands, asking me to bring their beloved back from the land of the dead. I had the harpy, after all.

I told you about the anguish painted on their faces when all I could offer was tea.

"They say 'What about my child? My nephew? My grandson?'" I sat beside you on the bench. "What am I supposed to tell them?"

"You give them your condolences," you said. "Like any other person would do."

But I was not any other person, I was the cure woman with the harpy and now I was haunted by the bereaved, those same mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who had plied me for charms before the war. They moved

heavily through the brush around my cottage. I could not see their faces through the veils, but I imagined they looked at my harpy with...longing?

Yet the harpy was a messenger, not a transport service, and I refused to delve into the dark magic that could only get complicated. I made my visits into town more brief than usual, in the early morning when no one else was at the dry goods store. I did not want to see hearses in the streets or have people give me the eye for “refusing” to help.

I could have called them idiots, but they were merely grief-stricken souls who didn't want to believe my powers could be limited. Essie must have known that story. Her recipe for a tea for grieving mothers was stained with water spots. It was a complex brew, so many herbs to memorize, but she must have done it. So did I. She must have seen wars, how their repetition every fifty or sixty years was just enough time to forget horror and focus on glory.

She had a recipe for tea to calm those who worried over loved ones far away. That was one I memorized for my own use, the little good it did after you left. I don't recall what I said, what you said, when you arrived with your box of tools and carpet bag packed for the train, traveling to a city where you claimed to have a cousin though you'd never mentioned family before. I appreciated your ruse, knew you meant it to be a balm for the stinging words. Did you kiss my cheek? I only remember a sensation like burning.

For days after that I stayed up late hoping your owl self would say hello. The scattered ghosts of sons visited instead, ranting around my cottage and trying unsuccessfully to upset shelves of glass jars, then collapsing into a ball of tears on a chair. What to tell them? I could deliver a message to their loved ones. Ask

the harpy not to rip them to shreds when they left. And when they did leave, I dreamed of your new home in the city. I doubt you stopped turning into an owl, but I hoped you found parks with more owls and voles and better chatter than you could find around my cottage. I don't think the problem was finding yourself, but finding yourself in a new space.

Yes, it's been years, but now there are those familiar rumblings of war. Since you left they constructed an armory in town, a fortification to support the peace, but we know how those stories are twisted. I've held my post with the harpy and doled out cures, but yesterday one of the ladies in town, a five-time grandmother who comes to me for poultices that soothe her joints and nerves, asked if I still made protection charms. I said I wasn't sure I remembered how. If I've learned anything it's that ghosts don't leave but continue to pester in small morning hours like the mice that used to haunt you. I can't stay where people might think they need these services. My carpet bag is packed. I'm ready to find you again, in whatever form you may be.



Teresa Milbrodt is the author of three short story collections: *Instances of Head-Switching*, *Bearded Women: Stories*, and *Work Opportunities*. She has also published a novel, *The Patron Saint of Unattractive People*, and a flash fiction collection, *Larissa Takes Flight: Stories*. She is addicted to coffee, long walks with her MP3 player, and writes the occasional haiku. Read more of her work at <http://teresamilbrodt.com/>

charm of goldfinches

by Crystal Sidell

how many sailors lost at sea ever
return? she learns to
live without her love

but the days are dull in
an empty house —
meals for one, no flannel
to mend, silence

except for the Labradors
lapping from
their water bowls.
then, a visitor on

the first day of spring — a
goldfinch perched on
the mailbox, a fresh
stamp of lemon and

onyx too bold to miss:
pencil tail, chest
proud-puffed, trilling sweet
nothings happ'ly on

still air. nectar attracting
nectar. on
the magnolia tree,
vibrant bulbs that

resist dimming even
as the hours wane.
day after day they
return to the yard,

creatures too lovely to
go unseen. three.
seven. thirteen. twenty-
nine. thirty-five.

they multiply until
she loses count.
what do they want?
horizontal, from limb

to limb, and vertical
to the crown, she
traces invisible lines,
heart rabbit-

thump-kicking when she
unlocks the pattern.

is it coincidence? this ornithic

gathering in the shape of a letter?

she grabs a pad and scribbles
“d”— dear? death?

desolate? tries to
imagine what comes
after, when the birds
take wing and scatter.

a new routine roots
itself to twenty-
three Stillwell Lane. each
dawn, she rocks on the

front porch swing and
waits for the chorusing
charm of goldfinches
to alight on the

tree. chirp-hop, untangle
their wings, reveal
curves and lines of the
next symbol. one per

day, one word every few.
she collects them
in a fever, eager to discover

what sentence will form,
what their letters will
read. she sobs when the
message is complete,

when the goldfinches
leave, and the blue jays
return to the magnolia. waxen

melancholia-joy coaxes the chill
from her marrow as the
nights lose their heat.

*don't worry, love. I am
with you always.*
she rolls the inked scrap
of unlined paper

into a glass trinket
silver-chained to
her throat. *with you... always...*
the voiceless breath

threads the gaps in her
days, shortens the once
so-very-long nights. she
will survive, she

decides, she's not alone
— weathered, yes, but
whole. in the autumn
her missing sailor

appears — whole, yes, but
weathered. bandaged head,
a crutch, still-pink scars
on the arms and chest.

how many sailors lost at sea ever
return? it's a veritable
dream come true.

except... hovering at
the blurred edges
of her resurrected
happiness, there's

a blooming wariness:
the worrisome
weight hanging from her
neck; unvoiced questions,

a gaze she feels tracking
every movement
she makes in the house,
in the yard —

whose words...?



A native Floridian, **Crystal Sidell** grew up playing with toads in the rain and indulging in speculative stories. When she's not busy with librarianship or writing, she's usually looking for ways to spoil her pets or stopping traffic to rescue animals. Visiting other corners of the world inspires her greatly, and she hopes to someday visit Bruges and Antarctica. Her work has appeared (or is forthcoming) in *34 Orchard*, *805 Lit*, *diet milk*, *The Dread Machine*, *Frozen Wavelets*, *opia*, and others.

CW/TW: Ableism, suicide

The Goblins of South India

by Naethan Pais

Disclaimer: *This incident was recovered seventeen floods after the massacre of the Dhovona village by The Maharani Aadhila and is recorded here for cautionary purposes only. It is not intended to hurt the sentiments of any civilized goblin-folk, organizations or cults.*

Always consult your local warlock before attempting to capture a goblin. The University of Enchantment will not be held responsible for any side-effects sustained (immortality, dream diffusion etc.) by attempting to medicate through goblin magic.

- 1) You're just a child when you realize teleporting acorns into your hands doesn't mean you can fix everything.

You watch your mothers greet the warlock at the gates of धोवोना Dhovona with a bag of sicklegrass from the first harvest. He rides in on the arms of a redwater ogre, his gold-laced kurta streaming out behind him. Judging from his ashen throat, he was one of the Lujha tribe, and

the broken black medallion across his forehead marked him as a senior sorcerer of the royal troops.

The villagers gossip that The Queen, colloquially referred to as 'महारानी अदलि' or *The Maharani Aadhila*, chooses to keep him on guard by her bedside, for her paranoia makes her believe she will die by a poison that takes her in her dreams.

Your mothers lead the warlock to the hut where they keep your sister. You're almost jealous that Ásta gets to meet him, while you don't.

You choose to ignore your mothers clinging to each other as they wait outside the hut, their heads bowed as they mutter futile prayers. You call one of them *Amma*, and the other *Man'h* though they respond even if you call one the other.

The warlock walks out of your sister's hut after a while— his hands glowing like blown coals – and shakes his head sadly.

Man'h dissolves into Amma's arms and cries into the crook of her elbow. She dropped the basket she held and a dozen unripe mangoes go tumbling down the hill. You'd planned to eat them in the afternoon with lime and chilli powder.

Later that night, Man'h takes you for a walk along the सौम्या Soumanya River. Her golden eyes—a mark bestowed upon her when she began living through her Second Age—shine faintly in the dark.

You're excited when you smell more of the mangoes and chilli in the basket. With a flick of your wrist, you could teleport them into your hands, but all that would earn is a rap on your knuckles.

Man'h takes your hands in hers, and tells you the news. That you're not allowed to see your sister

anymore. She is to remain in the hut on the hill until ten floods have taken Dhovona.

Your mothers would occasionally send Ásta to the hut when she skipped her enchantment classes to play kabbadi with the girls from the Buthur tribe. She must have done something far worse this time.

Man'h hands you a slice of mango and dips the ends into chilli powder. You attack the fruit, and you munch so loud you can barely hear Man'h telling you that Ásta's sick.

A cursed disease which causes her flesh to fester when a person touches her.

Amma will deliver her meals by a pulley system, and she'll eat nothing but *ಗಂಜಿ* congee. You make a mental note to prepare jackfruit pickle when you get home, for you cannot bear the thought of her eating soggy boiled rice for ten arduous floods.

Man'h tells you that tomorrow she's going to sprinkle broken glass around the hut to deter curious villagers who have never seen an active curse.

That's a pity, you think, how am I going to give her the pickle?

- 2) You're nearly a teenager – about seventy-five floods old – when you're convinced you can heal Ásta. Over fifty floods have taken Dhovona since you've last seen her, and yet every time you picture her face, it's always that of a small child. Your mothers had visited her a long time ago, back when she had completed her first stay on the hill.

Within a minute of them setting foot in the hut, a lump the size of a grapefruit had erupted from her throat.

Your mothers came back with nothing but a single hastily scribbled note from your sister. Now, you're in the Dhovona bazaar, hiding behind a wall of crates as you watch the roads. You cut jagged edges into the pebbles and throw them onto the pathway. All you had to do was wait. Last night, you remember hearing Man'h sobbing into Amma's arms as she packed the last remaining plate of congee for Ásta. The grain rations had been plagued by rats, and all the shopkeepers in the bazaar refused to give her rice after learning she was the mother of the cursed girl on the hill.

The rice vendor was a punctual fellow and rode in on his ragi ogre precisely when the banks of the Soumanya began to brim. You would have to wait until the ogre stepped on the pebbles and bucked with pain. Then, you'd have until sundown to pick the rice off the mud.

Ásta didn't mind the odd grain of sand in her congee.

But today, you overheard a soldier from Queen Aadhila's troops while you waited.

He spoke to the Dhovona headman in Konkani, the language that was your mother tongue and yet you never understood. Man'h had tried to teach you by only conversing in Konkani, but gave up after you left your chores undone.

Still, you recognised a single word the soldier said: 'ಭೂತೆ'

An umbrella term that meant 'goblins'.

The headman spoke of the fisherman who had spotted a family of goblins riding the currents of the Soumanya in the carcass of a scythe-dwarf. They were a rare sight this far south, for their magic ran through the sand grains of the desert east.

You were excited.

Dhovona people hold many superstitions about goblins, as people who know little of a topic often do.

A stonemason spoke of his cousin from the east, who would tie a piece of their flesh around his newborn. Though he lived in a jungle thicket, neither beast nor bird ever approached his son. The blacksmith spoke of his aged *dadi* powdering goblin bones and taking it with honey, after which she was left untouched by the Valspar plague that ravaged her entire village. In the houses where goblin claws adorn the doors, the rice basket never diminishes nor does the oil pot run dry.

But here in the South, all goblins are the sole property of Maharani Aadhila. Hunting them is seen as stealing from the Queen's personal stores, and your entire bloodline would be nailed to the walls of the Capital.

Some of the Dhovona people refused to believe the fisherman's tales. Goblins are remarkably similar to the Indian wild *katsina* after all and those pests graze freely around the Soumanya. Others believed him, claiming that they could hear the goblins using the bark of the oaks to moult.

The rice vendor even said he could smell them near his tea estate, a sharp stench of mutilated dogs.

You knew he was lying. You had smelt them too, especially during the muggy nights.

And to you they smelt like banyan trees after the monsoon.

- 3) You're a grown woman who still yearns to play kabaddi with the kids from the other village. The rules have long outgrown you, but you're sure it still involves pummelling your opponent into the mud and keeping them there.

Amma helps Man'h in the fields in your absence, cursing the weeds stalk-by-stalk. You leave your mothers to it, though you know it's an enchantment that preys on youth.

You're far too focused on searching for the goblins.

Tonight is when you decide to sneak out to Ásta's hut. You spent an age hunting around your room for the map you made as a child, when Amma took you up to her place for the first time.

You thought you had etched the route in your mind, but years have made it difficult to remember how many steps it is before you reach the split in the road.

It's the third day of the monsoon when the wind ogres finally convene, and the rain cuts down in unrelenting sheets of white.

The winds sound like an ill-tuned flute when you creep out of the house. Man'h sleeps soundly during the night, for the fields make her elbows ache and sleep is her medicine.

The hut on the hill rattled.

The rain shook off splinters of wood from the roofs, and the winds sang through the holes in her walls. You curb your breathing as you walk up the hill. Ever since the goblins arrived, the scent of the rain has turned putrid.

As you near the hut, you feel a sharp sting of pain shoot up your foot. It reminds you of the time a young buck nipped your toes when you wandered into its graze. You slump down on the grass and study the soles of your feet. A shard of glass pierced the thick underside of your heel.

You'd forgotten about the glass you helped Man'h sprinkle around the hut all those floods ago.

Now that you remember, you can spot random glints of light among the grass, miniscule bits of glass running through the soil. In the moonlight, they look as harmless as dew.

The blood on the shard next to you gleams bright.

You pull tufts of grass to bandage your bleeding foot. And that's when you realize.

You're not bleeding.

You bend down to study the drops on the glass. You suspect it's the blood of some poor creature who stumbled onto the shards as it grazed.

The blood is a sullen black and has a shimmering quality to it. It has a smell that reminds you strongly of petrol.

Goblin blood.

A goblin must have wandered up here, drawn to the Asta's aura, and cut itself on the glass just as you have.

You run over to a little outgrowth of shrubs and hide behind the leaves, looking around in a wild panic. You thought you'd be ready when you finally saw one, but now in the wind and dark and cold you feel a knife of fear slowly piercing your chest. The nightmare always seems tame in daylight.

The smell of goblin blood still hangs near.

You scan your surroundings in breathless horror, and see a small gathering of bones near the shrub. Rotting meat still clings to the bone – probably that of a katsina – and beside them are a deep set of footprints.

Goblins are distinctive among the mythicals for a variety of reasons. If not for the eyes on their hands, or their instinct to feed on dreams, it would be for their

feet. Every inch of it resembles that of a human female, down to the padding and the toes.

The difference, however, is that the goblin's foot is twisted backward.

You can see the footprints snake around the base of the hill, unable to ascend due to the glass.

A goblin of this size would have abilities rivalling that of a senior warlock. A far younger type of magic, a kind that just might cure Ásta.

You pull out a pair of wooden sandals from your jute bag. You called them your '*bhoutappal*' and you spent weeks sculpting them yourself. They had the shape of a goblin's foot carved on the sole, such that the prints they made would be indistinguishable from that of the goblin's. You'd gotten the idea from the women who tended to the sicklegrass fields and were forced to trek through the forest when the dawn was still dark. They wore sandals just like these ones to hide their route from the creatures.

A more civilized type of creature, like those from the areas of Germany, would be able to track human footprints.

But maybe that's what the goblin needed.

A way to reach Ásta.



You remember the path that Man'h took when she went on her annual visit to check on Ásta. She always walked through the forest instead of climbing the front cliff of the hill, and sauntered up to the back of the hut. You suspected she had made a path for herself, one clear of glass.

You remove your protective sandals and begin walking through the forest, tracing the route Man'h used to take. With each step you press your foot deeper into the soil, leaving a clear imprint, making sure any goblin could track it with ease.

With the rain still beating down your back, you begin the trek to your sister's hut.

Maybe you don't need to find the goblins. They'll reach you.

The least you can do is help them out.

4) You're an old woman who still hunts goblins despite the creaks in your knees.

You're at that age where the death of your Man'h has stopped haunting you, the image of her mangled body long reduced to a wispy blur. You don't even remember a mother you called Amma anymore.

You spend your evenings out on the front porch of the hut munching on a stalk of kasandi as you watch the trail of footsteps you left all those years ago. You stopped believing a goblin would actually track you after the first fifteen floods, but still do it because the monotony brings you comfort.

You run your hands idly over the rotting wood of the hut. After Amma left, you decided you would care for Ásta yourself. And you would actually be there, *actually* present with her in her hut. You wouldn't leave her to fend for herself on a lonely hill. In fact, as a young woman you had wanted to rebuild the hut into an actual house, instead of a glorified wooden box.

But now you wonder if you should've done it the way your mothers did. Ásta's curse has only gotten more grave since you moved in with her. You try to limit how often you touch her, but at times when she's too weak

to hold her spoon, you have no choice but to step in and feed her. With every morsel, she screams and howls at your presence, but after a few floods, you've learnt to tune it out.

Now, Ásta's with you on the porch, sagging into her wooden chair. She stares blankly off in the distance, her eyes clouded over with a smoky white film. The disease has managed to eat its way through her body, and her legs are no thicker than the kasandi stalk you munch.

You spend the evenings making enough congee to last the both of you three days. When you were a young woman you would cook something a bit more palatable for yourself, maybe a simple *rasam* to pour over your rice. But now you find yourself too tired to cut the vegetables, too tired to stir the pot.

The congee tends to wear you down.

There's just one thing that keeps you going.

In the summer after the first rains, a cashew apple tree began to sprout behind the hut. Its bark cracked and brittle as it bent from the weight of its own fruit. You spent weeks nursing it back, nailing wooden supports to the trunk and making gutters in the soil to replenish the roots.

You look forward to the days when you have to trek to the Soumanya river to collect the fertile mud from its banks. But even as you tend to the tree, a single thought creeps into your mind. You dread the day the tree grows too tall for you to trim its branches and pick its leaves.

You're not the child who could scale it anymore.

When the cashew apples ripen, you pick the fruits and squash them by throwing them down the hill. Afterwards you collect the juice, ferment and distill it to make *feni*.

And this is the process that terrifies you , for it involves waiting. And you've been doing an awful lot of that already.

But you'd be surprised how a single night can make the wait a whole lot easier.

You're sitting out on the porch, basking in the bluefire lights of the Dhuravandi festival at the village when you hear the goblin.

“Ásta!” the voice from the forest says, “Ásta!”

The villagers of Dhovona call the goblin ‘ताएल पोचन’ or *Ta'el Pochana*.

It takes a good while to get used to the wretch.

For, the Ta'el Pochana steals the voices of people and uses it to lure their loved ones.

The villagers have made it a habit to go to sleep with straps of jute around their mouths, lest they accidentally respond to it.

You were the first one to hear it, and as such yours was the first voice to be stolen. All you have to show for it is an ashy black streak that runs along your tongue: The mark of a goblin.

The villagers lodged a formal complaint with the court of the Maharani Aadhila. Goblins have long gone extinct in the East, as their magic was blown away with the desert sands. They were reduced to creatures no better than livestock, hunted for their metallic nails and black meat.

The troops of the Queen produced nothing but scraps of moulted goblin skin, and an imprint of their inverted footprints.

The villagers of Dhovona are drawn to stories and as such from the tipsy lips of women in taverns came about the legend of the Ta'el Pochana. In her previous life—as the story goes—she was said to be a singer in the court of a lesser king.

The songs she produced were so beautiful that the moon hung lower to listen and her hymns became anthems on the tongues of every villager in the country. Devotees would flock to the court in droves, trampling over each other to hear a snippet.

It so happened that one day, the famed Parashuram, a musician renowned as one of the Nine Jewels of the Emperor Bhaunash began to search the land. He had a premonition that he was to die in 33 floods and hence sought an heir to take his place in the court. And this was no easy feat, for he was the singer who brought forth a tsunami by simply humming the first verse of the *Jalgeet*.

As fate intervened, Ta'el Pochana was to perform before the great Parashuram.

In her arrogance, she decided to best him in a contest. She aspired to sing the *Jalgeet* in the drought-ravaged fields of Dhovona, and bring forth a rainstorm to cure the cracked earth.

But as she sang, nothing but a single grey cloud convened above. The drops that fell out of the sky on that day barely filled a single pitcher.

In his righteous anger, Parashuram cursed her so that she would lose her voice.

Now the Ta'el Pochana roams the South, stealing the voices of others in a vain attempt to find her own.

You hear her call out once more.

“Ásta!” the goblin says in your voice, “Ásta!”

During these months, the Ta'el had begun asking the strangers for a drink to quench its thirst. The women at the tavern say this is because she died thirsty, and one cannot sing with a parched throat.

You can hear Ásta groan from inside the hut.

A single thought inches its way through your mind. Ásta is unaware of the Ta'el.

You could let her respond to the voice.

She would wheel herself out of the hut and into the woods and no one would know. The goblins eat the bones, after all.

But you stifle the thought immediately. It's the tiredness threading through your brain, opening it to the fingers of the evil one.

You cut a strip of jute from your frock and walk back inside.

The Ta'el Pochana calls once more, her voice – *your voice* – getting clearer. You see Ásta shift her head toward the sound.

“You hear that?” you say, “That voice?”

Ásta blinks in answer.

The women in the tavern tell their sons various ways to guard themselves against the Ta'el Pochana as they return from the villages. The goblin can only call out their names twice, and so they must wait to be beckoned thrice before responding.

You tell the same to Ásta, and even trace the rule on her hand with a stick for you suspect her hearing has faded away just as much as her sight. She whimpers lightly at you standing so close, but you tell yourself that her pain is worth it.

As you wish her a good night, you wrap the jute cloth around her mouth. And you find yourself wrapping it looser than you'd like.

- 5) You forget how old you are until you catch a reflection of yourself on the bark of an iron tree.

Your eyes have turned a dull gold, the colour of ichor, a signal that you've begun living your Second Cycle. You see more of Man'h in your reflection than you do of yourself.

You're knee-deep in the Soumanya river, filling a bag with the red clay from the bottom. While the cashew apples ferment, you've begun molding the clay and sun-baking them into keechad lamps.

At night, when you fill them with oil and light them, you can see Ásta smile.

It's just the corners of her mouth, but it's enough.

Ásta told you that their light is the only thing she can see anymore. Now, you're determined to make a hundred more before the next flood.

It's midnight when you light the next lamp.

You can barely make out Ásta smiling, her lips eaten away by the wrinkles around her cheeks. It cures the soreness in your arms more than any hot-coal packs would.

But your joy is broken in the morning, along with the keechad lamp..

The flame had fizzled out long before dawn, and the pieces of clay were scattered throughout the hill by the gusts.

You could have baked them for another hour, you tell yourself, you could have molded the clay to deflect the wind and you could have trimmed the wick another inch.

That's until you spot the footprints beside the lamp. They resembled a human's in every single way, except they were twisted backward.

The Ta'el Pochana must have approached the lamp in the night and lapped up the oil to quench its undying thirst.

The sight of the footsteps makes your chest burn with a ferocity you thought had died along with the young woman you were. It's the same excitement you felt when stealing a spoon of curd from under Amma's nose, and when scaling the wall Man'h forbid you to climb.

The plan springs forth in your mind, fully formed.

You knew you had to do it as discreetly as possible. *If word reached the ears of The Maharani....*

But, let all the Queen's elephants try making it up the hill.

You had a couple glass pots at home, and you weren't afraid to break a few.

- 6) You watch the steam swirl from the warm cup of feni in your hand. You're forced to heat the drink, even though it loses its sour edge, for it rattles your teeth otherwise.

You're crouched on the floor, bathed in the thick shadows of the hut.

A single keechad lamp stands in the middle of the porch, filled to the brim with coconut oil. With the winds as it were tonight, its scent would travel far.

The sounds of the night transform as you wait. The rustling of leaves sounds like the snort of a goblin, the creaking wood boards like its thunderous footsteps.

You reach out for your double-barreled rifle, and the cold metal feels oddly comforting in your hands.

Ásta lies asleep a few feet from you, her breathing long and laboured.

You take a cautious sip of the feni, and wince as you still feel the glass shards in your fingers. You spent the morning sweeping the glass from the hill, for you're determined that nothing should deter the goblin's journey today.

And when you see it, you almost mistake it for a common Indian dwarf.

It emerges from an outgrowth of sicklegrass, the nose delicately sniffing the air. It throws a single leg out, and pulls itself through the mud, nothing but a shapeless lump.

But, by the flickering lamp light, you see it clearly.

The Ta'el Pochana circles the keechad lamp cautiously, its black eyes darting independently of each other. It possesses a lithe dark body, fragments of bone tearing through the skin.

"Ásta," the creature whispers in your voice, "Ásta... Just a small drink would do... Just a single sip."

Hearing your voice come from the goblin enrages you far more than you thought it would.

The Ta'el Pochana droops down low to the lamp, singeing the tips of its fur, and unhinges its jaw. A messy mass of thin tongues tumbles out, each of them a life of its own.

The flame flickers out.

You watch its tongues, transfixed. Your fingers are lodged firmly on the trigger, but you almost don't want to shoot.

You have to force yourself to aim the barrel at the goblin's thigh and you dread the recoil of the gun.

That's when Ásta puts a gentle hand on your shoulder and says your name.

"You called me," she says, "...and I saw the keechad die out. Could you not find the flask without the light?"

Ásta's cloudy eyes miss the goblin completely and she passes it as she searches for the flask. You hold your breath, but the Ta'el Pochana doesn't seem to notice either way.

Ásta pours a glass of feni, and sets it down on the floor with a thud.

The goblin's head snaps toward the sound. It approaches the glass, smelling the fruity scent of the alcohol.

You watch as the tongues drown themselves in the liquid, and the goblin downs the feni in desperate gulps.

This is how your sister tells you that it's time to let go. Goblins are nothing more than animals with a trace of magic in their bones, and how is that different from any other being?

You put your rifle back, and lead Ásta back into her bed.

"You forgot the rule, Ásta," you scold her, "I never called you thrice."

She waves you off with a playful smile and for once you see the child behind those wrinkles.

This becomes your habit each night.

Right after you wish your sister a good night, and after you light a single keechad, you leave a glass of feni outside on the porch. Sometimes you even linger by the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of it again.

It takes you a week to notice that the Ta'el Pochana never cries anymore.

- 7) You wake up and you're a child again. You've lived through your Fifth Cycle and this is your reward.

Most of the women in Dhovona who make it this far go on living for an age.

It was the dying remnants of a blessing bestowed back in the Chaitanya wars, where an aging sorcerer trekked across the land, and the villagers of Dhovona were the only ones who gave him wine.

If you had been back in that era, you would have turned your back on the sorcerer.

Man'h had always taught you that water in a stranger's belly is water that isn't in yours. Perhaps that's what the villagers ought to have learnt back then.

When you make it back to the hut, Ásta looks ten floods old. You'd forgotten how that face looked, back when it was unmarred by the wrinkles and scars. She carried herself like an old woman, her neck protruding like her back still gave her trouble.

You entered the hut, and greeted her, just as you had done every day throughout the Five Cycles. And she never responded.

In fact, Ásta hadn't moved *all month*.

After the first week you thought she had finally died and that the blessing of the sorcerer had passed over her. That was until winter came, and you saw the hairs on her arms rise and crawl with gooseflesh.

It pained you to realize that the thought of her dying made you feel like bursting into song.

But now it seemed as though Ásta was damned enough to go through the Fifth Cycle as well.

You spend the evening massaging coconut oil into her scalp and braiding her hair. It was amazing what the magic of Dhovona could do. Ásta's hair was back to being a muddy brown, with only a stray grey hair to tell the tale. You tug at the strands of her hair, and carefully count the knots you make. The last time you remember doing this was for the funeral of your Man'h. The sorcerers refuse to bury the dead unless their hair is slick with coconut oil, and inlaid with hundreds of sickly-sweet jasmine flowers.

As you tie her hair, you see her scalp turn a stark red, her disease raging just beneath her skin. You work faster, for you don't want to prolong the pain.

Fifty-eight knots.

That should be enough for the afterlife and beyond.

By the light of the evening sun, you see a cloud of dust in the distance accompanied by the shrill of a flute. The ground beneath your feet begins to beat and heave.

The Maharani has arrived in Dhovona.

It had taken a whole two floods for the Queen to get word of all that had occurred in the village. The women reported that they had been relieved from the cries of the Ta'el Pochana. It didn't take long for them to spot the goblin arriving at our porch at every moonrise, lapping up feni until its belly had swollen.

The Maharani had sent forth an entire army, for she believed we had brought the goblin under our command, and that was worth far more than all the women in her troops.

All of this reminds you of the time Amma took you into the Capital for your cousin's wedding. As you approached the gates, you could see the goblin poachers nailed to its walls. The newer ones still had strength to

cry and wail for forgiveness, while the old hung their heads in a drugged daze. Most of them were common workers, selling finger millets and sicklegrass. The poor wretches probably believed that selling goblin carcasses was no more harmless than butchering veal.

Amma had tried to distract you from the nailed poachers by enticing you with a kit of sculpting tools. But the guards ordered you both to look up at them before letting you in.

The Maharani believed the next generation of her reign would be easier if she forced in the nightmares while still young.

You see a horrifyingly clear vision of Ásta nailed to those walls, too weak to even scream. And with her passing her Fifth Cycle, she would remain on those walls until the mighty Soumanya river ran dry.

The ground began to quake in tune with the elephant footsteps. Thankfully, you had spent last afternoon coating the grass around the hill in shards of glass. That would occupy them for a while.

After propping Ásta into a chair, you bent down and whispered a lie in her ear, for that is what the levitation spell calls for.

With the chair hovering an inch off the ground, you push Ásta out into the outside world. You instinctively cover her face with your hand, lest the sudden exposure to the sun blind her.

But she gazed blankly ahead, her eyes empty.

An elephant trumpeted in the distance. The glass always works.

From your vantage point on the top of the hill, you can see the entire troop steadily climbing the hill. As you peer down from the height, you think about how

easy it would be to accidentally trip and send Ásta down into the darkness below. But, the hill isn't as tall as one might think, and a sudden death is not a given.

And even if you managed to do it, you would have to see the pain in your sister's eyes as she teeters over the edge. You're far too selfish to do it yourself.

Instead, you begin to jog toward the forests, dragging Ásta along. You notice that you left your bhouttapal back at home, the only thing that would mask your tracks from the goblins.

And you wonder if you did it on purpose.

The moment you set foot into the forest, the sunlight cuts off. The sounds of the village fades into the distance, like you're hearing them underwater. The only colour in the forest is the orchard of mangoes. Some of them are overripe, the flies buzzing around them in earnest.

The smell takes you back to the days of the First Cycle, where Man'h would feed you rice with pureed mangoes. You almost stop beneath a tree, wondering if there's time to nibble on one but you continue pushing Ásta through the forest.

And you both hear the voice again.

"Ásta," the Ta'el Pochana calls with your voice, "Ásta!"

The voice lends strength to your feet, and you begin to sprint toward the sound.

And Ásta speaks.

"The rule..." she murmurs, "The voice beckoned me twice. Didn't you tell me not to answer? Wasn't that the rule?" You can see the quiet panic in her eyes. And you realize that your sister suddenly knew where she was going.

You bite your lip so hard you can taste the iron.

“That was a thousand floods ago, Ásta,” you say softly, “Maybe you don’t exactly remember what the rule was.”

You’ve tried so hard to forget the rule. *You tried.*

You fantasized about the day when you would hear the voice, and your mind would slip as you walked toward it. Then everything would have faded away in swirls of black and red and everything would be glorious.

The call of the Ta’el Pochana gets closer and closer, clearer and clearer. Now that you think about it, though the goblin uses your voice...you can’t help but notice the deep raspy edge it has to it.

You can feel Ásta’s body quiver through the chair.

The forest breaks into a clearing, the entrance of a cave located in an inconspicuous corner.

The entrance is choked with blood-red lilies. The plants in this area are carnivorous and their bite remains long after they’re dead.

The Ta’el Pochana’s voice emanates from within the cave.

All you have to do is walk in.

You want to cover your sister’s eyes as you enter, but you curb that instinct. You want Ásta to see. You want Ásta to know that the goblin heard your pleas and your prayers.

You walk in through the cave, the lilies attacking you and digging into your exposed neck. Asta gasps as she sees the huddled shape hidden in the shadows of the cave.

You close your eyes.

You hear the breathless fear in her voice, the shock jolting her into a brief moment of lucidity. She shrieks with all the strength she could muster, talking at length

for the first time in months. And she only screams your name.

The Ta'el Pochana growls, and you hear it shuffling closer.

Ásta's cries gradually grow more frantic, the sound of your name blending into incoherent mumbling.

And then there is silence.

You hear a sound, like a heavy sack of rice hitting the ground. You had always wanted the goblins to cure her. But not like this.

Never like this.

You hear the bones in the goblin's spine creak as it turns its attention to you. Outside, the Maharani's troops are nearly at the entrance of the cave.

For a single fleeting moment, you think about turning yourself in. Maybe being nailed to the walls of the Capital is a fate you deserve.

A chance to suffer just as much as Ásta did. Instead, you slump to your knees. You're far too afraid and far too selfish.

The Ta'el Pochana's muggy breath is hot on your cheek. When the pain comes, it comes as a white-hot stab in your gut. All the air rushes up your throat as you hit the floor of the cave.

And amidst all the slithering darkness, the scent of mangoes only grows stronger.



Naethan Pais is a 17-year-old comic artist and writer of speculative fiction that tries its hardest to break your brain. His work has previously appeared in the October 2021 issue of *The Future Fire*.

She Calls

by Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas

She came to me in May.

As heavy downpours threatened an early start of summer, I found myself already inundated by the ghost of water. I felt a swaying motion as if I had spent hours playing in an invisible sea, the same feeling that had haunted me every rainy season since I was a child. My body, overwhelmed by the persistent sensation of phantom waves passing through me, did not feel like my own but theirs. Hers.

I was at the library waiting for the rainstorm to die down. The building, with its high-ceilinged rooms and inner courtyard with arches connected by wrought-iron fences, used to be a house in colonial times. In the middle of it all, a stone fountain and a jacaranda tree. Violet flowers fell on the tiered bowls of the fountain and then cascaded into the round basin. Usually, the scent of flowers and paper filled every corner.

That day, it smelled like wet soil.

I heard distant laughter, could feel the sound waves coming toward me as they traveled through raindrops.

It was a silvery laugh that echoed as if it came from the bottom of the ocean.

Sitting at the edge of the fountain, she was plunging and shaking her feet into the water to create small whirlpools. Flowers from the jacaranda had settled into her drenched hair like remoras sucking the different shades of green and turquoise. Her black eyes reflected the clouds. The constant rainfall made her freckles shine. She laughed and murmured unintelligibly to herself.

“They’re from Chalchiuhtlicue’s temple,” she said in a loud voice. “The stones, I mean. Fish came along with the rain.”

By her feet, fish of different colors swam in the transparent water. They were bright as jewels over the dark stones of the fountain that had been part of a sacred place demolished by Spanish conquistadors some centuries ago.

A temple devoted to Chalchiuhtlicue’s consort, the god of rain, was still standing at the archeological ruins nearby. But not even the foundations of hers remained.

She went on saying as if reading my thoughts: “Only the woman’s abode was torn down by those fuckers. What a surprise, uh? And for what? To make ugly things like this water waster. Isn’t it bittersweet that the goddess of water was forced to leave her aqueous kisses scattered around the city?”

I wondered if that was the reason why Toluca was such a rainy place.

She remained silent for a while. I watched her from a distance, not daring to talk or move. When the rainfall eased up a little, she got up and walked towards me. Her

green skirt undulated as if moved by the same invisible waves that had brought her laughter to me before.

“You’ve grown a lot,” she said while taking my hand. Her fingers felt rough and pruney, sweaty and yet firm, cold. I stood still feeling the phantom waves breaking into my soul. When I was not moving, I noticed them the most as if the water was reclaiming me for itself, forcing me to move, slowly eroding me as it had been doing for years.

She looked into my eyes for an everlasting moment. Then, she left frolicking in the puddles.

Those eyes.

I realized I was tightly grabbing something. She had slipped a round, translucent plate into my hand. It looked like the iridescent scale of a big fish that I was not able to catch.



When I was a little girl, my parents used to take me for picnics to Xinantecatl, the extinct volcano on the outskirts of Toluca. If the weather was fine, we would go up to the crater where there are two freshwater lakes. One of them, named after the Sun, is big and irregularly shaped. The other is named after the Moon; clear and round, its surface shines like a mirror showing whimsical figures when moved by the wind.

I remember myself playing on its banks. I can also recall those times when we arrived very early in the morning. A chill gust of wind, the fog dissipating with the first rays of light, the sounds of our steps disturbing the sleepy patches of yellow grass. Everything there seemed to exist in slow-motion. I would see a couple of fishermen, immobile like rubber-booted statues emerging from the depths.

One Sunday in May, the ball I was playing with rolled into the Moon lake. I ran after it but stopped when I saw them—those eyes.

Black and round, a rainbow trout's eyes stared at me from the water. The fish waited motionless except for its gills, which were opening and closing mesmerizingly. I heard my name coming out from a bubble that popped as soon as it touched the surface.

It was calling me.

The trout's scales glowed with the light refracted from the midday sun, its eyes did not stop staring at me. It was calling me.

I answered.

I woke up inside an ambulance. I was thirsty. My clothes were soaked, cold and clung to my shivery skin. My hands were sore as if they had been holding onto something, fighting to not drown—or to remain underwater, I am not sure. I was so thirsty. I barely heard my mother weeping in my father's arms.

We never went back to Xinantecatl.



“Enthrall me with your alibi, again,” said Brisa. Her poker face slowly turned into a smirk.

“Again? Why?”

“Because I *have* to know, you know? In case your psycho mom calls like the other day and goes all Scorpio on me because I wasn't informed about a tiny detail you came up with.”

“The usual,” I said mockingly, “a family reunion. I'm here to help you take care of your five hundred noisy cousins. Kids are wild these days and I'm a nice friend to a very special little lady. Happy?”

“Okay, nice friend. Thank you for your invaluable help. Now assist me by drinking this concoction or whatever.” Brisa handed me a red plastic cup.

“What’s in this?”

“I don’t know. Aguas locas, maybe. It’s tasty. Just drink it first, ask questions later. Be a good Aquarius and come have fun with everybody. Why tell all those lies if you’re gonna stay in a corner the whole time? Drink and then come to the pool, alright? The water won’t eat you,” she said and left.

“You know I’m not an Aquarius,” I said, but she did not hear me.

Brisa’s family owned a summer house with a swimming pool in Valle de Bravo. Since we started high school, they let her invite people over once in a while as long as she maintained her good grades and we cleaned the house up after ourselves. Her parents said that they felt relieved knowing that we were in a safe place, other than who knows where, since we were going to get intoxicated anyway.

My parents, on the other hand, were overprotective. They would never let drunk kids near a pool. They would never let kids get drunk in the first place, nor even have a sip of beer. They did not let me attend parties or go out late at night. I was only allowed to go to Brisa’s since they thought we were having innocent sleepovers with popcorn and skincare. My parents loved her and I am sure that they secretly wished me to be as smart and outgoing as her.

As I did.

After Brisa left me with that drink, I decided to lie down, eyes closed, on a checkered blanket by the plum tree. I did not want to be in the water.

“I don’t swim either,” said a familiar voice from above me. “Do you mind if I squeeze in here?” The voice continued but this time in my ear, it was accompanied by a warm breath.

I opened my eyes and turned to where that voice came from. Alex, who had just sat down on the blanket by my side, was looking at me, their pink-haired head resting on their right hand, smiling.

“Seriously, I don’t swim either. Not in pools, at least. I only swim in the rain,” they said, squinting their dreamy eyes.

“So you swim in the rain. Wow!” I said incredulously.

“You know, when it’s raining and it’s so windy that it rains sideways. Sometimes you don’t even know where the water is coming from, and you try to walk but you’re actually swimming instead. And in that floating process you hear a voice that’s calling your name, but you realize it’s just the wind filling your ears with water or maybe...” Alex took the drink Brisa had left and drank it all in one gulp.

“Yeah?”

“Maybe that voice is already inside your head, maybe it’s the voice of the rain itself and it’s not calling *my* name. It’s *your* name that I hear, as if the rain is telling me to come to *you*.” They touched my lips with their index finger. “Or maybe I’m just a little wasted, who knows.”

“Are you high?” I laughed. “Or is this your weird way of hitting on me?” My lips burned by the recent touch of their finger. I needed to put that flame out.



That night I dreamt about a round lake. It emitted a cold, blue light like the Moon's. Lots of trout swam and jumped above the water. It started to rain lightly.

I heard a distant melody composed of unknown sounds and voices that sang words I could not understand. The sound came closer as countless bubbles ascended to the surface creating a thick, white foam from which Chalchiuhtlicue emerged.

The goddess of water was hideous and beautiful at the same time. She rose looking magnificent, an abomination between fish and woman. Her green skirt undulated in the water where rainbow trout danced as if they were inside a kaleidoscope. Her round, black eyes stared at me as she called my name with a voice that came from the depths.

I walked to her, but as my feet touched the water, I was stopped by the sound of weeping. Then, I saw someone carrying the body of a little girl. Soaked, inert. The girl's hand, strengthless, dropped something round and bright: one of the goddess' scales.



"Are you listening to me? Finals are around the corner and you're not going to survive them if you keep on being so distracted." Brisa shook my shoulders. She looked fed up, and tried to change her expression by taking a big sip from her cup of coffee.

"I just can't stop thinking about her," I said, closing my book. "The green-haired girl from the library. I didn't have the courage to talk to her."

"Typical Pisces! Weren't you trying to date our pink-haired classmate? I saw you both talking at last week's pool party. What happened to them? A little too sweet a color for you?"

Alex was indeed sweet. Their lips tasted like sugarcane juice and felt so plump and refreshing against my tongue. I could have died in those lips. I did for a brief eternity, but I panicked.

I wish I could go back to that Saturday afternoon at Brisa's garden. The air had smelled like freshly cut grass and chlorine, but it faded once I was surrounded by Alex's scent. Some friends had just tapped a keg and asked us to join them at the pool. Alex grabbed my hand to take me there but I froze, not because I did not want to go with them—I craved to feel their skin next to mine—but because I was not able to move a muscle. My body felt as if it was not mine, as if some invisible force had rolled in to flush myself away from me, to wash my desires away, to make me thirsty for a different water. My arm went limp releasing me from Alex's gentle grip. They asked me what was wrong, did they do or say anything to upset me? Was I feeling fine? I did not answer. Their dreamy eyes showed disappointment and eventually turned away from me. I stood there, silent, terrified. Phantom waves engulfed me all over.

A different pair of eyes, small and black, replaced theirs in my mind.

They never answered my texts.

"I didn't want to call them back," I lied to Brisa. "I wanted things to work with Alex, I really did. But what didn't happen has nothing to do with that girl at the library. It's just that I feel like I want to ask her something, but I don't know how to do it."

"Is that a euphemism?" Another of her smirks.

"Of course not! I have this feeling... as if we've known each other since forever."

“When did you get this corny? Is the Moon already in Cancer?” Brisa asked looking at her watch. “If you want to tell her something just go and say it. What can you lose?”

I was not afraid of what I could lose but of what I could gain.

“Be a Libra! Talk to people, don’t just stare at them from a corner. That is a little creepy, you know? Now let’s talk History. Finals, remember?”

I could not focus. The library girl’s black eyes were all I could think about.



As every weekend, Brisa’s garden smelled like dewy grass. It rained overnight, but the morning sky was clear and blue. Leaves from the plum tree scattered all over the place, some of them floated on the pool’s surface like tiny fish trapped in a rippled net of light.

I sat by the edge, dipping my feet, feeling weird for being surrounded by people and not in my usual spot under the plum tree, away from the water. Maybe my parents would be proud their daughter was following Brisa’s advice. But I am sure they would be terribly disappointed anyway. Like Alex, who had been avoiding me the entire morning.

I was aware of the real water on my skin, it was gentler than those waves I felt all the time, but it was also colder, its unexpected movements almost frightening.

“Where are you now?” asked someone, her voice mixed with the burble of water.

“What?” I snapped out of my thoughts.

“Where are you now? Are you here or are you still inside our dreams?” She laughed. The water rippled

around her while she swam in slow-motion near my legs.

It was her. The library girl. She wore a headband covered in amaranth seeds to keep her green hair from her face, and it floated behind her as an algae veil. Her skin looked dewy and bright as if emitting a light of its own. She floated effortlessly, the water lovingly embracing her body. The rainy day girl. Her coral lips directed words to me. The blackest-eyes girl. *Her*.

I was not able to talk or move. I was staring at her, mouth agape as if waiting for the rain to fall and quench my thirst.

“This is going to be weird. If you don’t talk, I mean.” She splashed some water in my face. It felt so cold, it almost burned.

“I’m sorry,” I was able to say at last.

“For what? For being in our dreams, dripping wet and looking gorgeously scared?”

“What? No!” I felt my face turning red, maybe it was the burning sensation of cold water. “I wanted to ask you something, but I don’t remember what it was.”

“I’m in those dreams too. They’re ours and only ours, after all. You can come whenever you want, but come alone.”

She laughed again. Loud. She then grabbed my feet and dragged me into the pool.

Shocked by the cold, I became disoriented. Everything was blue in all directions. I panicked and started kicking the water, not knowing what to do. Her hands grabbed mine, their hard grip brought me back. Other people were swimming around us, but I focused only on her black eyes.

A big bubble came out of her smiling face. “Ask away,” I heard as an echo, a murmur inside the pool, inside my head. I desperately wanted to breathe. I had to go back to the surface. Her arms were now around me. I swallowed water. My lungs burned. She came closer. I could not breathe. I needed to put down that fire. Her lips felt slippery cold as we both emerged. Air was not my priority anymore.



In the dream, I am walking on a long bridge surrounded by fog. Other people pass me as if they are in a hurry. Some of them hop like frogs with distorted legs.

I walk for what it seems like hours. Some people start to cry. They yell and jump off the bridge, turning into fish as they fall.

When the fog disperses, I see the river we are crossing. From its turbulent waters, it grows a huge prickly pear cactus laden with beating fruit. As I look closer, the fruit is human hearts that drip blood into the whitewater.

I hear my name. Someone is calling me from the other side of the bridge but I keep on walking.

There is no one around me anymore. No one trying to pass me. It is only me who arrives to the other side where a dark stone temple rises over the river.

Chalchiuhtlicue arrives with the same force as copious rain. Her skin covered in scales, her green skirt made out of serpents, and her hair braided with blood and amaranth seeds. She carries me gently to a turquoise pond right in the middle of her temple. She kisses me and bathes me in the cold waters.

“Where are you now?” She asks. Her rough, gill-covered hands rub me all over. “In which part of you is there sadness hidden?”

Her laughter creates rain inside the temple. Chalchiuhtlicue pulls me close to her. I get lost in the black abyss of her eyes.



Summer is ending, but the rain keeps on falling everyday. May is a distant memory now. I feel that the phantom waves are too faint to pass through me or perhaps I am already swaying along with them. I have not seen the green-haired girl again since we kissed at Brisa’s pool. I only think about her hair and her lips and her eyes.

Her eyes.

I have been to the library every day hoping to stumble into her. Every day, I get back home defeated, soaking wet because it does not stop raining. My hand hurt from holding tight the translucent plate she gave to me that time by the fountain. I hold on tight to the only piece of her I have while something is already embracing me. Every day I wish for her to come to me again; and every night, I still have the same dreams about my childhood, about the rain and Chalchiuhtlicue.

The wind has been building up as if it is gathering strength to carry something. It is hard to tell where the rain is coming from. As the cold raindrops tap on my window, they sound like little beads from a necklace knocking against each other. Water music comes along with my name as if emerging out from the depths. I am swimming in the rain, I am going back to Xinantecatl volcano.

By the water-Moon's shore I watch her swimming, mesmerizing me with her gills. Her black eyes—those eyes—will not stop looking at me. They will never look away.

She calls me.

I go.



Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas is a Mexican immigrant and a graduate of the Clarion West class of 2019. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology *She Walks in Shadows*, and elsewhere. She can be found online at nellygeraldine.com and on Twitter as [@kitsune_ng](https://twitter.com/kitsune_ng).

Creek Bed Charms

by Gretchen Tessmer

baby mud violets
spring up
sucking
on the veins
of the riverbed
dew-eyed
and glinting
sparks of
former lives

once, I was
a mage
a princess
a washerwoman
my hands cracked
with hot water
and lye

now I know nothing
but the weight of
lies and water

and the way spring
floods the world
only to recede
too quickly

wilting, wickedly

my hands gather up
those mud violets
and press them to my cheeks
my eyes

fingers to my lips
they say, don't
ever, ever
let us die

as if the choice was mine



Gretchen Tessmer is a writer based in the U.S./ Canadian borderlands. She writes both short fiction and poetry, with work appearing in *Nature*, *Strange Horizons*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Cast of Wonders* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, among other venues.

Silver Bells

by Jaime Marvin

In the dimension where Laura unfortunately finds herself, it is always almost Christmas.

And she's thinking about Kathy-with-a-K, because that's just about the only fucking thing to do in Almost-Christmas. Now, Kathy would have thought this dimension was the tits, because she *loved*—no, sorry, *loves*, gotta get that right—the buildup to things. Kathy feels it in the air, the crackle, the buildup, feels it in her teeth, the way they ache right before a date, or a flight, or Christmas.

And Kathy, because she's a corny bitch who loves the Hallmark Channel, not even ironically, would probably say the only thing better than Almost-Christmas is Always-Christmas.

To which Laura would tell her to shut the fuck up. Or she would, if Kathy-with-a-K still had ears to hear with, or a mouth to laugh at Laura's crabbiness with. She would, if everything that was —or maybe still is— Kathy-with-a-K hasn't in all likelihood been torn off clean by the space-time abyss.

Laura can't think about that for too long, though.

Mostly because it's her fault, and if she lets the guilt in it's gonna rip her apart into even more pieces than Kathy's in. It's gonna spaghettify her like when you fall into a black hole and the pressure tugs your body apart into strings.

And then her stomach lurches, and she wants to stop the car only she fucking can't, she can't stop, not ever, the neurons in her brain won't even reach her foot to get it off the gas pedal, let alone hit the brakes, and it's so hot in here, heat pumped way up, and she's sweating under this dumb green mistletoe sweater, and God, God, it's all ruined, all of it, all of—

Okay. Okay. Laura spins back into her body, which is still here. So that's a good start.

To continue that good start, she decides to start a fake argument with the theoretical idea of Kathy saying that Always-Christmas is a swell place to be. Because, well, it's something to do.

The thing about Always-Christmas (which, if anyone was wondering, is a dimension about ten paces down the hall, up the stairs, around the stained glass window with the cursed window seat that sucks you into oblivion if you sit on it wrong, and nine doors down), is it sucks ass.

Always-Christmas is a whirl of gluttony. Every minute a tense exchange with your aunt's second husband (he can't seem to stop jabbing Nana's fruitcake with his fork and grumbling "heh, not the only fruitcake in the room," because the other men are helping the womenfolk clean up). And over there, the whole day, always—even when it seems for a second like it's not going to this time—eventually gets taken up in something lost. Some fundamental joy you are unable to regain.

And it's all just proof that deep down, as you smile through the unnameable discomfort, you are broken. Always have been.

Laura knows all this about Always-Christmas because the radio hosts like to pipe in every now and then and tell her about it.

And then they like to say *Hey, kid, see? It could always be worse! You should be glad to be trapped in this shithole dimension instead. And now for a word from our sponsors.*

And, okay, that all sucks a whole bunch, Laura agrees. Sure. But she also feels they're just bringing that up to discredit her very real qualms with her current environs, where for the last, fuck, five hours? ten? eighteen? seventy-two? she has been driving through a snowy local highway with the windshield wipers doing double duty.

Here, the radio mostly plays "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" and "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer". Plus other songs about family members having eerie interactions with Christmas properties that only exist in this dimension, like "Uncle Ray Ate Three Platters of Holiday Cookies and Now He's on the Ground Writhing", which has admittedly been stuck in her head for hours.

What's really disturbing is that she *does* have an Uncle Ray, and he once *did* do just that during a mental breakdown from some drug (though no one would tell her which one).

She can still remember the horror in his eyes though, like he was seeing God and God was angry.

But, fuck, this song is really good, you know?

Point is, she is headed somewhere and she doesn't know where, but her body knows all the turns.

She gets the feeling she's on a dark road, though. The snowy static brings a feeling that it's neither day nor night, just a glowy dim, and the ice never builds up much underfoot, just a steady crunch of wet snow beneath the car tires, like crushed nuts dissolved in mostly melted ice cream. It's pleasant.

Except she can only get the *fuzzy* sense that it's pleasant, that she's on a dark road, that she'll be arriving soon. This calm certainty only comes when she's zoning out, in that half-conscious state of long drives when your brain goes on cruise control. But every so often you flash into awareness, and then there's the panic, cause you don't remember having crossed the border from Wyoming into Colorado, but nonetheless you're here and there are weed dispensaries everywhere.

Laura snaps to attention, is suddenly aware of her hands on the steering wheel, and her panic is quick and hard and makes her want to bite down on her tongue. When she is even a little aware of her surroundings, she suddenly can't remember any of the turns and maybe she never knew the way at all. Can't feel the tar under her tires, even. And when she looks out into the road stretched before her, she realizes there's nothing there. The snowy static is actually just pure static, old rabbit ears TV static with no snow involved, and she knows then that nothing is real.

Except the fact that "Silver Bells" is playing on the radio.

The radio has a good old fashioned crinkle, just thick enough to give the song body, but thin enough you can still listen, and it's almost Christmas, that's real as well, and Aunt Cathy (Cathy-with-a-C) is going to make disparaging comments about the mushroom loaf Laura's bringing to family dinner, and will thrust her own Pyrex full of animal flesh insisting: "Look this

isn't even meat! It's just *ham*, can't you have a little piece? Jesus won't know!"

For a second Laura thinks Aunt Cathy's voice is being projected out of the car radio, or at least the shock jocks are imitating it? But no, it's still "Silver Bells" fading back into "Uncle Ray".

Laura doesn't know how long she's been driving (eighteen thousand hours and fifteen million nanoseconds is her best guess), but she does know that the toys she ordered for her nephews aren't there yet. Even though Amazon *said* they'd been delivered several days ago, and when she called, the customer service rep, an Australian woman whose accent made Laura irrationally angry, said sorry, there's nothing she can do, we're getting really close to Christmas after all. And Laura said yes, but I need these now, and the lady said, and what's so special about that? Doesn't everyone want their presents?

Laura knows her nephews will hate her for this—she says nephews, really they're her second cousins. But, being eight, and indistinguishable both in their sticky faces and ridiculous post-millennium names and being related to her, they feel like nephews. The moment it's clear Laura doesn't have presents for them, she's sure, Aunt Cathy and Uncle Ray will bring out their presents for their sons. An extravaganza of Nerf guns and Nintendo Switches and tubs of make-your-own-slime and a new Easy Bake Oven and those glow-in-the-dark stars that stick to your ceiling, and the boys will love them. And then no one will talk to her all night. Which is maybe a blessing.

For just a second, swerving back to her fake argument with Kathy-with-a-K, she wishes she were in the dimension where it's always Christmas, because that one gets to end, at least in theory.

In Always-Christmas, you go to sleep at the end of the day. It's an uneasy contentment, like maybe it all is just like you remembered. Maybe nothing is wrong with you after all. Because look, didn't you have a nice time when you look at it from the tail end?

Of course, you then wake up what feels like seconds later from a stampede of children in footie pajamas barrelling down the stairs, shouting, no, bellowing, battle-cry-ing, caterwauling: "Christmas! It's Christmas! It's *Christmas!*" and you hate them and your eyes burn.

But still, a moment of rest.

There's no dozing in Almost-Christmas. Just driving, skin getting hot from the broken car radiator, worrying if the oven will heat the appetizers evenly, and wondering when the family is going to bring up Kathy-with-a-K and if they'll blame Laura with their eyes when they do.



Laura tries to make out practice rounds of answers for when it inevitably comes. She braces herself, she has nothing but time—

"She chose to go herself," Laura will say. (*Sure, you tell yourself that, kid*, the radio shock jock says).

"I couldn't have stopped her. If I had, she'd have hated me and I'd have deserved it," Laura will tell them.

She'll say: "You can't bring her back by hating me and I'm getting real tired of your shit, Aunt Cathy."

She'll say: "Oh my *god okay*. Braxton, Jasxn, Tymmyçee, *fine* I'll tell you what happened to your sister, okay? She got sucked up into the fourth strand of the space time continuum on a windy day. And she smiled at me as she went in, even waved! And her hair

was blowing all around her, and the vortex just lifted her *right* up like a hover-something, like she wanted to go. Like how on *True Blood* vampire Eric got lifted out of Sookie's house by magic when she rescinded her invitation, but it was all soft and floating and sad, because he respected her choice, only this wasn't sad, this was triumphant, I mean—*she wanted to go! Okay?* and I wasn't about to keep her here!!”

(Is his name really Tymmycee? the radio host asks. With the ç and everything?)

“Honestly your guess is as good as mine,” Laura responds, but the radio host is gone, and then it's just the chorus of “Uncle Ray”, and Laura sings along again, even though she doesn't want to, but that sort of thing really doesn't seem to be her choice anymore.



Oh he's writhing writhing writhing by the Christ-mas-Tree,

And we're wond-er-ing if we should call an E-M-T.



Kathy would get a kick out of this song, Laura knows.



Kathy-with-a-K was born three months after Laura. The eldest and, at the time only, child, of Cathy and Ray. Laura's best friend for twenty years running. And then horribly misplaced when Laura fell in with the spacetime crowd, and started playing around with dimensions and trying to listen to the unholy (or very holy, depending on who you ask) pulse of time.

The spacetime cult kids hang out in most small towns. It's an easy thing to fall into instead of school,

instead of a job that sears skull with boredom, instead of blowing your brains out. When she was young, Laura thought it was just her town, but road tripping through the West she could see them hanging out in clusters, at a gas station or corner pizza parlor or abandoned kiddie play place, and then she knew it was all over. There must be some inertia that called folks to it.

Laura was never much for school, but Kathy was. And when Kathy started spending all her time at the community college, and then moved two hours away to state college, Laura found that she'd never bothered to make any other friends, and everyone left in town was mostly insufferable. Except for the spacetime kids, who were too weird and tranquil to be much a bother. She hung out with them a few times and they seemed like any other stoners to be honest, and being stoned was a pretty good way to get through being in Wyoming, Laura decided.

They all hung out mostly in what used to be a pool hall but closed down years ago for some sort of tax fraud and nobody had ever bought up the property.

And the lot of them were all chilling there one day, Laura lying across the aged felt of a billiards table, when one of them said: "I think she's ready?"

Honestly, Laura didn't expect it to be much. She didn't expect to be taken in, because she was better than them, really, wasn't she? Better than them, and just here on a whim.

But still, she did want to see what all the fuss was about. Just a glimpse couldn't hurt.

They were always talking about the yawning maw of space, the way time crinkled in your ears and the fabric of dimensions snuck under your nails, all to make your finger bones tingle.

One of them summoned the portal, which seemed to involve a lot of waving your arms and whispering sibilant syllables. Laura kept her face a mask of nonchalant derision lest she be accused of caring, but really her feet were on pins and needles and the blood was rushing to her face and fuck, maybe this was a little cool?

And then the portal appeared, a great whooshing, and the friend who'd summoned it kept chanting, to keep it at bay so it wouldn't expand and swallow them all into the spacetime continuum, and another friend grabbed Laura's arms, fingers tight around her flesh, and brought her close. They placed her ear to the cusp of the vortex, and Laura gasped, fell to the ground. Came up in a fit of hysterical laughter that felt almost like an orgasm, ripping through her, grinning crazy.



For days Laura did nothing but listen to the voice of time.

Her phone died, and Kathy's calls went straight to voicemail again and again and again. And Kathy is, was—no, is—not the kind of person who sits around and waits. So on the weekend Kathy drove back to town in her beat-up Ford, tracked down the address of the pool hall and marched into the windowless room to drag Laura out of there.

The vortex was open when she came in—Laura was the one summoning it that day. Her first time chanting, probably too early in the process to take that on, but the kids she'd fallen in with weren't exactly scrupulous or careful practitioners.

Laura gasped when she saw Kathy but she knew

enough to know she had to keep chanting, or something was going to go very, very wrong.

She stumbled over some of the words anyway and the portal got bigger than it was supposed to. Inch by inch, like water spilling across paper, making it thin enough to rip.

Laura's friends saw, eyes wide, and backed up slowly, but Kathy, never to be deterred by any space nonsense and especially not when her cousin was in danger, stormed right up to Laura. Laura tried to shake Kathy's hand off, but Kathy was always stronger. She pulled at Laura to leave, yanking at her shoulder and her sleeves and her wrist, until both girls were knocked off their feet, and this thing was picking up, like wind, but not. And one of Kathy's jacket buttons got torn clean off by it, sucked up into the vortex.

"Shut it down Laura, fucking shut it down!" one of the others shouted at her, and Laura tried to remember the right words. (God she should have written them down, she thinks about this constantly in Almost-Christmas.) She said something, but it was the wrong something, and the vortex surged again.

Laura's mind was all caught up in Kathy at that moment, see. So, when the portal billowed, it shot a blast of spacetime, all glowy and viscous and quick, right into Kathy-with-a-K's cranium.

Laura gasped, and in her shock remembered the right words to close the portal.

But it was too late—Kathy had heard the voice of time. Not only that, it had been downloaded right into her skull.

So, that was it.



It wasn't long. A few weeks maybe. They were out in the big fields behind Kathy's parents' ranch where they had played their whole lives, and Laura was afraid to ask Kathy a question, afraid of the silence on her, the calm, because Kathy was—is—was a firecracker, a loud and mouthy one. So they were just sitting, ripping up grass and tying it together and not speaking, and then they came, it came, the whirl, whorl, the wind.

Laura looked over and Kathy wasn't chanting, not even under her breath. But maybe once the abyss has been inside you you don't need all that rigamarole to summon it.

Kathy, who was sitting criss-cross applesauce on the ground, looked up slowly, with a smile of someone who sees the friend they've been waiting for arriving across the hotel lobby.

And, very calmly, she went into it.



Laura sent herself away, afterward. Self-exile. She'd learned enough about the fabric of things (not as much as Kathy, she'd picked it up so quick!). But enough.

Enough to slip into the cracks between dimensions and fling herself into the worst one she could think of in that moment, a fitting punishment, where it is always just before Christmas.



Laura turns up "Silver Bells" and sinks into herself as she drives. She turns the wipers on and off for fun. She messes with the heat. She checks the gas but can never seem to get a good read on the fuel gauge—her eyes go

fuzzy the second she tries to look right on it. She turns her brights on and off and on and off, because what's the point, why not, no harm in the endless wasteland of highways in cosmic Colorado-or-maybe-Wyoming.



She wishes she could go. She can't focus long enough to even think about calling a portal, that's part of the haze of Almost-Christmas. It wasn't her fault, she knows that now. Or maybe she doesn't. Maybe, though, if she wants to be gentle with herself about something, just for a second? Maybe it was a good thing. Kathy seemed so joyful, so at peace, like the evangelicals who don't approach you even, just wait in their corner of the train station with their little pamphlets and their little table and their skirts, because they know their God will bring them all the followers they need, that's enough, the Word will flow out. And Kathy got something out of it that Laura never did or could, and even if it was Laura's fault, that's no reason to be stuck here, in this infernal and unending nothing of a place, and she is so fucking tired of "Silver Bells."



Silver bells

Silver bells

It's Christmas time in the city

Ring-a-ling, hear them ring

Soon it will be Christmas Day

Soon it will be Christmas Day



But no, it won't and she wants to go *home*, to Boulder, which is where she imagines home as when she pictures living Not-in-Wyoming, and smoke a fat blunt and watch that lady on the internet make pastry horns, and *god fucking damn it this sucks ass*.

She flashes the brights again, and gasps, hard and harsh:

“Hey asshole! You can't just flash your brights in the street like that, you're gonna *BLIND SOMEONE*.”

She looks up, and the street is still nothing, a dizzying nothing, she can't look at it without wanting to vomit in that way where there's no vomit in you to come out, and if there were that's not the point.

When she looks at the source of the sound, though, her headache clears.

'Cause there, in a red Corvette with the top rolled down because of course, is Kathy, the K in her name sharp as the lines on the old car, and she is smiling, and beeps again, a real ornery honk and says:

“Hey *asshole*, you wanna turn them off now?”

She is parked, and Laura is parked too now, she guesses. And Laura's smiling, her cheeks hurt from smiling so much, bitten round apples achey and sore, like she's been smiling a while, maybe it's been a while.

And God, it's *Kathy* and Laura could howl, so she does, she howls, and she laughs and runs out of the car, but Kathy honks again, so Laura sprints back in, opens it (and wonders for second, does this car have keys?) turns the brights off, and sprints to Kathy. The snow feels maybe like something under her feet, and she is afraid of slipping, but she doesn't, maybe the snow is nothing under her feet, but Kathy is here, really. And Laura hugs her, clutches tight. Kathy clutches back.

“Hey freak, you want to get out of here? I hear two dimensions over it’s two days after Christmas and the house is full of leftovers and the company is gone and everything is on sale.”



Jaime Marvin is a writer and tarot reader based in Brooklyn, New York. She has previously published poetry in *Sublunary Review* and *Q/A*. You can find her thinking too much about vampires and taking accidental four hour walks (or, occasionally, at jaime-marvin.com).

Creating Charm

with Erika Hollice

If I had to think up a tagline for the cover of Issue 17: Charm, it would be 'how charming become a Queen'. As a personality trait, charm goes beyond a magnetic connection. To me, a charming person is eccentric, comfortable with themselves, and (most importantly) comfortable with you. They are the best version of themselves and they want the same for you.

The inspiration for the cover was from the Cuban Characters photo series by Scott Watton. The portraits in the collection are brightly lit, studded with colourfully dressed older men and women. The women in the photos are showstopping. You imagine them turning heads, halting traffic, casting spells. They're all unapologetically old with deep set wrinkles, wide smiles, and puffing on cigars.

Originally, I wanted a cover with an 80s Miami vibe-- pastel pinks and light blues. Even with that intent, the colours quickly transformed into the pops of jewel tones that I gravitate toward. Luckily, Seen (our intrepid designer) used that 80s vibe with the font choices for the cover.

Erika took my ramblings and immediately brought the character to life, several times over. She drafted four

distinct sketches with a myriad of delightful old women who seemed like they would brew you a cup of tea and *maybe* dose it with something stronger (if she liked the look of you). The four images had separate colourful backgrounds. The first was bright yellow with an old woman with three hands, three fans, who was looking right at you. The second was a green background with a woman sideways, mid-puff, and almost dancing with her fan. The third was a blue background with a woman with thick round glasses who seemed almost demurely fluttering her fan. The final image was a coral background, similar to the first image with the positioning of the character but with the added draw of the round glasses.

After discussing with the Editors, we decided on the third, blue-background image. Amy Robinson described it best, the glasses were awesome and “she also just seems to be living her best life and knowing it”. Happily enough, this also turned out to be Erika’s favourite pick of the bunch as well.

Over the final design. Erika weaved her magic and gave life to the character. The long jeweled nails, the bangles, the headwrap, and the bubbled glasses are all products of Erika taking the core concept and running with it. I would have laid money that the glasses would have been the focal point of discussion, but I was surprised that the most commented aspect of the image is that claw-like manicure.

As is tradition, I was so enamoured with seeing the final design, I completely forgot about the speculative element. Sometimes there’s so much magic, charm if you will, in a character that you forget that you sometimes need to spell the actual magic aspect out. Over a quick discussion, Erika added one final detail into the fan: a clear blue horizon. Is it a better world?

A reflection on what's already there? Is it a promise? A threat? Drink your tea and see what the woman tells you.

So often the covers we see feature women in the blush of life, still in fighting form, or dressed to the nines. Maybe they're smooth-faced robots meant to be thousands of years old but still barely looking over 30. You see more Princess Leia's than General Skywalker's on covers. What happens after you lay down the sword, after you bear children or size out of bikini armour? As a fat woman, I was rarely reflected on covers. As someone with slowly growing grey hairs (and a few chin hairs), I see myself even less.

You can't out-age fandom though. It's a passion that stumbles along as you move from making fansites on a webring to tattooing your favourite game icons.

Gather round children, as I cast shadow puppets on the wall and take you back to the end of the millennium. Will Smith is top of the charts. Tamagotchis are out. Rich kids have bricks of cellphones only used for playing Snake on.

I've been in fandom since the age of lemons and limes and we had to pray to FanFic Daddy that Anne Rice wouldn't sue us. Fandom is meant to be an insular corner of the internet created out of pure love and fostered by goodwill. As all things meant for joy, there is a toxic and blood-drawn quarter that the rest of the group will apologise for and ignore. Often it relates to shipping but there are other areas where lines are drawn. One area I was exposed to early was the divide between old and young fans.

Besides *Star Trek: Voyager*, my first all-encompassing fandom experience was the little-known, B-series called *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's The Lost World*. Yes. Full

title necessary. This is when websites were a new thing for television shows. Some of them didn't even advertise the traditional website address. No. It would be something like Stargate.com/homepage. Because lord knows, you needed that homepage section of the address. If you don't type `http://` don't even think about the website loading.

Anyways, websites dedicated to promoting a single show were new to me and they all came with their own message board. The website for *The Lost World* is imprinted on my mind, with its sepia-toned picture of the main cast that rolled over to a full-colour image when you moused over the characters.

As fandoms go, this was one of the kindest communities that I've been a part of. There were US Fans that would meticulously tape episodes on VHS, make labels and mail out the Season Three episodes for international fans that no longer had access. Yes, I was one of those fans that had to order episodes, illegally, through the mail, on VHS. A sentence that has never made me sound older.

This was the show where I discovered that, while I definitely shipped Marguerite Krux and John Roxton together, I was also deeply attracted to both characters. This is probably why, to this day, I crave complicated female characters who might trap you in a prehistoric world because of a shiny jewel. But, in their defence, that was a mighty shiny jewel.

Looking back, it's a show I'm glad I discovered when I was young and less critically-minded. The colonialism aspect that was always present, the sexualization of Veronica (a character originally coded as a teenager but aged up because boobs), the all-white cast. I could go on about the flaws. I know they exist. But, even so, I can

forgive a lot about the show precisely because it was my first love.

One more *holy shit I'm now that old lady of fandom* memory: I was at a county fair and the TV guide listed that my favourite episode was going to be airing while I was out. I had been a good little A-type personality and set up the VCR to record but, as any 80s/90s kid knows, the VCR recorder is a machine of black-magic. It might as well be a magic eight ball. I left the fairground to call my mom on a payphone to make sure the VCR still had that red record button on.

The VHS tapes that I coveted and purchased were created and distributed by older fans. They were the ones who wrote the 100-chapter stories, that led research discussions about the 1920s, that meticulously taped episodes for other fans. They were the caretakers. They launched the contests and fanart that the younger generation took over and they were the first people told they should have aged-out of fandom when adult-oriented critiques and content edged along a fandom. It's a tale that was replicated on Livejournal, Tumblr, and... I don't know...maybe TikTok?

Fandom can shift as you get older, but that interest and slight obsession doesn't leave you. My fandom has wrinkles. It has saggy arm fat that flaps when you gave goodbye, signalling its own morse code. My fandom wants to tell you a story, make you some tea, and maybe give you a little pick-me-up.



Written by Rebecca Bennett

Erika Hollice is our Artist-In-Residence for 2022. You can find more Erika's art at <https://www.eriart.net/>

Find the sketches from Erika on our website.

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