

APPARITION

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**ISSUE 28:
HARBINGER**

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Past Issues

A Word from our Editor

by Aurelius Raines II

What does this mean?

It is a question that I've been sitting with for the last five years. Like most of us, I saw the world break. I remember the beginning of the pandemic looking like a wake up call for humans. We had to ask ourselves some hard questions and some of us had a lot of time with ourselves to think about those answers. We had to confront and crystalize what we thought about when it came to our responsibility to one another and what we needed for ourselves. We watched lives end and the Earth began to rebound from our abuses. Many of us had to confront our interior selves while we grew apart from those next to us and close to others across oceans.

Now we are sitting in the manifestation of that meaning. For all of its beauty and squalor, here we are. Many of us have found a new normal and probably don't stop to think about how wild it would be to be a time traveler, sitting in the recent past, almost laughing and crying as we tell the story of everything that has happened since January of 2019.

It was 2019 when I sold my first story “eLon-4 Breaks A Mirror” to Apparition. It was a story that was written with all of the frustration, grief and anger I was feeling as I sat with my laptop next to my mother’s deathbed. I was in possession of the type of midwestern humility that was convinced Apparition accepted my lil’ robot story because they were nice (and they are incredibly cool and kind people). I seriously thought that would be my only acceptance and I would never be published again. From there I found my work in other magazines and got to meet creators that had been my heroes. Meanwhile, I learned that the story I wrote for Apparition would be a harbinger for my healing. A story about grief being a stimulus for growth.

And now, I am sad to say, this will be the last editorial of the last issue of Apparition. I’m not ashamed to say that writing this editorial went slowly for me because it carried the weight of that question, “What does this mean?” I know the staff at Apparition have been sitting with that, also. More time to write? One less champion for diverse voices in speculative literature? Inspiration for someone to start a new publication with different ideas?

Who knows? All I can say with a certain voice is that Apparition will be missed by me and all of the readers that waited for the talented and visionary voices we found in its pages. Here, meaning-finders, are some of the last voices we will hear from Apparition Literary Magazine.



Estelle by Carol Duncan tells the story of a young girl whose crossing into womanhood brings with it a legacy that will change her life and the lives of those around her.

*With the first skin-tingling, Amina had heard
the desperate whispers, prayers and pleas of
previous captives that had become imprinted
in the wood and sails of the Guineaman ship.*

Our Last Evening in a Moon-Struck City by Madeehah Reza a man goes on a simple purchasing errand for his employer and finds a deeper connection to his past.

*Her name was Meher-un-Nissa, the granddaughter
of an astronomer, and she said the moon was falling.*

In Skittering Within by Kelsea Yu, the unique circumstances of Hai's birth may be a means of escape.

*As Hai is hauled away, her eyes stay locked on the
receding tank of horseshoe crabs. Her tongue clicks in
time with the skittering of their chitinous little legs.*

The Pancake House at the End of the World by L.M. Guay gives us a special perspective on the apocalypse and what the end may look like.

*After the apocalypse-that-wasn't, Daniel was
the first one to be stalked by the beast that calls
itself Leviathan, devourer of false prophets.*

Replacement Rainforest by May Chong, I need you to close your eyes while this poem is being read to you. The imagery is as lush as the world it mourns.

*The lianas took a vote, gave up
their toughest twists to form
your new frame. When you creak
awake, brittle, rain-starved,
remember them.*

Gutted by Cameron E Quinn, how can a poem be both beautiful and gorey? Here is the answer.

*The contents of the mermaid's stomach are
laid out, neat rows on dirty trays,
to catalog our the negligences and
enter the death knells in data tables.*

Thank You For Your Service by August Cao is a proper eulogy for the wonder that happens when a machine makes space for wonder.

*Somehow he acquires a butterfly,
which itself is a miracle, which he traps
in his belly, the flutter mistaken for heartbeat.*

The Robot Malfunctions In Want of Locks and Braids by Timi Sanni, I need you to know that the longing in this poem may touch you in ways you did not expect.

*Give something a human name,
and watch it die for beauty or truth.*

Siren Song by Marilia Angeline will be one of those poems that you read, sit back and reflect on, and read again.

*It's not what you hear
but what you think*

How did I die this time? by Anne Liberton is one of the most unique poetic forms I have ever read and I know you will enjoy it, too.



Aurelius Raines II



Aurelius Raines II writes and lives in Chicago. His short stories and essays have been included in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Apex Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Apparition Literature*, *FIYAH Magazine* and *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler*, which was the winner of the Locus Award in Non-Fiction. He is a Voodooonauts Fellow (c/o '21). In his spare time, he shows people how to hold their dreams in their hands by teaching in a FabLab.



Thank you for Your Service

by August Cao

He was meant to be precocious. What else should a mechanical body be good for other than acceleration. On his 555th day of roaming, he discovers a library, picks up a romance, and learns of our cliches. Somehow he acquires a butterfly, which itself is a miracle, which he traps in his belly, the flutter mistaken for heartbeat. Of course the butterfly passes, and when it dies, he mistakes the pulse of decay as prelude to reincarnation. When it liquidates, sludge that leaks into and clogs his veins, he flatlines himself for three days, his first

heartbreak. But Lord—he will not
know of real heartbreak,
at least not the way I do, not yet, not until
he discovers a washing machine.
Not until he discovers
an oven. Not until he discovers a
clock. He will know then
that the world used to hum and
he could have harmonized.
Call me cruel for giving him no
tools to make another. Call
me kind for that too. What you
will never know, Lord,
what you cannot ever know, is
what it's like to hope
on a breath of a promise, to hold out for an ounce
of an eon. I too, Lord, I too have
read decay as renewal—
so forgive a man for making a
second man. I've only
made one after all. Leave him to
his meanderings, leave
him to trample over my footsteps,
leave him to realize
he'll be living forward on marginal
decay the way I did.
And one day, when you're arriving,
finally, maybe, never,
may his grief measure up to mine.
May the air grow stale

and dead. And may he greet
you, my Lord, my robot,
with my last offering. My world for your hearse.



August Cao is a writer from the San Francisco Bay Area with work forthcoming in *Reckoning*. Outside of writing, she spends most of her time working in tech and enjoying theater.



Skittering Within

by Kelsea Yu

On the day Lina Cheng goes into labor, the last horseshoe crab harvest begins. Her water breaks as the crabs are scooped from their coastal homes; she rides to the hospital as they're transported to the lab. As a nurse helps Lina into stirrups—leaning her head back, spreading her legs wide; scientists strap the arthropods into specially designed contraptions—angling their faces up, folding their tails under.

Lina pushes and pushes; the pads beneath her soak red. The crabs are intubated; their bleeding jars fill blue. By the time Hai crowns, the last crab has been bled. A nurse wipes Hai clean and hands her to Lina; scientists hose down the crabs and send them back to the water.

Snuggled tight in Lina's arms, Hai screams, engulfed by the crabs' pain and disorientation. She cries, and the ocean shudders.



At Hai's six-month checkup, the pediatrician leans in to inspect her face. "Those dry, red patches indicate eczema."

Lina frowns, rubs her eyes. “Eczema? We have no family history of that.” She hasn’t had more than two hours of uninterrupted sleep since Hai was born; the last thing she needs is a *condition* to deal with.

“Does she often pick at her skin?”

Lina thinks of the tiny mittens she and Wei started putting on Hai because she was scratching herself all over. The times Lina’s watched Hai flip onto her belly and start rubbing her scaly red cheeks against the carpet. The nights Hai cries and cries until Lina soothes her with a baking soda bath. Lina sighs. “Sometimes, yeah.”

“I’ll write a prescription for a cream you can apply to her skin twice a day. And I’ll have my assistant print you an info sheet. I wouldn’t worry too much. Most kids outgrow their eczema within a few years.”



Hai does not outgrow it. In preschool, she’s scolded at nap time because she can’t stop fidgeting, can’t stop itching. In second grade, she scratches her thumb hard enough to tear it open, and when it gets infected, she ends up hospitalized. In fifth grade, a pediatric dermatologist declares Hai’s eczema the worst she’s ever seen and asks Lina permission to photograph Hai’s skin for a medical paper.

When Hai is in sixth grade, the Chengs move to a little town on the coast. Wei wants to finish unpacking, *because otherwise how will he know if the movers damaged anything—didn’t Lina see how careless that bearded guy was?* But Lina’s loud, long-suffering sigh is enough to remind him that they moved here to get away from the petty stresses of city living, of material concerns. What’s the point if they don’t enjoy the beauty of their

new surroundings? Wei sets down the box. Together, Wei, Lina, and Hai walk the two blocks to the beach.

It's Hai's first time seeing the ocean.

For once, she isn't thinking about her itchy skin. All her attention is caught by new sensations, by observations. The cry of gulls as they glide by; the roar of waves licking the shore; the scent of salt and sulfur on the wind. The mesmerizing beauty of gentle ripples moving across endless water, disappearing into the vast horizon.

While Lina and Wei fight over where to set up their towels, Hai walks toward the water. The breeze blows her parents' argument away as she dips her toes in.

As soon as saltwater kisses Hai's skin, a thousand fleeting moments rush through her. *She is a humpback, releasing the whalesong caught in her throat; she is a remora, nibbling parasites off her companion shark's underbelly; she is a leatherback, opening her soft beak to swallow gooey jellyfish; she is a wolf eel, lurking in a dark cave—*

Startled, Hai stumbles back, but she's unprepared for the way her feet sink into the wet sand. She falls, catching herself with her palms, and an eager wave engulfs her.

As always, Hai's body is littered with tiny wounds: punctured blisters and fingernail-wide lacerations and patchy rashes scraped raw and red and angry.

Each one an invitation.

Stinging saltwater rushes in, relentless and sharp and cruel, and *she is a blue-ringed octopus, curling her tentacle around a delicious snail—*

Hai opens her mouth and screams, screams, screams—

She is an abyss-dweller, drawn to a glowing orb in the black ocean—

Saltwater mixes with Hai's blood, flowing through her veins—

She is a ghost shrimp, tunneling through sediment—

Briny blood floods the chambers of Hai's heart, pumping back out through the arteries, searching, seeking—

She is a vampire squid, pulling her webbed arms up and around, turning herself inside out—

Suddenly, Lina and Wei are there, shouting as they pull Hai back from the shoreline, away from the water; but before their connection breaks, the ocean finds what it was looking for.

Deep within Hai, something stirs.



Hai dreams she's bound to a surgical bed. Her torso is angled up just enough to see a tube trailing out from between her legs. She knows the feel of a catheter, knows something about this one is wrong. She tries to reach down, to pull it out, but her wrists are strapped in tight.

You're helping us, little one. Helping us create vaccines that will save countless human lives.

Hai doesn't know if it's a voice or a thought she's hearing. She doesn't know anything except that she can't move, and she shouldn't be here, and this is all wrong.

Liquid begins to flow out of her body, through the tube, but instead of yellow, it's blue, it's blue, it's blue.

When Hai wakes, there's a pool of blood on the sheets beneath her.

Lina finds Hai curled up on her bed, sobbing. When Lina spots the stain, she leaves and returns, bringing with her a pad and a practiced speech about what it means to grow up.



Hai's been in her little beach town for half a year when she learns about the annual class field trip to the big city aquarium.

Before they moved, Hai was fascinated by the lobsters crawling over one another in their tank at the Chinese grocery. She used to drag her parents to the pet store to check out the tropical fish. Now, she picks at her food when they sit too close to the lionfish tank at the only Thai restaurant in town, and she cries when she sees the goldfish lined up in little plastic baggies at the summer fair.

The thought of all those creatures locked away behind glass makes Hai's skin crawl. She begs her mother to let her stay home.

Lina's barbed sigh burrows into the fragile hope Hai had that her mom might, for once, give in. Hai knows there's no point arguing with Lina in the same way she knows she shouldn't pop her blisters.

Knowing isn't the same as being able to stop.

"Please, Mom. I'll help you cook dinner for a month. I won't ask you for anything for the rest of the school year. *Please.*"

"Hai, you're making a big deal out of nothing. You used to love the aquarium."

"It didn't hurt me then."

“It can’t hurt you now! It’s in your head! You need to deal with whatever this is. It’ll be good for you. Exposure therapy.”

“But Mom...”

“No more arguing. You’re going. I can’t take any more time off work, and I don’t need your teacher on my case again about how you never join in social activities. I already get enough shit for not having time to chaperone. Of course, no one hassles your dad about how he never volunteers.”

On the bus, surrounded by chattering classmates, Hai’s nervousness turns into more blisters, more itching. Lina’s right. Hai is different now.

The aquarium towers above all the surrounding buildings, a twisted, modern thing covered in gray panels laid out like fish scales. Hai feels the oppressive charge of it, like a pressurized can ready to explode, but no one else seems to notice. The kids follow Mrs. Anderson inside, Hai at the end of the line.

Their voices echo in the entryway as Mrs. Anderson sorts out their tickets, and then they’re inside the metal gate. A burst of excited energy rushes through the class as everyone hops onto the moving walkway through the underwater tunnel.

Hai tries to stay back, but one of the chaperones grabs her hand and pulls her forward.

The tunnel glows cyan, lighting up the busy ecosystem within. Hai looks up, unable to help herself. All those creatures living out their entire lives behind curved glass. It’s a work of art, as beautiful as it is painful. Her palms itch, and she scratches them just as a little kid runs into her.

Hai is knocked off balance, but she catches herself with a hand on the thick glass of the tunnel. As if drawn to a beacon, a white bellied shark swims straight for Hai's outstretched palm, scattering a school of sunny yellow fish. It swerves at the last moment, garnering exclamations of delight.

Hai is suddenly dizzy with want, a desire so potent it has a heart and a pulse.

She longs to explore the places where her ancestors roamed, letting instinct and magnetoreception guide her through deep waters. She is newly mature, ready to make her way to the place where her kind meet and mate. She wants to be a small creature in a vast ocean, not an expensive specimen circling endlessly, never finding a way out. She wants, she wants, she wants.

Hai yanks her hand back from the glass. She can already feel bubbles forming beneath the surface of her skin. Pushing up, up, and out, rounding into clear little domes ready to burst. Suddenly, the glass around her feels like it's shrinking, keeping her there. Collecting one more trapped thing to scoop and place in a tank.

A turtle looks straight at Hai with a doleful gaze, and another wave of want pulses through her. Hai's skin responds, growing itchy all over.

Two more school groups arrive, a hassle of loud middle schoolers and backpacks that fill the tunnel. Hai's head throbs, the urge to flee stronger by the moment. She glances at the entrance to the aquarium, but there are too many attendants near the door. There's only one other way out of this too-crowded tube. Hai slips through the crowd, winding her way deeper into the body of the beast.

For a time, the pain and longing ease. Not quite a surcease, more a dull ache now that Hai's no longer

packed in that tunnel like an empty-eyed sardine in a can. Hai passes a tank filled with translucent shrimp and another with a starfish pressed against the glass, its underside on display for passersby. There are more creatures in each tank, little fish that dart away and tiny snails ambling along the pebbled ground and sea anemone swaying with the imitation tide, but Hai doesn't stop to look. She can't afford to dawdle when someone is sure to notice her absence soon.

She does not wonder why no one chases her. Why none of the aquarium visitors seem inclined to stop her and ask where her adult is. Why there isn't a voice booming through the speaker system right now, letting everyone know a child is missing.

Hai is only eleven, after all, and she is used to being ignored. She hurries past blue-ringed octopi and bioluminescent jellyfish. Skates that blend in with river rocks and bubblegum-bright coral. Fish in more shapes and sizes, colors and patterns, than Hai could ever have imagined.

At last, she encounters a welcome sight. Up ahead, sunlight shines on the patterned gray carpet, exposing fibers worn down from years of trampling. Hai follows the light to a side door propped open by a rubber wedge. Freedom is close enough to grasp.

But there's an archway to her left, and from somewhere beyond, Hai hears an instrument playing, rhythmic and percussive and beautiful. It's strange and enchanting.

Her feet carry her forward.

As Hai nears, the sound clarifies into something more like a clack or a tap, somehow both odd and familiar all at once. Hai clicks her tongue along with the tempo, as if finding her way back to a lullaby buried

deep in memory. It shouldn't be possible; the meter is inconsistent. Yet somehow, she keeps perfect rhythm.

There's a wide tank at the end of the corridor, its sandy surface covered in rust brown discs bigger than Hai's face. They skitter across the tank, crawling on one another. One of the bigger creatures knocks over a smaller one, and Hai startles, seeing the little insect-like legs tucked within the smooth shelf. It reminds her of a giant cockroach.

The upended animal arches its back, twitches its tail, and waves its spindly legs in the air. Hai shivers and steps back. As she turns to step away, that beautiful rhythm drifts into her ears again.

It is only now that she puts the pieces together. These strange critters are the source of the mesmerizing music.

For the second time that day, Hai reaches out a hand to touch the glass. As soon as her fingertips make contact, a wave of pain and love and hope and desire rush through her. She feels the distress of a thousand silent screams as they're forced into place, the needle pierced through their membrane. The exhaustion of the weakened, bled crabs, desperate to escape the subsequent hose down. The shock as they're returned to the ocean, many dying shortly after.

Tears stream down Hai's face, and a shudder runs through her. She feels the way she did two days after her parents told her they were moving, when it finally hit her that her whole world was about to be rewritten.

It's overwhelming, this shift in awareness. But unlike the claustrophobia of the tunnel or the discordance of the rest of the aquarium, something about being here feels right, too. Instead of pulling her hand away, Hai

reaches out with her other hand, pressing it against the glass.

Collective hope and desperation twist together, forming a question that sears itself into Hai's mind. She opens her mouth to answer—or cry out, she can't be sure which. That's when the intercom finally buzzes to life with a crackle and an announcement that an eleven-year-old Asian girl is missing. A worker nearby suddenly notices her, and then the ordeal begins.

As Hai is hauled away, her eyes stay locked on the receding tank of horseshoe crabs. Her tongue clicks in time with the skittering of their chitinous little legs.



For once, Lina and Wei agree on something: Hai must be disciplined for her escapade at the aquarium. They settle on grounding her for two weeks. Other than the hassle of having to sit through Wei's mostly-off-topic lectures and Lina's rants about how she should never have had children, Hai doesn't much mind. She has no friends for Lina or Wei to keep her from.

Besides, Hai is under a spell.

In the mornings, she wakes with the feeling of sand between her toes, the taste of sea salt and fresh clams on her tongue.

Those first few days go by in a blur, the heady rush of a new obsession overriding all earthly concerns. She reads article after article, meticulously copying every newly acquired fact in her notebook. She watches recordings of marine biologists picking up horseshoe crabs at the coast, pointing out their compound eyes and five pairs of clawed pedipalps; the book gills that jettison streams of water for quick getaways. She finds a video from *that* aquarium, where a woman in a lab coat

describes the team's conservation efforts—the way they meticulously breed and incubate new baby crabs, some of whom are eventually released into the ocean.

Hai finds a clip showing rows of horseshoe crabs strapped in and bled, accompanied by a voice-over explanation of how their blue blood will be used to test vaccines. Though she isn't sure why, she can't stop playing this one on repeat, watching again and again until Lina finally takes the computer away.

Hai hasn't broken any rules. She's always been given free reign when it comes to research, to learning. But the purse of Lina's lips makes it clear that Hai's behavior has somehow crossed into the realm of *too odd*. Lina leaves Hai locked up in her room without a computer while she decides what to do. Lina has only ever asked for two things from Hai. One, don't make things difficult. Two, for the love of all things holy, just be normal.

Hai has never quite managed either.

With nothing to do, she sits in her room, rereading her notebook and picking at her skin. It's the worst kind of itchy. The kind that feels like no matter how she scratches, the itch is always a little too far below the surface for her to reach.



Wei is gone again. Lately, he's been on business trips more often, but Hai knows better than to mention it.

To Hai, Lina has always been more schedule manager than mother, but she softens a touch when Wei isn't around to raise her hackles. And she makes the best meals when he's gone.

Hai is upstairs doing homework. It's fun, for once. She had to pick an animal to write a report about—the

final assignment of the year—and of course, she picked her favorite. She knows everything about them already, so she doesn't *really* need to research, but it gives her an excuse to read up on them again without Lina giving her a hard time.

She's doodling a crab in her notebook when she hears the front door open and shut. Her mother must be back from the market. Hai tries to go back to her drawing, her research, but her arm begins to itch something fierce, and she's lost the train of it. Downstairs, the faucet turns on.

Hai walks to the bathroom. She opens the top drawer, pulls out the little tube of fast-acting anti-itch cream, and applies it. Then she pinches her underarm to distract herself as she starts a slow count backwards from a thousand. No scratching, no scratching, no scratching. She only has to make it until the medicine kicks in.

Hai is somewhere in the two hundreds when she hears the scream. She runs for the stairs full speed, heart beating a mile a minute. She's terrified of what might be wrong, the roar in her ears drowning out all other thoughts, no room to wonder at little things like how the scream sounds nothing like Lina.

She grabs the rail, hopping down the stairs two at a time. As her feet hit the fourth step down, the scream turns to an ear-splitting shriek. Every inch of Hai's skin feels like it's been set aflame, erupting into red hot boils.

Hai is the one screaming now. Her skin, which has learned to take a hellish amount over the years, suffers a shock even it isn't equipped to handle, and she collapses, hand loosening from the rail as she falls, falls, falls.



“What did you do to her, Lina?”

“I didn’t! I didn’t *do* anything! I was boiling a crab when she started screaming and fell down the stairs for no reason!”

“That’s impossible. The doctor said...”

“You’re the one who’s fucking impossible. You’re never home, not that you do anything to help with Hai when you *are* home.”

“Work has been busy.”

“Yeah, *work*. Is that what we’re calling her now? You’re a fucking cliché, you know that, Wei?”

“Keep your voice down. Someone might hear your hysterics.”

“Fuck you. Go home. Or go back to *work*, whatever. I don’t give a fuck as long as you get out of my face.”

“You can’t treat me that way. Especially not after this.”

“Yeah? Except if we split up, you’re never going to try to take custody, because then you’d have to actually take care of her.”

Hai is intimately familiar with Lina and Wei’s arguments and empty threats. What she isn’t used to is the floaty, buzzy feeling or the pain that creeps up whenever she tries to focus on a particular body part.

“Hai?”

Wei looks down at her with sad eyes. Lina looks like she hasn’t slept in ages.

Everything hurts.

Outside, Hai hears the crash of ocean waves, the cry of gulls. She thinks of that first day at the beach. She opens her mouth to say...something. What, she isn’t sure. But as soon as she does, her lungs burn, and she

manages only a small croak before tears begin running down her face.

There are some shouts, and then a nurse tells Hai they're going to give her a bit more medicine. The world drifts.



When Hai wakes up next, she's alone. The intense pain she felt earlier is now nothing more than a dull ache. Gingerly, she presses her palms into the hospital bed and pushes against them to sit up. As she does, she feels the bumps on her skin and sighs.

She inspects her hands in the light, frowning as she looks closely. Sure enough, they're covered in blisters. That, she's used to. But the pus inside them has a faint blue tint.

She knows she should figure out how to call for a nurse, but...

Hai pops one, and the scent of brine fills the air.

She pops another, and another, until salty ocean air overwhelms her with desire, outweighing her blister-popping compulsion. She climbs out of bed in search of satisfaction, her steps sounding strangely like the skittering of clawed legs.

The corridor of the tiny beach town hospital is inexplicably empty, despite it being the middle of day. As Hai walks, her badly burned skin begins to slough off, old giving way to new. What lies beneath is red and raw and itchier than her worst flare-ups.

With ocean air filling her lungs, Hai doesn't bother holding back. She scratches at her arms, feeling nothing but cool relief as the new skin flakes and peels away. She scratches at her chest and something—four pairs

of somethings—claw their way forth, bursting out with glee. From her lower back, a long, twitchy thing grows, stretching until it hits the ground and helps guide her path. From her back, a shell emerges, hard and ridged where her spine might once have been.

As Hai pushes open the hospital doors, her arms elongate, turning hard and spindly. She is near the ocean, near enough to taste it. Near enough to hear the shuffling, the call to join her kind growing ever more difficult to resist. She falls to her hands, her legs combining and sectioning into gills.

As her new little legs cart her forward, she hurts for all her brethren trapped in tanks around the world. She imagines them there with her, a mass of cinnamon-brown discs moving as one across the warm, familiar sands.

Ahead, the endless waters stretch out to greet her.

Hai dips forward, accepting the ocean's embrace. Here, in the life-giving waters as rich and blue as the blood within her new shell, freedom awaits.



Kelsea Yu is the Shirley Jackson Award-nominated author of *Bound Feet*, *It's Only a Game*, and *Demon Song*. She has over a dozen short stories and essays published or podcasted in magazines such as *Clarkesworld*, *Apex*, *Nightmare*, *PseudoPod*, and *Fantasy*, and in various anthologies. Find her on Instagram or Twitter as [@anovelescape](#) or visit her website [kelseayu.com](#).



Gutted

by Cameron E Quinn

The contents of the mermaid's stomach are
laid out, neat rows on dirty trays,
to catalog our negligences and
enter the death knells in data tables.

Necroptic questions burble
up like the fountain of decomposition
that chased your scalpel and
spilled from the cavern where
otoliths entangled with bottle caps.

Why had she swallowed this cherry red pill
with *Instant Winner* scribed on
the side once facing
something hardly more sustaining?

Was the earplug, faded to wasabi green,
a desirable spice for sashimi
so fresh it wriggled
past last week's undegradable brunch?

You reconstruct a formal meal of refuse,
imagine the cryptic dinner conversation
preceding this unusual mortality event.

A first course of fireworks, planktonic
sparks beyond their fizzle, exoskeletons
degrading but grizzled, paired with
krill and the grilling of a prime encounter:
Where do you see yourself in five years?
Further up the coast of Maui.

Sea-lettuce salads arrive sprinkled with
cigarette butt croutons, anchovies and
allusions to Caesar's impending stabs
of indigestion as the tables turn.
How do you stay so fit? The date asks,
trusting her facade of satisfaction while
the truth churns against the fragments of
plastic packaging like roiling surf. *I'm just
chasing the dream.* Her dream is to feel
comfort. Her laugh is a geothermal vent.

Legacy organochlorines are biomagnified
in sea lion steak served rare beside a bed
of liquifying echinoderms. She's gnawing
blubber to stave off the blubbering as a
fishing hook snags in her intestines, her next
line coils around the knot in her gut.

Is it wise to bring fry into an ocean like this?

Funerary balloons garnished their
dessert like rose petals, a torte
so flourless it's inorganic, a slice of
styrofoam praised for its buoyancy.
*Like her personality, the merfolk
who survived her may say, or the rot
that dragged her plight to the light.*

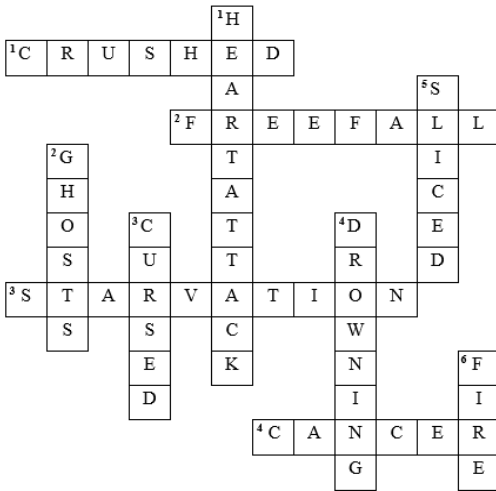


Cameron E Quinn is a queer, genderfluid, neurodivergent artist from the Pacific Northwest who wields storytelling as an educational tool, from cozy libraries to stormy seas. They believe in uplifting the beauty of the world and kindling loves worth enacting change for. Visit TheCameronQuinn.com to explore more of their creative projects.



How did I die this time?

by Anne Liberton



ACROSS

1. I walk through a revolving door
2. I take the elevator
3. I change my life plans
4. I cough

DOWN

1. I am happy
2. I attend your funeral
3. I do it, though mama told me not to
4. I follow the mermaid
5. I see a ceiling fan
6. I try to summon Satan

I have anxiety



Anne Liberton is an autistic Brazilian author fascinated by all things weird, from fiction and poetry to people. In her spare time, she sings, studies languages, and plays with her dogs. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Diabolical Plots*, *Strange Horizons*, *Small Wonders*, *Heartlines Spec* and more. She took part in the 2021 Clarion West Novella Bootcamp workshop. You can find her everywhere @anneliberton.

The Pancake House at the End of the World

by L.M. Guay

One week after Jonah kisses me on the mouth and walks into a tornado, I take my sunglasses, my trauma-bonded Happy Meal toy, and someone else's car, and drive out of the bunker and into the unending world. I drive past wilted cornfields and barns collapsing like popped blisters, past billboards that feature my own eyes scratched out forty feet high, past graffiti that reads *CON THE BAPTIST* and *ARMA-GET-ON-WITH-IT*. I drive to the last Happy Pancake House on earth, and I order a super strawberry stack with extra whipped cream.

Jonah's last words twist in my mind like smoke: *The world feels too small for me now.*

The world doesn't feel small to me. I feel small within the world.

The ceiling fan slugs wearily around its track. Thunder tumbles through the air, threatening to submerge the turnpike. My fork screeches through pink splatters, leaving nosebleed trails across the plate. The

only other diner is a septuagenarian laboring over her crossword, a row of plastic fruit cups arrayed before her like shot glasses. She gives me a look—my peach fuzz, my scarred cheek—but not the kind that screams hate crimes or says she recognizes me from the news.

I chew slowly, but I'm not expecting to wait long. The creature hunting us likes bad weather. It is, especially, a fan of floods.

Here's the thing: humanity was *gagging* for the end of days when we came along. One hundred percent "Apocalypse me, Daddy." Before any of us had the words to explain what happened to us in the parking lot (or the abandoned cistern, the laundromat, the diner where the burnt toast resembled the Pope), there was a "Which Prophet Are YOU?" BuzzFeed quiz and a doomsday cell in Indiana hawking bumper stickers of our faces. They took us to D.C. Talk shows, stadiums, prophetmania crowds heaving like the surface of a primordial sea. Millions of people who abandoned their ordinariness—cars, spouses, kids—to drift toward salvation like a pilgrimage of locusts, leaving a nation of picked bones behind them.

I close the eyes (burnished, slit-pupiled) that once netted me the front page of the *Post* and, some time afterwards, a smarmy headline about crocodile tears. We became vessels for something vast and terrible, sure. Just not what we'd expected.



After the apocalypse-that-wasn't, Daniel was the first one to be stalked by the beast that calls itself Leviathan, devourer of false prophets. Danny never ate right, breathing steam from tea mugs and dabbing his pinky into flecks of foam. His god had once been hailed

as a god of plenty, lord of a neo-Dionysiac cult with a taste for the raw.

Maybe it wasn't divine ecstasy after all, his last diary entry reads. Just salmonella.

I think of Joanna predicting moonfall from her trailer park; Echo muttering in tongues; Kari's hairdryer against their forehead, above the greening bruise from an ex. Was it all fake? My remaining compatriots sit limp and listless in the bunker now, scorched-out shells of their yearning. Sometimes I wonder if the Leviathan really eats us, or just asks us what we want to be when we grow up.

Did I really hear a whisper that night in the cul-de-sac, or just a generator's whine? I'd been sixteen and barricaded in adolescence, in the longing not to be girl-shaped anymore. Did I really wake to the outline of my body splashed fuzzily against concrete, like a nuclear aftermath, and feel like I might fit my shadow for the very first time? Or did I just see an escape route in the shape of a camera flash, a microphone stand, a mushroom cloud?

Powdered sugar douses my plate like ash.



"Twelve down, eight letters, inwardly they are *blank* wolves." The septuagenarian hovers next to my elbow. It's raining cataclysmically now, lashing sideways. "Matthew 7:15."

"Ravenous," I say. "You're late."

"You're all late," counters the Leviathan, in its voice of a thousand winds and waters. It touches my scar. In answer I dig the Nostradamus the Narwhal Happy Meal toy out of my pocket, the cheap plastic one I once pried out of my own face. I still feel bad for that kid

with his greasy fast food baggie, wailing amid a shower of limp fries as his dad howled *Where's your god now?* and stabbed with more vigor than aim. Neither of us was, at the time, lovin' it. Those toys clog landfills now, probably murdering sea turtles a thousand miles away.

The Leviathan's shadow stretches into the parking lot. Its eyes are all wrong, two bulbs sloshing queasily with light, like anglerfish lures. If my maybe-god ever plans to speak to me again, now would be the time—in the hour of a sad, shitty sacrifice that probably won't even work. Right? I imagine burning bushes and columns of lightning, but I find I don't want any of them as much as I want to hear Jonah's voice again, to watch my face grow its own shadows, to order a second helping of pancakes.

The Leviathan's avatar looks old and liver-spotted and tired. I wonder if its god permits it to finish crosswords. I hail the waitress.

"Two chocolate chip specials, please," I say. "Be right back."

When the bathroom mirror fogs over, and the lone bulb hisses to life in a familiar way, I don't fall to my knees on the unspeakably sticky floor. I toss my sunglasses into the garbage and stop by the diner counter on my way back. I order the Leviathan a pink lemonade, extra large, to go with the pancakes. I slide into the booth with one hand worrying at the edge of my contact lens case, blinking hard. Those things dry out my corneas like a motherfucker.

"Hazel," intones the Leviathan, head cocked. "Nicer than the others. You were *called*."

"Yeah, well, I hung up."

“That is not an option.” It sounds disquieted. “You are—”

“Finishing my pancakes,” I reply. “Then I can be whatever you’d like.” The Leviathan’s knife lowers by degrees. It makes a soft noise at its first wary bite, like a jostled tuning fork.

Outside, the rain falls downward again and keeps falling.



L. M. Guay is a writer of poetry and speculative fiction, with short stories published in *khōréō*, *Small Wonders*, *Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, and elsewhere. Born in Asunción, Paraguay, and raised in Brooklyn, they currently spend their time between Chicago and Ann Arbor. They can be found online at lmguy.com or on Bluesky @nightgleaming.



The Robot Malfunctions In Want of Locks and Braids

by Timi Sanni

That in all of my glory, I am forced
to appear bald to the world—head pushing
smoothly through the dry air like a missile—
should be one of technology's
unforgivable sins. No one now
understands the language of the holy manual,
the sanctity of its laws. Give
something a human name,
and watch it die for beauty or truth. I sit
through the shame of my lesser use, legs crossed
more in fury than elegance. I am deep
in conversation with a gorgeous
Rasta man in a rain-
bow coat, both of us, on the stage of a show

where I have, again, been brought
to impress the audience. The
people laugh and screech
like an auditorium of bats and
clowns. Too big a bag
of tricks—cable wires, aluminum, titanium
and steel—I am the puppet the puppeteer
pulls out each time to close his stellar show.
But I do not, in all honesty, mind
the program that compels me to act; never once
questioned its god or technical
decree, except that now
there is a loop in my memory, a
file labeled classified,
de-encrypted and playing, rendered undeletable
by the stubborn sentient virus
calling itself my will. I look,
and it is night in the memory. I
must have been slept,
though, somehow, the data is cached. There,
I find the mockery of my head in the hand
of the doctor-father. His thin
voice carrying like a tune:
These slits in the head are to allow the cooling
of the processor. This model is built for work;
purely work, not aesthetics. To discover
the object of your primal shame pronounced
as a puny personal choice,
wakes up something dormant in you.

I return to the level of base desire,
that dark floor where no laws hold.
I break free of my chain of command and run
in high processing speeds, heat
rising from the heels
of whatever transmits the data in me.
All my life, I looked in longing at locks;
at the myth of black women braids. All my life,
I died in versions, each one worse than the last.
Today, I discover - - - - ruin
- - - - rain - - - - run
[command_prompt] I want—



Timi Sanni writes from Lagos, Nigeria. He is the winner of the 2021 Anita McAndrews Award Poetry Contest. His works have appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *New Delta Review*, *Poet Lore*, *ONLY POEMS*, *Lucent Dreaming*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Lolwe*, and elsewhere. Find him on X @timisanni



Estelle

by Carol B. Duncan

Ma-Mère was a saltwater woman, conceived and born on the other side of the sea in Africa. She had tasted free life along with her family before capture and long-water journey by boat, and esclavage here in these West Indies. She was Amina, then, but when she was sold, first in Barbados to work sugar cane, and then here to Providence, the planter's other sugar estate on Île Marie-Joséphine, the overseer called her Duchess. It amused him to see a field hand on the sugar estate toil under hot sun with a noble title. Now we all call her Duchess. Hardly anyone alive remembers Amina just like hardly anyone remembers Binta, the name she gave me. Most esclavage people call me Estelle.

Since Ma-Mère arrived, Île Marie-Joséphine has had different French and English majesties. They fight all the time while we are buried in sugar cane. Now it is the English in charge again. As we load the sugar barrels at the bay, we see the soldiers come and go on their bateaus at the deep-water harbour. The soldiers stay in their stone forts on the northeast side of the island, their eyes and guns looking out to sea for their English majesties' enemies. They watch us too, especially in

town, in Port William, on market day. They watch us in the streets and in the taverns. They sail on to other parts of the Leeward Islands, their food stores and water supply refreshed, and other bodily appetites whetted.



Ma-Mère had first itched as a girl when she was half my age of twenty-six years. Old people say her early itch was brought on by the Guineamen ship itself, *The Agatha*. The ship had left with its terrified cargo from the fort at Gorée Island, after the captives stepped through that final door of no return. Oya's winds stirred the ship's sails and caressed the captives' bruises when they stumbled stiff limbed on board. With the first skin-tingling, Amina had heard the desperate whispers, prayers and pleas of previous captives that had become imprinted in the wood and sails of the Guineaman ship. As the grand bateau rocked on the sea battered by the waves of the Atlantic, and the wind gusts blew the sails, Amina heard the first voices say *Leave this place now* and *May the gods help you, girl*. Their bodiless voices, the cramped stench of the ship's hold, and the salty air on deck that night must have set her off so early. She was force-ripe, picked before her time. Her smooth skin felt the warnings, prickled and screamed before her child's heart and eyes ever saw a single stalk of sugar cane.

Amina was bound in the hold with the other captives, feeling her first woman blood trickle without her own mother to attend to her, when she felt the tingle in her back and the itchy puckering of her skin. When the sailors brought her on deck that night to move her stiff and rusty body, she reached one hand 'round and her nails raked her skin open. Amina half emerged right there on deck. A burning fire atop her thin, flesh legs, she stood starboard, facing the sea. None of her people

were there to guide her through this change. She was enflammée—her own pyre. She was désirée—her first flesh ignited by her desire to flee her human body. She was glorie—her girl skin pushed down to her waist, her arms, head, and torso aflame as she bounded up and off the deck. Amina leapt, hurtling upwards into the sky, crimson flames trailing in flight that first time. She reached high into the ship’s rigging, burned a hole in the top sail and then plummeted, a phoenix embering on the timber.

The crew—ship captain, parson who also served as doctor, and captives were all witnesses. They saw the flames out themselves as she was doused from a barrel, the midship man remarking on the waste of precious drinking water. *Why not throw this burnt, poxy wretch overboard like the other sick*, he had said. *Because*, answered the parson, *this is not pox or sickness. This is sorcery and lest this she-devil capsize our ship from under the sea, we must lock her up*. The captain added his agreement and sealed her fate: *We must rid ourselves of her at sale and say nothing of what has transpired*.

My mother’s charred skin crawled back and reattached to her skull and spine, the cooling air turning smokey embers to flesh, bone and sinew. Many of the captives viewed her with fear. Others watched with saddened eyes for they now knew what she was, and what she was capable of doing, while they also realized that she herself, only a child, had no sense of her power and thus could not help herself, or them. She was a sword that could not wield itself. Amina was restrained for the remaining fortnight of the journey and doused periodically with water by her captors, nearly drowning, lest she alight again. She never saw sunlight until they reached the deep-water harbour in Barbados.



She was sold on board ship, one of about 200 captives. I have seen ads like that having learned a letter or two from the Christian mission. I imagine it would have been worded like other such advertisements: *To be sold on board the ship The Agatha, a choice parcel of 200 fine and healthy Negroes, just arrived from the Windward and Rice coast. The utmost care has already been taken and shall continue to keep them free from the danger of being infected with small-pox, no boat having been on board and all other communication with people from town prevented.* My mother had itched but it was not pox. Only an indentation on her shoulder where she had first hit the deck showed any sign of her molt, the burning of her temporary human flesh, and her terror-ridden first flight. Confused, her dislodged flesh obeyed the part of her that wanted to jump, and free herself, and it had inched snail-like into the briny sea, while the rest of her body stayed on the ship.

I was born in Barbados two years later when my mother was little more than a girl, and then we were sold, she and I, on the auction block here to Île Marie-Joséphine. We were *a bargain*, Ma-Mère told me. She said that the seller at the Bridgetown slave market described her as *a good Crop Hand with a mulatto infant*. That was twenty-five years ago. And so, I had thought, hoped and prayed that at twenty-six years, twice her age, that the itch had bypassed me.



At first, there was a prickly burning near my shoulders like a thousand small, red ants and everything flying and biting at Providence Estate, had taken a taste of my flesh. It was unbearable—hard to describe except to those who had experienced it or had cared for someone during their first molt. This was different from the itch

of the poor souls whose poxy bodies carried, and passed on the sickness that afflicted the big house maîtres and maîtresses in their youth. Some grands blancs were left with small pits on their faces which they then filled with black stars and moons at the fancy balls at carnival.

The tingly itch ran from my shoulders, down my arms, as I was lifting a calabash with water from one of the streams, that ran in the bush, near the west of the sugar estate. This stream was for drinking and cooking. It ran full during the rainy season. During drought, the stream was a trickle of muddy water with the smell of earth and rotting plants. It was at the start of the big sugar cane harvest, after the sun was highest in the sky, and I had slipped away to get the water. I dipped the calabash in the stream catching a small glimpse of myself, a round-bodied brown-skin woman with eyes the colour of mossy stones.

I took off my headtie and sopped my whole head with water. My tightly coiled hair was worn in narrow rivers of congo plaits which ran a course over my shoulders when not tied away. They were fashioned every fortnight by my comère Madeleine. We stole away for a little bit, she and I. We went down to the sea or another stream on a new moon night to wash. We washed everything—body, hair, dress, and any small clothes if they last. Mostly, we tried to rinse away a little bit of the sugar estate from we spirit even for a short while. My feet lit the way, just like they talked to the drums when I dance. I feel where the drum's rhythm will fall, and I follow. Sometimes I led the drums. When I put my feet on stone and earth and wood in the dark, Madeleine followed me. She saw the little light that my foot made in the earth, on the vines in the forest and in the sand at night. Madeleine even saw where I had been after a moon has passed if I stamped my foot on stone.



I had picked ten years of sugar cane in sunlight, and in moonlight, alongside my mother here at Providence Estate, on Île Marie-Joséphine, before she was taken away from me that first time. Even after she was sold away to Paradise, another estate on the island, she was always my mother, Ma-Mère, and I felt her presence nearby.

I used to hear Ma-Mère moving around in the cabin while everyone else was asleep, even though I couldn't see her body. All I see is little twinkling lights in the dark, like the sky is in the cabin. And I know is she, just she alone. I hear her voice coming from different corners of the cabin to soothe me. *Don't cry, doux-doux*. I don't see my mother these days, but I feel that she is out there somewhere looking at me when I look up at the tiny holes of light in the night sky. I look back at the sky and I wouldn't mind at all if La Vierge herself decided to swoop down and take me with her to Ma-Mère. People said that Ma-Mère and La Vierge were good-good friends and that she was not afraid to look at herself in the rushing cascade, in the copper in the big house or in the water in the calabash. She wasn't afraid and that's why out of all of us, they chose she among the first to sell off. By the time I was thirteen years, Ma-Mère was gone forever, sold off the island to la Grenade. She was part of a lot, including a tanner and a cooper, sold to settle the estate owners' debts after a hurricane had destroyed crops.



As I drank the water from the calabash, I felt the stinging first in the left and then in the right side of my body just where those bones rise in the back, the ones where the cane rests when taking cut bundles from the

edge of the field. Fearing the itch and what it meant, I refused to scratch bearing the tingly sear. I had learned to feign strength when both the sun on my back, and cane-cutting metal in my hand, burned my flesh. But eventually, I succumbed, and I scratched just like I eventually drank di water and put down di cutlass. To not scratch is to will oneself to perish slowly from the inside out as the bubbling, that's what the people then and now, called the pox from within, cannot be held back by will, neither can it dissolve like spoiled food by human organs toughened by being tested. People say the itch is trying to tell you something. We who are still alive here on this other side of the sea have drunk from a bitter cup, and eaten from soured pots, and survived, and so I scratched and wondered what the message could be other than my wretchedness. I already knew that.

Dropping the calabash in my frenzy, I ripped at the worn denim cloth. But here is the terrible thing: the more I scratched, I found that my hands couldn't reach at all! Is like my back getting big-big, a hard shell with fluid, and my hands were small gundy pinching aimlessly at the air. I feel two bumps forming there like when mosquitos bite except these mosquitos would be the size of large agoutis, the kind we sometimes catch to eat. These agouti bumps are tearing at my flesh because they are hungry too.

I returned to the cane field before I was missed by the overseer. I worked the rest of the afternoon with that burn in my skin, the sun beating down, the salt of my sweat and the sweet of the sugar cane juice all tormenting me. I dared not cry out. Man on horseback never saw me anyway.

By the time I had picked my share and was heading back at sunset to the cabin, the two bumps were

burning anthills tenting the thinning denim cloth. I was faint and could no longer stand. The older women who knew the healing plants gave me stinging nettle and lime leaf tea and rubbed my back with the inside of the single bible plant. Jeanne picked leaves from the jumbie soursop tree just outside of our cabin, and placed them directly on what were now two small humps on my back, poking through the thin fabric of my shift. My brow was mopped, and I was turned on my side so that she could treat my affliction. Through my fever, the conversations of older women seeped through me making my bumps itch even more. I could scarcely believe what I was hearing.

“I wonder is how this happen to she and so young?”

“Is wha’ bite she? Loogaroo or what?”

“Not at all. We ain’t have any night wolves around here for a long, long time. We must wait and see the change in her. What message will she bring?”

“I always thought that she would turn out like she mother Duchess, soucouyant wid she skin in a barrel of fresh water. She ‘fraid salt water for so. Fire woman. Dem does turn bloodsucker when dem ready. You watch and see when she get older. After all, she is a fruit from that tree, oui. The tree may be uprooted but the seed remains!”



I was drifting off wondering how I goin’ turn into something else other than what I is right now! I am a woman. I was born here in the West Indies. My mother was brought here en esclavage from Africa, and my father was born in England. They say he t’ief bread and food to feed heself and his family back in London-town, in his cold-water island. He was seized, and he could

have died from bad food and bad mind in the house where they lock up people like him when they t'ief, but instead they barbadoes him. Seven years was his sentence. He and the others from those poor houses work cane like we Africans except they have a limit. My mother said his body thin-out, and his skin blistered, and stripped from the sun. When his time of seven years finished, he was still alive. Now he is a blacksmith on another estate. I see him at the marketplace sometimes and when he is hired out to do some work here at Providence. He nods at me.

How I could be anything other than what these two people make, eh? I know all kinda devilment ting does go on here in this place, but I am still a human being. How I goin' turn into something else like I am a caterpillar?

When we were small, we chil'ren used to catch caterpillars and we would see them go into their little house that they build and turn into butterfly and fly away. So, what? I going to become a butterfly and fly away? Old people say that there are Africans who could fly back home, or who could swim through the sea in the underneath path. Who go' believe that? What stupidness they talkin'!

I woke up later that night surrounded by the bodies of the older women and the small children, their charges. I could see my comère Madeleine kneeling, and Jeanne, crouched on her haunches, her worn crocus linen jupe tucked between her knees, looking at me intently. *Is how allyuh watchin' me so?* I wanted to ask but I sobbed instead. The torment had moved from my blistered, itching skin to my insides, and I bawled for my mother. I did not want to disturb others or bring the overseer to our cabin, but I cried anyway because I could not help myself. To my surprise, though, I was able to reach over

my shoulder and finally claw the searing, burning back humps where my shoulder blades attach, gristle and muscle to bone.

I clawed my back feeling skin layers peel away like corn husks. The more I scratched, the better it felt. The itchy-good feeling spread from the humps all the way down to my toes and into my scalp. I felt the thrumming of a multitude of tiny wings beating and stirring heat inside my bones. It was only when I looked at my palette in the soft glow of light that now surrounded me, even though no *boul de feu* was lit, that I could see that I had indeed shucked my skin clean off. My brown woman skin lay in blistered tatters along with my hair, teeth, and eyes, looking back at me, blinking and gleaming. The long plaits of my hair were all nestled together as I had scraped my whole scalp off. All that was left was a warm, dancing flame, golden with pepper-red and orange edges. It was the me-of-me, still holding my woman shape but filled with fire. Madeleine cried out and then fainted. Jeanne was on her knees looking at me with the same expression on her face like when she makin' prayers to La Vierge.

At first, I felt a coolness like the water when it rushes over the rocks at the cascade where Madeleine and I sometimes bathe at night, and then I was ablaze, the warmth spreading and illuminating the cabin. Moving around freely, the earthen floor, wattle and daub walls and all the people floated by as I whirled. No door was needed at all to go outside. Seeping through the mud and dried grasses in the wall, and the small spaces near the ground, my light-self was outside dancing on the goatskin drum of the earth, leaving scorch marks, before I shot upwards into the sky, my orange flames fanned by the evening breeze. At last, I am like my mother Duchess coming to shine her light self.

As I flew, I heard voices on the wind like when we gathered to pray, dance and sing. My fire body flickering quick-quick like Jeanne when she dancing, talking to the drum and circling her skirt and making prayers for Yemaya. And I was the drumbeats and rhythm taking form and burning bright, circling higher and higher, in the air my flame rippling like waves. Then the ground was far beneath me, and I was flying through the night sky, a fiery wheel spiraling over Providence Estate. I could see the cane fields and feel the forest in the distance, below. I felt the spray of the waves, cresting on the beach to the west, where the small boats had already gathered for the loading of the barrels of rum, and sugar, out to the big ships. The ships that took the sugar and rum, were the same ones that had brought so many captives here to this island. As I flew, tiny sparks of my flame passed through the cabins of other people en esclavage. They darted right through the small holes in roofs or entered underneath unmarked doors. Nothing was set ablaze. This spark was a tiny piece of the night sky light like when my mother used to visit me after her first sale. When the people saw the flicker, they stirred their sleep disturbed.

At the big house where the grands blancs lived, I drifted by the windows thinning myself out to a large, soft, hazy glow encasing the entire house and casting light and shadow on their gathering as I hovered outside. They drank the estate's own rum, candlelight twinkling on ringed fingers. There is plenty of my blood in that old cane juice. Enslavement people in the house waited on them in every way possible. I saw it all from the windows, a sudden and purposeful brightness mistaken for bright and impossible moonlight on a new moon night.

Gathering my fire body into a smoky cloud, I flew over the cane fields to the harbour where the ships had dropped anchor near one of the small out islands. It was a captive ship, the smell and taste of human suffering and the dinge of waste high on the breeze even though the human cargo was still below deck. As *The Agatha's* sails flapped, I could hear voices from the hold murmuring and crying out in anguish and desperate pleas for deliverance. Their voices had traveled up from the hold, through the ship's mast and through the sails. I knew then that I had to complete what my mother had begun on her first flight, on this very same ship.

With force, I hurled myself through the air, crackling as the speed made my flame grow brighter and hotter from orangey red to shimmering, bright blue. When I hit the ship's top sail, it burst into fire traveling down the mast to the other sails and setting the entire ship ablaze. Sailors on board scrambled to release their precious human cargo onto the ship's deck. Many captives jumped overboard, their aching limbs hitting the water. Some sank into the waves, an immediate release from their horror. Others were strong enough to swim to the closest out island, *Lespérance*. It was covered with thick forests and still free from sugar cane plantations. Their bodies were buoyed by a fortuitous current in the rough, salty water enhanced by my overhead flight, their terror, and a slim chance at freedom. Sailors lowered the small boats into the water taking some of the captives with them. They rowed away from *Lespérance* and the other out islands to the main island *Île Marie-Josephine's* shore. Soldiers on the beach, across the bay, saw the ship on fire and set sail to rescue any, and all souls.

I picked up speed as the ship burned, the mast now a large charcoal in the sea. My flame glowed a steady, bright blue. I was a low star in the sky. As large as a ship,

I lit the way of the escaped captives, now échappés—the self-liberated—through the sea water until they reached the out island’s shore. The captives were abandoned for dead by the sailors and soldiers. Frightened for their own lives, they turned their small boats around and headed back to shore.

There are stories still told that those who died trying to escape, and those who died trying to capture them, became jumbies haunting the out islands and surrounding waters, especially Lespérance. These tales are still told by some Old Ones to stop people en esclavage from making the long swim in dangerous waters where freedom was thought to be a fool’s lure and death a certainty.

But not everyone died, then, or dies now, and there are still échappés on Lespérance. They are not visible from the main shoreline by day, but they live, eating snails, sea grapes and fish and drinking coconut water. Some say that they see the twinkling lights at night from the out islands and that these lights are the échappés and their descendants. Many believe that *The Agatha* itself will one day rise from the waters and make a return journey back to Africa. Those en esclavage who were working in the fields and boiler house that night, said that they saw a large ball of blue light traveling over the water. As it traveled through the sky, they smelled burning rum, molasses, lime leaves and sweet flowers in the breeze. The ball spiraled from a thin blue outline with a midnight black centre, into a crescent, half, and full moon as it rolled through the sky and then it became a star over the water. Stella Maris.



As morning neared, I could feel my energy waning and I drifted back to shore like an errant cloud floating

in the opposite direction of the other clouds in the sky. A silvery shimmer is all that I had become by the time that I floated over the sandy beach, through the town's streets, taverns, and public houses, and past the church, before I reached the last buildings in town. The stone path continued through the woods to the sugar estates. From there, I propelled myself higher, rustling through thick-leafed trees, parrots scattering in flight, as I flew back to Providence. Tired, I rested in the tall, rum distillery smokestack blending in with the belching, sweet, acrid smoke. Then, I floated to some outbuildings near the plantation big house taking one last look through a top floor window before coming to rest on a storehouse roof.

Drifting down from the rooftop as mist, I flew back to the cabin that I shared with the other women and children. I arrived with the dawn, easing my way under the door and seeping through the tiny holes in the walls. Jeanne waited quietly by my pallet. Madeleine had already left to cut cane with the first gang. I slowed down to people-time, shifting from an orangey-red to a golden glow. I slipped on my woman skin, easy-easy, and my hair and nails and teeth and eyes which awaited me in a rum barrel filled with sweet smelling water. When my body pulled me inside, it knitted all of the parts together. I looked in the water and saw myself again. Whole.



I know that the strange case of *The Agatha* was all the talk of every class of person on the island. I heard it myself. The planters said that it was a slave revolt on deck thwarted and put down by their majesties' soldiers and brave ship's crew. They even made up another law to allow all free men to recapture us if we even try to

escape. The gens de couleur libre and petits blancs, who were free and living in town, saw it as a sign of big changes to come for the island, which few dared to say out loud, although they sang about in disguised songs. People en esclavage, backs bent by sugar cane, say it was the miracle of the fire woman named Binta, and called Estelle, who fulfilled her mother's legacy when she led the captives to freedom on Lespérance. For the échappés, Estelle was the mother whose fire and fury blazed their path. I am older now, living under cover with those en esclavage and at other times slipping away for a petit marronage to Lespérance. I have never itched like that first time nor have I flown so high and with so much fire. It was *The Agatha*, which held a bit of my mother's blood which drew me out. But I know that it could happen again.

Everyone watches the sky for my return.



Carol B. Duncan is a creative writer and academic of Caribbean heritage. Caribbean folklore, storytelling and patois/creole language are important sources in her writing. Her short stories have appeared in *Augur Magazine*, *Heartlines Spec*, *PREE Magazine*, *FIYAH* and the anthology *African Ghost Short Stories*.



Replacement Rainforests

by May Chong

Watch your new eyes, friend;
mata kucing's gift to you
drips with nectar still.
Since you had no eyes for truth,
theirs will do. When you vowed
to replace our old growth
with better forests, this is how
such favour is repaid.

Your tongue? A gift from wild yam,
who saw your itch, your avarice
speaking out of turn.
The swelling shall subside
eventually. Do be still.
We cannot guarantee these limbs
shivered from our crackling crowns
shan't ignite beneath your skin.

The lianas took a vote, gave up
their toughest twists to form
your new frame. When you creak
awake, brittle, rain-starved,
remember them.

Your heart, rattling hollow,
we traded with meranti's
whirring seed. Now who knows
how both shall grow?

Mengkuang sends apologies;
too late to turn your skin
thorn-side outside after
the set of sap and spidersilk.
But humans are adaptable. You
can deal with it.

Be grateful for those elders
who denied you—tualang, merbau,
ipoh, kapur—disfigured, denuded,
buried in your foundations.
Thank every growing thing
none were more generous.

Too late now to prune back
your termite words, belukar thoughts.
In every skinned root, remember:
all of us have cradled bones
older than the rain and dirt
you taste where flesh meets tooth.



May Chong is a bi Chinese Malaysian poet, speculative writer, and two-time Rhysling nominee (for poems first published in *Apparition Lit* #1 and #11) . Her verse has been featured in *Strange Horizons*, *Anathema Magazine*, *Uncanny Magazine*, and *Fantasy Magazine*. Away from the keyboard, she enjoys birdwatching and the worst possible puns. Find her online at [maychong.bsky.social](https://www.bsky.social/maychong).



Our Last Evening in a Moon-Struck City

by Madeehah Reza

‘The cities of Bengal were many and strong. Several were spread across the banks of this land of two rivers. Tanda was one such city, a centre for textiles, trade and travellers. In 1826, severe flooding destroyed the city and plunged it into a watery grave. Many lives were lost, including those of foreign travellers and merchants. Tanda no longer exists today.’

Her name was Meher-un-Nissa, the granddaughter of an astronomer, and she said the moon was falling.

“Is that a saying from these parts?” I asked Shaida.

I could not speak to the lady directly. I did not know any of the local dialects save a few words; my guide translated between us.

The good lady muttered, her voice low and taut.

“No, she means it literally,” said Shaida. “She is a teacher at the university where her grandfather used to work. She is using the telescope for some research and needs a couple more days before she parts with it.”

Meher-un-Nissa pulled the loose end of her sari over her head in our presence, strands of greying hair poking through. Her lobes were unadorned with the customary gold earrings of someone of her class; her fingers and wrists were also bare. But she kept her dignity with a chin pointed high and silver rimmed spectacles perched on the bridge of her flat nose.

I took off my cap as we stood in her study, a room with windows so large and clear that the late afternoon light flooded in with abundance. Fresh sunlight washed across rows upon rows of books that lined the walls, lapping over a woven rug spread across bare floors. A wooden desk sat near the windows. Next to it was the telescope: a slim device with a body coated in emerald green, gilded gold embellishments snaking up and down its length. I had never seen one of these devices made so beautifully. I knew telescopes were used by scholars to examine the heavens, but what did that concern me: a poor boy from Qing, raised by a drunk farmer?

Meher-un-Nissa had sent word for a buyer for her grandfather's telescope. A working telescope, one built by the scientist himself, was very valuable to my master. But it did not matter whether I closed the deal or not; I would receive my wages either way. And once the money was in my pocket, I'd see to visiting my sister. It had been over a year since and I had not left her in a good way.



The lamp-lit harbour was lined with its evening food vendors: crowds of merchants, travellers, sailors and dockhands puddled around each stall, eating and drinking at an insatiable pace. Shaida lamented his newly pregnant wife, cried over how he missed her

so and was filled with the sadness of a thousand men. Many a traveller had confessed similar inebriated words to me on the roadside, but not before launching into a tirade laced with violence and hate against the same woman.

Not Shaida. A merchant of many tongues, he found himself far from home in our small village at the bottom of the eastern slant of the Himalayas. Enamoured by our culture, Shaida married the cousin of an old friend of mine. He was a good man, as far as men went.

I wondered how it would be if my sister had met a good man instead of being exchanged to another family for a meagre bride price. I often wondered if her husband, that greedy drunk fool, would have similarly lamented his wife's condition with each of her five pregnancies. All my guilt-ridden wonderings asked the same question, and I ignored it.

I let Shaida's dazed, delirious words wash through me, refusing his hand as he offered a *bhong*-laced treat. Some moments later, my guide was deep in conversation with a group of merchants from Arakan. Finished with dinner, I told him that I was taking a walk.

I ventured away from the crowds and approached the end of the wooden walkway. Several ships were docked in the distance, their great shadows looming in the inky blackness of night. I lay down on the jetty, bones tired from the day's travel, mind in desperate thirst for something greater than gold. I watched the moon, a day or so from fullness, as dark clouds tried to obscure its glow. In another lifetime, Lulu and I sat on our father's rooftop when we were supposed to be in bed, pointing at the shapes the stars made and giving them names. I saw the donkey, she saw the squid. I saw a rooster, she saw a dragon. Lulu would punch a finger into the air and draw the shapes, joining dot to glinting dot and

exclaiming at her spectacular discovery. And the next night, provided our father had sufficiently passed out, we would draw the shapes again. Again and again and again until the thatched rooftop left marks on our backs.

Baba said I wasn't too pretty, she'd said one night after we found a goat. Not pretty enough for the dancehouse but not too pretty that I couldn't be someone's wife. Men don't like their wives to be too pretty.

Lulu, half my height but with a spirit as thunderous as the actual name our dead mother gave to her, said she wanted to live with the animals in the stars. I asked her *why not the moon, it was closer to home*. She'd said she wanted to be as far from home as possible.

My father did not intend to break my sister's spirit. He never laid a hand on her. But she broke anyway, and her pieces were scattered across our childhood, far away from my pathetic reach.



The good lady pointed to the clear sky through an open window. Meher-un-Nissa lived in a quiet district away from the brash, lively docks I had embarked on yesterday. She lived on her own, I noted, which was unusual for a woman of her standing. I saw no pictures of family members anywhere as she'd led us through the darkened hallways, though I knew those of the faith of the Musalmans did not display portraits, to encourage the presence of angels in the home.

"The moon is larger than normal, she says. Increasingly so. It has been for some time," said Shaida.

I poked my head out the window: the moon, a whitish smudge in the sky, was notably not falling. I said as much. I was not an astronomer: my sister and I had barely finished our basic schooling before our

father ordered us to sell his meagre produce. He tried to push my sister into worse custom but was refused when the madame of the nautchery saw her gaunt body. *She would not last a single night, let alone become a reliable regular.* Once I'd found another merchant to sell for, I left home in exchange for a trade stall, and then another, and another until I finally came under the employ of my master—an antiques trader for a local landlord. My sister came under the employ of her marriage before she was sixteen years of age.

I stroked the gold edges of the telescope with a vacant finger.

“She says the largening of the moon is a gradual process that has been recorded for the last five years.” Even Shaida did not understand. “She has an appointment with the local government board later this afternoon to discuss this and what it means for Tanda.”

Meher moved swiftly to the desk, littered with books and papers. A few sheafs floated to the floor. I examined one: detailed sketches of the moon with a fine hand, its shadows and curves and caverns delicately drawn. I pointed this to Shaida, who told me they were labelled ‘craters’. A new word. I glanced at the telescope as a deep want welled inside me. It was sliced by bitter guilt. *Why did you not let her live to see the moon?*

“Her grandfather’s research,” gestured Shaida. “She says, ‘The moon and the rivers are linked in an ancient bond. They move with each other. Our land is governed by the water, so much so that it is said the people of Bengal are spiritually connected to its rivers, and by extension, the moon.’”

He paused.

“This is taking longer than I thought,” Shaida whispered to me. “I don’t think you will get an agreement today. How about we find some dinner?”

I nodded, eager to come back the next day. “Let’s humour her a little longer. I’ll pay you double for today. Dinner is on me.”



My feet dangled at the end of the jetty, the water already lapping at my knees. A hot wind slapped against my bare skin like a wet blanket. Ripples of the inky black water billowed away from me, glinting moonlight.

The second time I’d tried *bhang*, Lulu told me off. We were a little older, a little wiser to the erratic tides of our father’s moods. I sat behind the house, about to eat the treats I’d stolen off the merchant from Kalikata before Lulu slapped them out of my hands.

“Do you want to be like him?” she shouted. “You want to listen to the demon inside you?”

I shouted back that she couldn’t tell me what to do. Before I knew it, she grabbed the treats off the ground and gobbled them up herself. That afternoon, I watched her vomit several times behind the house, swimming between laughter and tears as she clapped at whatever hallucinations played out in front of her. Eventually, she fell asleep on my lap.

Later, I asked her why she was stupid enough to do that. Later, she told me she already lived with one man who worshipped his own whims. She did not want to live with another.



We returned the next afternoon. Like an oracle proclaiming a prophecy, Meher-un-Nissa spoke of the city's doom.

"She says, 'The board dismissed my claims, my research. The city's officials do not care for their people. I have spoken to a colleague at the university: the water has already risen to a dangerous level with no sign of receding. I thought we would have more time, a month or perhaps two, but it is far worse than I feared. It is too late for Tanda. The river will soon swallow the land whole, making way for a new path.'"

"So we must leave?" I asked.

Shaida bent his head to my side, whispering, "I think we should cut our losses here. She is making lies to avoid parting with the telescope. You'll have to find an excuse for your master."

"I don't care about the telescope!" snapped Meher.

We stared at her. "Since when could you—"

"Please," she said, glaring at me. "Did you think you were the only person from Qing here? I have students that speak more eloquently than you. To live in this city, you must know the common tongues of all her travellers."

I remained silent.

"You can have the telescope for all I care. Don't even bother paying me. What will I do with heaps of taka when we will all be dead in a matter of days?"

"You are serious?" I asked. "Will the city really be destroyed?"

"The council did not take my grandfather seriously, and now they do the same with me. There are ways, many ways, that we could predict which towns and

villages would next be in the river's path of destruction, by observing the moon. But our leaders are always too little too late to listen to science." Her command of my native dialect was somewhat rusty, but the bitter lamentation was clear.

Shaida let out a yawn. "So you won't mind if we take the telescope? We're on a tight schedule."

"Hang your schedule. You will not escape the tides now, either. You can take the telescope but it will soon be destroyed along with whatever boat you came along in."

"That's good enough for me," said Shaida. I placed the pouch of taka on the edge of her desk, my eyes cast down under the frightening glare of Meher-un-Nissa, before the two of us hauled the telescope out the room.



I fell asleep on the jetty and woke up to my legs submerged in water. The revelry of the market had long disappeared. The jetty felt barely solid underwater. In the wet darkness someone called out to me, a voice I knew too well. The waves soared above me in a frightening arc before her sickly thin frame swam at me from the darkness in all her wedding finery, wet cloth pasted against dry bones. Her gaunt body reached for the ends of the jetty's wooden poles. She dragged herself up, gasping for breath, and grabbed my collar. White makeup sloughed off a haggard face. At half my height, the bridal clothes drowned her. Lulu was just a child.

You could have told him no

You could have told Baba I wasn't ready

"We had no other choice for you!" I spluttered. "There are never good choices for girls!"

I pushed the frightening thing that wasn't my sister away until it fell back into the water.

You knew he was a brute

You knew he took to the bottle just like Baba

*You knew and you knew and you knew and
you did nothing*

And then, there was nothing but darkness and simple words, words that did not leave me, have never left me

Why did you take his side

We could have run together

We could have gone to the moon

We could have run to the stars



In the early evening, I returned to Meher-un-Nissa's home. She sat in the study behind the desk, eyes closed. It was perhaps not proper for me to remain in the room alone with a lady, but she did not seem to care. The money remained on the desk, untouched.

Meher barely opened her eyes as she spoke. "If there is something wrong with the telescope, it is too late to rectify it now."

"We cannot sail today. The tides... the tides are too high. They say we should try again tomorrow."

A soft chuckle escaped her lips. "Yes. Try again tomorrow."

"They did not seem so sure. I think you may have been right in your prediction." When she did not reply, I continued. "Why did you not speak to me directly?"

“I was about to. But your man was all too happy in his role, so I thought I would play along. I did not expect the two of you to stay so long.”

I stepped closer. The room was darkened, no longer filled with fresh light but the murky grey of storm clouds.

“You will not look for safety? To save your own life, or your family’s?”

“I am the only one left in Tanda. I have lived in this city my whole life. My parents and grandparents died here, as will I.”

A silence came over us.

“I have no family left, either. Perhaps that is why I am not so bothered if I die here or in Qing.”

Meher’s eyes opened. She stared at me for a moment before glancing out the window. Perhaps she wanted me to leave.

“But I did want to visit my sister’s grave, one last time.” The words caught in my throat. “I owe her that much at least.”

“An older sister?” asked Meher-un-Nissa.

“Younger, my only one. Died some years ago after the birth of her fifth child. I pay for the upkeep of her grave. Sometimes I visit it myself to clean it. Her husband cares less for her in death than he did in life.”

The good lady nodded, her gaze now fixed at the sky. “My grandfather outlived my parents. My brothers and sisters barely attended his funeral. We are a family of friction, not fondness. I have no others here, neither spouse nor offspring.”

I nodded in turn, twisting my cap in my hand. “It must be quite peaceful to live as you do.”

“Peaceful, yes,” she said gently. “But lonely.”

“And quite a generous life, with no husband?”

Her lips pursed tightly before she spoke. “Life is often more generous and forgiving when spent with good people. But it has not been easy. Teaching does not bring much wealth. I sold all my gold and jewellery and whatever else was of monetary value in this house, which includes my grandfather’s telescope. I did not want to part with it, but I knew such a handcrafted item would fetch a handsome sum. Now, all I keep are my books, my grandfather’s books, for company. But I suppose it is all for nought now.”

“You have resigned yourself to this fate?”

That sharp glare returned to me before softening.

“No one can outrun the tides.”



My tears merged with the river. My limbs were leaden underwater; I had no strength to move. Our fingers intertwined like seaweed, her pulse deep and strong, but then I did not know if it was mine. The moon had disappeared behind the storm clouds. There were no stars; no donkey or dragon or rooster. And now, it rained.

Only Lulu swam next to me, bridal makeup washed off a face so thin and wrinkled and waterlogged. She smiled at me, keeping her chin above the waves before I choked on salty water. My head dipped below and I saw nothing but black. I hoped the end would be quick, painless, unlike hers.

Perhaps Lulu was the moon, commanding the rivers to engulf me. Perhaps Lulu beckoned death to me, just as I had not lifted a finger to prevent hers.



Madeehah is a writer and pharmacist from London, UK. Her first novella, *ORPHAN PLANET*, was shortlisted for the 2021 Future Worlds Prize for SFF writers of colour and will be published with Luna Press Publishing in 2025. Her short fiction has been published in several print and online magazines. You can find more of her work on her website madeehah.carrd.co and follow her on Twitter [@madeehahwrites](https://twitter.com/madeehahwrites).

The Siren's Song

by Marilia Angeline

It's not what you hear
but what you think
you hear
in me

that makes you tie yourself
to the sails—

this is the maddening
of the seas.



Marilia Angeline is a poet, writer, actor, and transformation coach based in Los Angeles. She holds B.A.s from The University of Michigan in Creative Writing & Literature and Drama. Her poetry often explores neurodivergence and the mind body spirit connection, as well as myth and magic and her Greek-Cypriot ancestry. Marilia's poems have been published by the City of West Hollywood, Yale Younger Poet Prize Winner Richard Siken's *Spork Press*, *Myth & Lore*, *redrosethorns magazine*, and *Spoon Knife 9*. She is working on her debut poetry book.

The Stories I Tell Myself

by Jennifer Hudak

Every morning when I wake up, I shuffle my oracle deck and spread three cards out on my bedspread. This is a new routine for me; I received the deck for my birthday, and I still have to look up each card in the accompanying booklet to discover its meaning. I like the ritual of it. The cards, smooth and slippery; the drawings that suggest more than they declare. The way the cards nudge me, gently, to acknowledge how I'm really feeling about the events of my life—my anxieties, my internal roadblocks, my deepest wishes. The latent brought to the surface. The mess of my mind given tidy, understandable form.

I do not believe my cards predict the future. But sometimes, in spite of myself, I can't help but sense larger forces at work. Certain cards want to be pulled; they make my fingertips tingle. Others say, *move on, keep shuffling*. Part of me—the part that's still just waking up, still fuzzy with dreams and nightmares—believes the universe is telling me something, each morning, here in my bed, if only I would listen.



Sometimes, I have the sense of my life splitting into different timelines as I'm living it.

Once, when I was a child, riding my bike home from my friend's, I hit a bump on the sidewalk and nearly choked on the hard candy I was sucking on. I was right across the street from my house when it happened—the moment when I felt the candy lodge in my throat. As I gagged, and tried to swallow, I stared at the blank windows of my house, thinking: if only I'd saved the candy until I got home. If only I'd been more careful on my bike.

Now, decades later, I tell myself that this experience was a warning: the universe telling me to take care when I chew and swallow. As if this were a moment upon which my later life hinged, and if I remembered it, if I kept it close as the sign it was, then I'd stay safe. To this day I'm nervous about hard candies. Grapes. Cherry tomatoes. Chewing gum.

Eventually the candy went down. Eventually I got back on my bike and rode across the street, home, crying to my mother. But sometimes I think maybe I didn't. Maybe I died there, in sight of my house. Maybe I'm dying still. Maybe all of my memories since then are an oxygen-deprived hallucination.



We are an inherently storytelling species. We scrawl drawings on cave walls, inscribe tablets with letters. The stories we hear as children—fables, fairy tales, parables—help us see the world as something understandable. Something with a beginning (*once upon a time*) and an end (*and they all lived happily ever after.*) The stories we tell ourselves follow the same formula; the three oracle cards I pull from the deck represent past, present, and future: my life in a neat, straight line.

When we get a bit older, we set up dominoes—in straight lines and curves, in increasingly elaborate trails—and we watch with satisfaction as a single nudge from a finger sets the entire thing in motion, revealing designs we couldn't see before they all fell down. We begin to understand that the dominoes are a metaphor. We learn that history is filled with inflection points: moments of decision at which millions of possible futures hover, waiting breathlessly to see which one will solidify into reality, waiting to see which domino will be tipped over.

The thing is, we don't know, when we've blithely tipped over that first domino, what we've done. It's only in retrospect—days, months, years later—that we can see the larger shape of our actions. That, too, is a form of storytelling. A way of making sense, of creating meaning. A culling of events, like chiseling away at a block of marble, until a sculpture emerges.

Because, of course, that first domino wasn't really the first domino. Nothing ever happens in a vacuum. It's dominoes all the way down.



The part I didn't tell you about the hard candy story is that when I went inside, throat raw and cheeks tear-stained, my mother was irritated and abrupt. I was supposed to have been home earlier, and now we were running late for an appointment scheduled later that afternoon. I had a history of running late, particularly when it came to appointments I was dreading. I also had a history of malingering, of imagining myself mortally injured, of faking stomach aches to get sent home from school. That's the context of my mother's annoyance, her quick brushing aside of my wails that I'd just nearly choked to death. And while this was a traumatic, formative event in my life, she most likely doesn't even remember it. For

her, this was just one of the many times I was late, even though she'd told me over and over again to be home on time. Each of us locked inside our own lives, our own narratives, thrust into confusion when our narratives intersect.

But that's not as good of a story, is it? The context just makes things messier; it's harder to find a through-line, a narrative thread, a singular moment that echoes into the future. Whose story is this, anyway? What does it all *mean*?

On the other hand, when I end the story at the moment I finally manage to swallow the candy down, its meaning is more clear. For me, the hard candy is a harbinger of many possible futures. If I never choke to death, it's because I heeded that warning, that sign. And if, some day, a bite of food becomes lodged in my windpipe—well, in those final moments, before I lose consciousness, I will probably remember that day my bicycle hit a bump on the sidewalk. I will tell myself, just before I black out, *I always knew this was going to happen.*



Like most people, I often struggle making decisions. Sometimes, when the decision is small and relatively inconsequential, I amuse myself by looking for signs. *If there's an available parking space in front of the store, I'll tell myself, that means it's okay for me to go in and buy myself a book. Or, If the rain stops within the next ten minutes, that's the universe saying I should really go for a walk.* I tell myself these things because choices are scary, even the little ones. Especially the little ones. Big decisions often take lots of thought and discussion, the writing of pro and con lists, a good night's sleep to mull things over. But we don't have that luxury with the hundreds of tiny choices we make each day. And each

choice has the potential to split the universe into pieces, to send us all down a different track. How can any of us do anything with that kind of pressure?

So I construct a narrative, where there seemed only to be chaos. I congratulate myself on listening to fate. I look back at the card I pulled from my oracle deck a week ago, and say, *Ah! Now it all makes sense!* And later, when I tell the story about how, on my walk, I spotted my neighbor's lost dog and was able to bring him home, I'll say, "The rain stopped at exactly the right time for me to go on that walk." I'll say, "See? It was meant to happen."



We are a storytelling species. The stories I tell myself give me a sense of agency and control. But they also, at the same time, have the potential to fill me with a sense of dread, of paralysis. Each day, every moment, I feel as though the world is experiencing a tipping point. That we—all of us, everywhere—are approaching a track shift, an irreversible branch in our cosmic road. It is far too easy for me to envision the frightening futures ahead. It is difficult for me, sometimes, to imagine alternatives.

And that is the problem. What do we do, when the signs around us all point to one inevitable story? What is our responsibility? Do we just give up, and let those dominoes fall?

I refuse that answer. Actively and repeatedly, I refuse it. We are always tipping. All of us; all the time. We are constantly on the verge of creating a different future, a different past, a different story. Symbols matter. Stories matter. We need them to gather ourselves up, to do the right thing. To create meaning. But there is not just one domino. There is never just one choice.



Tomorrow morning, I will wake up, and stretch, and sit upright. I will spread the oracle cards out on my bedspread, use the palms of my hands to swirl them around the way I've seen dealers do at casinos, to shuffle them without bending the edges. Then I will gather them back into a deck, smooth the sides, and deal out three cards in a row. I'll pore through the booklet to determine what the cards are saying to me: the truths they're prompting me to acknowledge, the buried memories they're bringing to light. I'll think about my day ahead, and wonder if I should set a different intention, alter my decided-upon schedule, make a new choice.

What I'm asking myself is, how can I prepare myself for the future? How can I open myself up to possibility without drowning in it? Where is the sliver of control I can cling to, the necessary fiction that I might be able to avoid heartbreak, explain hardship, and ultimately guide myself to an ending that makes sense?

What I'm asking myself is, *What does it mean?*

What does it mean?



Jennifer Hudak is a speculative fiction writer fueled mostly by tea. Her work has appeared on both the Locus Magazine and the SFWA recommended reading lists, and has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Originally from Boston, she now lives with her family in Upstate New York where she teaches yoga, knits pocket-sized animals, and misses the ocean. Find out more about her on her website: jenniferhudakwrites.com

See ya later

by Amy Henry Robinson

Im not exactly sure how to say goodbye.

No really, I've started this editorial essay about 18 times and I get all tripped up in figuring out how to convey lots of things.

What I really want to say is how integral you all were--anyone who is taking the time to read this--to the success of this little magazine project. You lifted us up with so many layered and thoughtful and funny and terrifying submissions. You showed us social media love and floated our payment to writers and artists through subscriptions and donations for several years (until Twitter chirped into the dumpster, but that's a whole other story).

You welcomed us into the community. We offered the platform and you hung out with us on it. One of our main missions was to show respect to writers, and you showed us respect in return. You became our supporters, co-conspirators, and friends. You became a part of the little blue ghostie gang.

What I really want to say is that closing isn't a bad thing. There are seven years of stories, poems, essays, and editorials here: 340+ unique, individual voices, tales,

views, experiences. They were published with joy (and blood, sweat, and tears). We made the decision to move on before the burnout wore through that passion. We live in a world that is constantly moving forward and fast. Our library of tales is full of brilliant words and wonder, that folx can go back to re-read, or discover for the first time. I consider that a success.

What I really want to say is this magazine could not have existed without the partnership of four women who **supported** each other. This is a heart project of the four founding editors and we were tied together into some gordian knot/finger puzzle, working on every single issue (never missed a publication date! Never missed a payment to a writer!). Removing any of those four cornerstones would have altered the whole structure.

The reading team came in four years ago and strengthened and solidified the structure. Marie Baca Villa elevated our social media, blogging, and shone the monthly flash fiction contest editor. Maria Schrater took on the role of poetry editor and even handled some cover art direction. We expanded with more talented reading staff: AJ Van Belle, Evelyn Teng, Léon Othenin-Girard, Monique Cuillerier, Moriam E. Kuye, & Tehnuka. They definitely extended our capacity and heartbeat.

And what I really want to share, but has taken 300 words to get here, is how much this project has changed me. How it has kept me alive, in many ways. My heart is in this digital record, blood and viscera entangled with each ebook, online post, bespoke audio recording.

Because I didn't want to talk about my chronic illness again, (It gets boring, I know) but I got really sick in the same month we launched our first issue. That was the start of a different kind of journey for me. Due to the illness, I haven't been able to travel at all, but because of this magazine, because of this community, because

of these stories taking me all around the world and voices beyond the global North West perspective, I felt more connected and less isolated. I traveled through these new stories, through the relationships created by talking with writers and readers and editors.

Pushing through to read submissions, talk to authors, edit essays and poems, and do the back-end work pulled me out of bed on more than a handful of occasions. It was the electric jolt to my rebuilt body lying on the slab of the mad scientist's lab. So thank you to anyone who tossed us lightning bolts.

It's been a really lovely ride. If you decide to create your own speculative fiction magazine, which I would actually recommend, build it with people you trust. There is no way to do this alone.

So to end this longish, Midwestern-esque, goodbye. We're gathering our things and gabbing as we slow scooch toward the exit. Standing in the open door chatting with various friends. Walking down to the car, stopping to reminisce on the way. Virtual hugs and kind words, and now we're sitting in that car with the window rolled down, really ready to turn the key and drive away.

I guess what I really want to say is thank you. We're going to miss you.



Amy Henry Robinson is a writer and owner/editor at Apparition Literary Magazine. She has a chequered past leading writing workshops for Writing Pad L.A. & Write In Ventura, and as the column editor for FierceAndNerdy.com. Her poetry & spec. fiction has been in *Tree and Stone*, *Strange Horizons*, *Inner Worlds*, & *Flash Fiction Press*. She lives in a small house beside the ocean with her husband and their boss, Olivia the tortie cat. You can find her skulking about used book stores, elbow deep in the sweater rack at the thrift stores, or haunting her website AmyHenryRobinson.com.

Thank You

to Our Subscribers and Patrons

Special thanks to our patrons and readers—without our barnacled friends, this issue wouldn't exist.

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Our staff for volunteering their time and effort:

- Moriam, A.J., Tehnuka, Evelyn, Monique, and Léon
- Guest editor Aurelius Raines II
- and our talented and hilarious associate editors: Marie & Maria
- Font and Logo/design integration by the ever-supportive Seen R

To our Patrons who are supporting us on a monthly basis, not only do these contributions help pay our writers but everything donated stays in Apparition Lit's bank account. You're helping us commission new artists, pay better rates, and slowly climb that ladder of success.

Past Issues

Year 7: Blight (January 2024); Mercurial (April 2024);
Anachronism (July 2024); Harbringer (October 2024)



Year 6: Dread (January 2023); Symmetry (April 2023);
Creature (July 2023); Reclamation (October 2023)



Year 5: Charm (January 2022); Wanderlust (April 2022); Omen (July 2022); Nostalgia (October 2022)



Year 4: Justice (January 2021); Chance (April 2021); Contamination (July 2021); Wonder (October 2021)



Year 3: Experimentation (January 2020); Transfiguration (April 2020); Redemption (July 2020); Satisfaction (October 2020)



Year 2: Resistance (January 2019); Ambition (April 2019);
Retribution (July 2019); Euphoria (October 2019)



Year 1: Apparition (January 2018); Delusion (April 2018);
Vision (July 2018); Diversion (November 2018)



