

# APPARITION

Literary Magazine

The cover features a detailed illustration of a merman's head and upper torso. The merman has a pale, textured skin, a small blue eye, and a crown-like headpiece with a purple band and gold trim. He is wearing a large, ornate, light-colored ruff collar. His right hand is raised, with fingers spread, as if reaching for a small, glowing, multi-colored sphere floating nearby. The background is dark and moody, with several other glowing spheres scattered throughout. The overall style is fantastical and artistic.

ISSUE 18:  
WANDERLUST

AUN-JULI RIDDLE

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# Apparition Lit

Issue 18: Wanderlust, April 2022

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# Contents

A Word from our Editor	
by M.L. Krishnan.....	1
Six Steps To Become A Saint	
by Avi Burton.....	4
A Spring Divine	
by Armaan Kapur .....	15
After Inventing Time Travel	
by Mary Soon Lee .....	31
Hitchhiker	
by Lindz McLeod .....	33
While Alice sleeps in Wonderland	
by Marisca Pichette .....	47
The Grief Portal	
by Aun-Juli Riddle.....	51
Working on Wanderlust	
with Erika Hollice .....	65
Multiverse Reimagined	
by Kamilah Yasmin .....	68
Thank You	
to Our Subscribers and Patrons .....	73
Past Issues	

# A Word from our Editor

by M.L. Krishnan

Dear Readers,

Many moons ago, as I was flying from one continent to another, as I lurched through each part of my journey in a dissociative miasma of exhaustion, I ended up in Frankfurt for a layover that stretched over eight hours. This was three years after 9/11, and I was a brown woman on a visa from a brown country, so security-paranoia-gymnastics dictated that I could not leave the airport. I was more or less numbed to the precise cadences of this theater, so I settled into a bank of seats in a crumbling terminal.

I laid there for a while, watching the evening slide into night through the glassed-in walls. I was unable to sleep or wake, so I cracked open Ursula K. Le Guin's short story collection *Changing Planes*, for the first time. I bought it for my trip as I had found the title amusing, but then I came across **this line** and my world cracked open like an egg.

*The airport offers nothing to any human being  
except access to the interval between planes.*

I suddenly felt very seen. As I kept reading, a burnished, glowing sensation began to pulse under my skin. On that day, Le Guin not only bottle-capped the exact situation I was in, but also parsed the complex knot of feelings I had deadened in order to navigate my long travels.

And that is what you can expect with the Wanderlust issue, with each gorgeous piece tapping into profound emotional depths that contain multitudes. The narratives thrum with movement and stasis, worlds and ethers, slippages into planes and states. But ultimately, they are tethered together by a yearning that strikes at the beating core of what Wanderlust stands for—a feeling, above all else.

- Step into “The Grief Portal” by Aun-Juli Riddle, and prepare to be cleaved into a million shards by the faceted prism of your emotions.
- Allow Avi Burton to vivify you in “Six Steps to Become a Saint.” Intertwining a taut narrative of religion, obsession, and the harrowing worth of sacrifice, Avi explores the fissures between familial ties and national identity.
- In “A Spring Divine” Armaan Kapur takes you on an epistolary journey through the roiling seas of language, art, history, and the delightfully bizarre.
- Let Lindz McLeod gently dismantle and piece back notions of who we believe ourselves to be, through “Hitchhiker.”
- Mary Soon Lee draws space and time around the gossamer frailty of human emotion in the poem “After Inventing Time Travel.”
- From the perspective of Alice’s sister in “While Alice sleeps in Wonderland,” Marisca Pichette

reinvoices Alice's adventures through a fresh, unexpected lens in her poem.

- And finally, we have a poignant essay by Kamilah Yasmin titled "Multiverse Reimagined," that weaves between the complexities of being transported as a reader and a writer in our increasingly fraught world.

Along with the fantastic Apparition Lit team, I'm incredibly excited to share these pieces with you—these shining, mirrored universes unto themselves. And as you read this issue, I hope you find yourself being captivated by the elsewheres and the heres and the quiet in-between spaces of your choosing.



**M.L. Krishnan** originally hails from the coastal shores of Tamil Nadu, South India. She is currently the Marketing Director of *khōréō*, a quarterly magazine of speculative fiction and migration. She is a 2019 graduate of the Clarion West Writers' Workshop, and her work has appeared, or is forthcoming in *The Best Microfiction 2022 Anthology*, *Death in the Mouth: The Best of Contemporary Horror*, *The Offing*, *Apparition Lit*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Paper Darts*, *Sonora Review* and elsewhere. Her stories have been nominated and shortlisted for the Stabby Award, Best of the Net, the Best Microfiction Anthology, the Bath Flash Fiction Award, and more. You can read her work on [mlkrishnan.com](http://mlkrishnan.com), or find her on Twitter @emelkrishnan.

# Six Steps To Become A Saint

by Avi Burton

*ONE: the father, the son.*

**I**grow up in the shadows of three-eyed gods. The statues stare me down, pale marble hands reaching out to cup the streets of the city. Some urchins nestle in the statue's palms at night, though that is supposed to be an honor reserved for the blessed, not street rats. The emperor loathes the desecration, but there are too many of us for him to stop.

I could tell him stories about desecration. Once, a boy pissed on the statue of Laetitia—the god of joy—as a dare. We found him hanging from her thumb the next morning, neck snapped. The boy picked Laetitia because he thought joy would not hurt him. I know too well how quickly joy goes to rot.

My childhood passes under the array of statues, running errands for my father, hauling metal back and forth. I'm an urchin, but at least I know my father—he is a blacksmith, an immigrant to the city, who builds beautiful automatons. He came here smuggled in



the back of a boat, muttering prayers to a god whose territory he'd abandoned.

I've never seen his— my— *our* homeland. I suppose we share it. At seven, it doesn't cross my mind very much. I certainly don't miss it. My home is the city and its gems and its statues. (It's hard not to love something when it gleams so brightly in the sun.) The saints and statues are open to all, even grime-smear'd urchins like me.

Whenever I express fascination with these stranger's gods, my father frowns. He warns me that this pantheon offers nothing to me, that they will never accept a foreigner into the clergy. That we are from the old country, and our god (singular) is not one of grand statues and gold-dripping statues. Our god is in small acts, our sanctity kept sacred by the mundane. Laughter between friends. A mother's embrace. Paint on canvas. In between these acts, in dancing rays of sunlight, is where our god resides.

I do not listen to him. I go to speeches in the square where monks have their eyes smeared with liquid gold, and festivals of diamonds and emeralds that celebrate the saints.

I decide to become a priest.



*TWO: marked blood.*

I am twelve and the seminary school hates me. The building is pale, cold brick; students of a similar color. My peers mock my accent, which I didn't know I had— I don't know if they're laughing at the slum-slur of my words or the rolling lilt of old country hidden in the back of my mouth. I ignore their jibes and focus on my studies.

In class, learning about saints— the servants of the gods, devoted and the dead. It is a painful process to become one and it always ends unhappily, but everyone in my class wants to try regardless. *Saints hurt. Saints die*, say my teachers. *This is the way it goes*. Only after their death are saints given titles and praise, and golden statues of their likeness placed around the seminary.

At school, all the statues are gold. Wealth means good fortune, and good fortune means the gods favor you. Here in this holy place, money is a virtue. Icons of silver and bronze dance in the firelight. I wonder what it means for me to have been born an urchin in the slums. Was I a sinner, then? Or just unlucky? What about my father? He only ever seemed to want to survive, and for me to be happy. The city gave me my ambition, not him.

When my father visits— which is rare— he brings strange rituals and expectations. Braided candles and stern lectures. A small oil-jointed automaton, and questions. Are my grades good? Yes. Are they the best in the class? No. He takes me aside, and says, son, *if you are going to become one of them, then you must do it completely. When they look at you, they must see only the best, so they never take a second glance and see the old country underneath. And get rid of your accent.*

I find that last statement ironic, given the rough brogue in his own voice. At this point, my father is nearly a stranger to me, and he looks out of place at the seminary school. Bearded, eyes downcast, head covered— his broad shoulders and rough sallow hands contrast against the slim-robed priests. I squirm away from his grip, uncomfortable with his intensity and oddity, but he pulls me into an embrace before I can escape.

When he lets me go, he slips a piece of sweet bread into my pocket. He must have carried it with him all this way, another small, strange gift to me. When he turns away, I take a bite. It tastes like hom— of an old god with no name and small miracles. I want to cry. I won't.

I try not to miss my father when he leaves. I work on my accent, and I make sure to pray to my new gods every night.



*THREE: divine devotion.*

I am sixteen and my father dies. I don't know if it was overwork or disease that got him in the end, or if they are one and the same, inextricably linked through the bitter string of poverty.

I go back to my hometown for the funeral. I have not returned here for four years, and it is dirtier and more cluttered than my memories made it. The small city block, where all the old country immigrants live, is crowded. The signs are written in a mix of city language and a foreign script I cannot read. (My father tried to teach me, once. I walk faster so I do not have to think about how I'll never have the opportunity to learn from him again.)

The statues of three-eyed gods are still there, and in my mind, they beam down beneficently at me as I stride down the street in my silver seminary robes. I have escaped this place. I have become something better, something holy.

My pride fades when the mortician tells me I'm too late to see my father's corpse. He requested an old world burial, one with a mourning period of seven days, but the morgue had no space or inclination, so they threw

his body into the sea. A heretic's grave. I think of how often my father stared longingly across the ocean, and I hope his corpse finds its way to the old country somehow. Guilt tastes like salt on my lips.

My father worked in the city for three decades, but he was never granted citizenship— that's an honor only for those who convert. He got paid less than other workers, and couldn't afford the doctors who might have saved him when his heart gave out. At the seminary, I learned that the gods love everyone but what of those who don't pray to them? How can they be benevolent gods, if they only grant miracles to those who sacrifice to them? How could they and the city be good and still let my father's corpse sag with seawater? The questions hurt my head. I do not want to cry, so I do what I did all those lonely nights at seminary school and pray.

To my surprise, the first words out of my mouth are the prayers my father taught me: like the signs above the shop, a mix of old and new language. I am startled at how easily the psalms rise to my lips. I shed my robes like a carapace and kneel across the floorboards of my childhood home. I search for beauty in small things: the gleam of sun off my father's tools. The smell of fresh bread from the bakery next door. This is a god who is always here. This is a god who gives small miracles to all, every day.

Maybe it is just as real as the three-eyed pantheon, but it does not matter. I don't need a small miracle. I need a way to bring my father back.



*FOUR: doubt.*

I am still sixteen, and I do not go back to the seminary. I tell myself I will, soon, once the mourning period is up,

but then it passes and I am still in my father's cramped apartment. I gift his automatons to his few friends and try— but fail— to throw out what's half-finished. I pray to a mix of gods. At night, I dream of drowning, of reaching for a shoreline that crumbles beneath my fingertips. During the day, I hang my silver robes up in the closet and put on welding gloves. My father's clothes and tools fit me now. Either I have grown into him, or what's left of him has shrunk into me.

He used to tell me stories of our people. I remember them now in the soft burr of his voice: how we prayed, how we ate, how we suffered, and when all three acts were the same. We were a small, isolated folk, tossed between different regimes like a ship between craggy waves. Our god stayed with us, but did not save us. In order to cope with this, we built creatures of clay that protected our villages, and loved them as we loved our god and loved our own names.

My father always ended his stories with the words: *That's why I became a blacksmith, so I could build as our ancestors did. You, too, could create something loved.*

I wish I had listened to his teachings, instead of being blinded by glittering gods. His tools are heavy and unfamiliar, awkward to use. Each blow of the hammer crashes against the anvil. I do not know what I am building at first, until it begins to take shape beneath my hands: a body forged in steel and silver, an automaton bigger than anything my father ever made. It is hollow on the inside, like bird bones, oddly delicate for all its bulk. It is stronger than clay— a mixture of city gleaming and old country tradition. It is a way for my father to return to me. (I think. I hope. I pray.)

My homeland and the city share one thing in common: resurrection is possible, but it's heresy, not a holy miracle. I close the blinds so the neighbors

cannot see what I am creating. Once, I would have been horrified to defy the gods, but grief has changed me. I will build what I need and take what I must. I need my father back, and that transcends all faith.

The priests of the seminary come knocking. I say I will be back soon, but do not give a date. My final exams are coming up, they remind me. I could be ordained within a few days if I focus, just in time for my seventeenth birthday. I don't listen. There is another test I have to pass.

Finally, the construct is complete. It's clumsy in places, with globs of metal holding the joints closed, a mixture of iron and bronze, but it is mine, and it suits my purposes well enough. It lies inanimate on the table, a vase waiting to be filled. It will hold a little bit of magic. A little bit of electricity. A little bit of prayer.

The ritual will be done tomorrow, and I will bring my father back.

That night— for the first time since my father died—I do not dream of the sea.



### *FIVE: martyrdom.*

I am newly seventeen, and the guards come for me under the cover of night. A storm crashes against the window, muffling their footsteps. They pull me from my bed and bind my legs with rough-hewn rope so I cannot run, then drag me to the city center beneath the triple eyes of the gods. It's so quick I don't even have a chance to scream.

Someone must have told the priests. Someone must have suspected what I was doing. One of my father's friends, superstitious and suspicious? One of the priests

of the seminary? It doesn't matter— I am alone either way.

Rain pelts the square. A crowd gathers around me. Their torches flare like pricks of stars against the dark. I clutch in my fist a small shard of metal with a switch and a wire— the key to my creation, which I kept beneath my pillow. I hide it between my fingers as the shouting starts.

The priests want to burn me for my heresy. I do not flinch as they list my crimes. Saints hurt. Saints die. This is the way it goes.

Someone douses me with oil— a baptism, of sorts. My breath rattles in my lungs. I see some friends from the seminary standing in the crowd, stone-faced like statues as thunder rolls in. I can't— won't— die like this, like my father, alone and betrayed by the city. The fire leers closer.

*I'm sorry, father, I think. For everything.* Once again, I failed. Once again, I am abandoning him. I have a way out, and I intend to use it.

The priest lights a match. I flip the switch.

There is a *crack*. In the distance, the door to my apartment shatters. Heavy metal footsteps shake the pavement. My automaton emerges, limping, half-formed. It is a crude thing, bulbous, staggering, but it stands eight feet tall and smiles with needle teeth at the white-faced crowd. My laughter is the only noise audible against the storm.

Then someone screams.

*Come to me, I beg my creation through a mouth full of rainwater. Let us both be complete.*

It lumbers forward. One of the guards swings at it, but his sword hits the automaton's metal chest and

sticks there. He stumbles back. The automaton ignores him. The crowd parts like water. Lightning splinters against the nearest building, close enough for me to smell the ozone. The storm is drawing closer. I raise my fist with the key up towards the sky. It quivers in my grasp, seeking the storm.

With my other hand, I caress the silver skin of my creation. It leans into my touch. The broad smoothness of its chest reminds me of my father. Thunder rolls across the sky. I know the next strike of the storm will hit us. I know, too, that god is with me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up— the air ripples— the heavens part. Lightning comes crashing down, falling-angel bright. I think, through my tears, that it is beautiful.



*SIX: resurrection.*

I am seventeen and I am dead. No— I am dying. I am surrounded by white light and I am burning. My skin is peeling off. My ears are ringing. The smell of melted flesh and metal singes the back of my throat. My automaton embraces me, shielding me, melding with me. I hear a scream in the distance. I think it might be coming from my mouth.

Saints hurt. Saints die. This is the way it goes.

I pass out.

For a brief moment, I feel my heart stop.

I come back to consciousness.

I breathe in with lungs of steel. The moon gleams like pale fire off my chest of chrome, and the rain soothes my burns. The crowd is clustered behind the three-eyed statues of the gods. I smile, feel my metal mouth



crack. I am an amalgamation of sinew and steel. I am half metal, half man. Half old country, half new. In the drop-dead quiet, I realize I don't have a pulse.

I stretch my newly bulky body. Metal pops and creaks. Thunder crackles overhead. Everything else is silent. I can hear my breath— in, out, like leather bellows against my ribs. I am a saint. I am immortal. I am a beast of resurrection.

I wish my father were here to see this.

I turn to leave. No one stops me. The crowd is pale and huddled in the darkness. I offer them an orphan's salute, then leave the square. My body still hurts, but it is mine, and the pain just means that I survived.

I make my way down to my father's final resting place. The ocean presses cold fingers to the shore and then draws back, as if afraid. The storm is fading, but slivers of rain still shatter the cool surface of the water.

My metal chest thrums. The statue-gods of the city face away from me, three eyes turned inward to the buildings I am leaving behind. The seminary glows pale in the distance.

I find a boat left unattended, big enough to hold my bulk. Rain splatters against my skin, and I tilt my head up to taste it: a tinge of saltwater. The ocean, calling me home. It's like my dreams all over again, but this time I will not drown.

I can't see the edge of the old country from here, but I can imagine it, just like the stories my father told me. I don't know if my people will welcome me back, strange and changed as I am, but I know I have to try.

I row. The oars cut like blades through the flat water. The moonlight melts across the surface of the ocean,

puddling white atop deep blue. It is beautiful. I breathe in, smell the salt. I find my god there.



**Avi Burton** (he/they) is an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto, where he's studying theater and classic literature. He enjoys writing about religion, revenants, and--on occasion-- laser swords. His short fiction has also been published in *Escape Pod* and *PodCastle* magazine. You can find him on twitter under @avi\_why.

# A Spring Divine

by Armaan Kapur

**D**ear Miss Beatrice,

You must think me a thief, the way I stole away from our home last week, unannounced. I hope this letter suffices in describing my trajectory, if not my intent:

At night, while the corridors slept, I packed a small duffel bag and some currency. Halting under the front door, I glanced back and observed Renoir's bronze fur glimmering by the fireplace, and for a moment, nearly believed the velvet curtains themselves had grown feet, to come and bid me a ghostly adieu! But it was just my longing and light-speed imagination, which evoked Ma's presence, her gentle hands that instructed me to 'Leave, now.'

Descending the staircase, I recounted stories of my mother's youth, of her attraction to aquatics, nearly a romantic sentiment. Grandly she leaned into the mythos of her own name: Apsara, celestial maiden, nymph of the seas. She considered things my father never could; ants and whole monuments blink past him, even today.

Often, Ma spoke of Viareggio, a resort with sandy beaches and a pirouetting breeze of possibility. ‘When the time is right, you’ll find your perspective,’ she mused, alluding that some discovery awaited me in the waters there. From such intrigue, and with an inarticulate expectation, I’ve travelled two nights to her getaway in Italy, within the mountainside province of Lucca. I am neighbour to Pisa, Pistoia, Firenze, and Carrara.

‘My dear—’ I hear you interceding already, with a finger on your redcurrant lips. ‘I won’t recall any of those names. The city is Viareggio, is it not?’

So, it is, Miss B. Such admonishments and your company I missed especially, earlier today, as I surveyed the Ligurian seaside with my eyes very much *open*. In the afternoon, I found a store with endless sketchbooks, canvases, an actual wilderness of paint. Over the shop counter, my grasp of Italian proved insufficient, but an older gentleman intruded and haggled on my behalf, arranging that I should get my supplies for close to nothing. His name is Jan Vanhove, he’s an expressionist painter from the Netherlands. With imposing kindness, he made enquiries into my interest, and subsequently invited me to his studio for art lessons, as and when I pleased.

‘Together—’ he urged, ‘we will uncover your personal points of focus. What cliff jumps out? What breach in the horizon? Is the afternoon a shade vibrant, in your private recollections?’

Around dusk, on the defunct fridge of Ma’s apartment, I found an old note which described the insignia of the nearby marina, alongside a man’s name and phone number. I cycled fifteen minutes to the shore, and through divine contrivance, discovered the noted gentleman sitting inside a booking office, sipping

coffee in the grey twilight. After some squinting, he recognised the handwritten cursive of Ma's writing, and looking up at my face, his expression transformed; he left his den of comfort and embraced me tightly. Together, we sauntered to the pier, stopping at a regiment of catamarans and dinghies and motorboats. Though I insisted that I was well versed with sailing, he stood over my shoulder as I boarded Ma's yacht and lopped into the water. When I turned back, he had vanished, but the entire province was watching me in his stead; the night-time lights were a binocular lens that surveyed my uncertain gait, that imbalanced me from the dangling bow of the yacht, and caused me to slip and fall to my knees.

I didn't careen out of the craft, gratefully, but the water was infested with sharp violence; a mutiny of waves arose out of nowhere. Rancorous thunder clapped above, and in front, with a stuttering gasp, I discerned two eyes (pewter stones) piercing into me: there was a man in the water, looking up and drowning.

Compelled by instinct, I leapt out to save him. Immediately, the tide thrashed me, and it gulped down my ears and throat, as I attempted to swim forward, even a small pulse, to catch the innocent by the waist, the arm, anything at all. Through rain-struck eyes, I saw his head fall under the surface and I gasped inwardly, swallowing outwardly, and there was no lifeguard to help, nor a saint in heaven, because I was a feeble pebble in Neptune's hand, and down the cyclonic tumult, I was sinking.

'My urge to live is the death of me,' I decided, as my eyelids closed and the world adjourned around me. Water mingled adamantly in my nose and mouth; it singed my eyes and skin and tugged at my jacket, and what wilful mind this water possessed! That it had

fingers, that it held me by the nape and flung me up into the sky, from the confine of an early grave, onto the deck of the yacht, to safety, even breath. Opening my eyes, I turned turtle-like in my shell, and spied two arms, a torso and head, lifted above the hull and peering down at me, with a bemused face.

It was the drowned man who had saved me, instead—!

I mustered to both feet and ambled to the edge to thank him. Seeing my advance, the stranger bounded backwards into the fount of roving water. Before he disappeared, I assimilated only a glimpse of his lithe shoulders, that glinted in the lunar spotlight. Afterwards, afloat in impasse between sky and Earth, I stayed a while longer, shivering into my clothes. Finally, the need for warmth begged me return to the shore, to the apartment, dry clothes, and a steaming cup of tea.

I must conclude now, because I'm due before Mr. Vanhoven at dawn. The painter endeavours to teach me to perceive a landscape correctly, because according to him, I've been looking at landscapes incorrectly my entire life. Somehow, I feel prone to believe him.

Yours truly,

Inayat



Dear Miss Beatrice,

How is the Sun today, from the window where you sit?

It's been a week since the incident on the yacht, and four of these seven days I've met with Jan Vanhoven at some viewing cliff or beachside or restaurant terrace, overlooking the gemstone shore. My tutor isn't a freeform artiste, like I expected, but rather, he

is a ruthless raven reincarnated as a man. Certainly, his fingers are claw-like, when he hooks them on my shoulder, to orient my body to *his* perspective of style, events, and eyesight. He insists I shouldn't gawk at any landscape overlong, that I should only allow a shallow glimpse, after which I must close my eyes and exaggerate the image mentally.

Comprehending this advice, I've stood for hours in front of easel and palette, and peered within my mind's store, but my meadow is prickled with a sonorous feeling that reverts me to thoughts of home, or flashes on me a frightening countenance, of the man who appeared on the edge of Ma's yacht: that spectre who sank himself.

I know you'd chastise me, Miss B., for having ventured into tumultuous waters in the first place. But to your concern I refute:

Did you ever *believe* my mother's stories, Beatty?

I picture our abode now, in the veil of my closed eyes, and a breeze taps on our first-floor balcony. There, under my brow, monotony and bohemia unfold in every aspect on the ground level, in pacing feet and sulking mouths and sultry jest and glasses of wine, a cornucopia of new thought (a seed in every artist's mind), but I am locked ostensibly out, gone, goodbye! How immovably fixed I am. Behind me, Dad opens the sliding door and beckons me inside, were I to catch a chill, or worse, a new perspective on being! It is crude to admit, but nonetheless true: Ma's ashes have travelled a greater distance than my own two feet.

Earlier today, when Mr. Vanhoven analysed my drawings, he assured me that I am free, that painters are instrumentally free, given to reorder elements of a landscape in accordance with their inner nature, their true being. My creative element, as you're aware, I've

kept hidden under an old yew tree, behind my wardrobe of boorish winter clothes, for years. A confession now, Beatty.

On Ma's yacht, I took the dive *despite* my acquired fears.

It was the man's face I had seen. His upper body, unaccustomed to the norm of clothing. The long hair, dark eyes, and steel jaw: a symphonic sequence framed by acrylic moonlight. In profile he was neither Grecian, nor Saharan, and as I searched for the texture of his origin, I recalled neither human cells nor blood, but cold and metallic scales. Reflected like deep tanzanite, a woven armour of blue, which belied his nature as purely human. For this surreal delight, I leapt into the churning sea, to clasp upon myself a momentary grace, a mercurial surprise.

Such fleeting compulsion would be unimpressive to Dad. A month ago, when you were away, he shook the linens at the dinner table with his clenched fists, startling the dead fowl on the salver. His stern notice followed:

'Will you heat the floors of your home with a canvas of the sunset?'

He speaks with unanticipated poesy; he is Ma's betrothed, after all. I expect some correspondence from him, any day now. A letter, perhaps, since I haven't reinstated the functioning of most appliances in the apartment. Not yet.

I sit by the window this moment, and am warmed by the falling sunrays. Downstairs there is bonhomie, and I will go there shortly, to eat fish and fresh bread, and sip a night-time coffee, in view of myself.



Afterwards, I may return to the water. To not return would be to drown on land, if such a thing even exists.

Yours,  
Inayat



Dear Miss Beatrice,

Do the flowers in the terrace garden weep in my absence?

Some weeks have gone in a cacophony of movement, where I've played trickster with the seafaring sprite, and with my own burning spirit, and with Mr. Vanhoven's patience (that thins and exudes with the temper of a young cloud). Every occasion I've returned to many bowers in the open water, with pen, paper, and determinate mind: to capture a shallow glimpse of the silver custodian, the disappearing scout on the breach of Circe. And I've succeeded! Spotting the elusive fellow not once, but *thrice*—in span of dawn, dusk, and starlight, his shining face and torso recreating the many phases of a Saturnalian moon. From a careful distance, dozens of impressions I've returned to paper. The very best of these—my vigour, truth, and priority—I've thrust in front of Mr. Vanhoven, under his crooked nose and white plume, but he remains dour and frankly, unimpressed.

'This is symbolism,' he scolds. 'Don't subvert reality for the sake of a romantic picture.' To which I've asked, 'What romance, Sir?'

A few days since have been spent in the library of this quaint town. Like Martians dropped into the vast Patagonian Steppe, we walk with careful tread across tomes and gargantuan shelves, peeling manuscripts and discovering new colours of dust, and within dust:

bright diamonds. Just yesterday, my tutor wandered off and returned with a woven manuscript, and urged me stand closer. In a hymnal whisper, he told the story of the Franco-English poet Peter Vitalie, who spent many an inspired season in Lucca, during a mission of meaning and search for a consolidated craft.

‘What happened to him?’ I asked, with a wistful feeling.

At which the old man unfurled the script, tapped on it with a strident nail and assured, ‘He’s right here with us, of course.’

Reacquainting with the text for hours, Mr. Vanhoven finally lifted the papers above his head and muttered, ‘Sanctity!’ His meaning, in fact, was to declare “serendipity,” for in that golden chest of ruminations, was a short Romantic poem titled *The Divine Spring*. ‘I studied it in my youth,’ he professed, proceeding to a breathless, emotional recitation. The gist, if you care for it, relates to the advent of a sudden civilisation in the sea of this attractive town, a faerie population and futuristic, sovereign structures (castles and sanctums of beryl), that clipped the tread of sailing ships and sent the locals into a simultaneous terror of damnation, and rapture of wonderment. Here I transcribe two lines, that have committed themselves to memory,

*The horizon did yawn to reveal a truth*

*In sirens, standing water, my planet redoubled*

It is stark and symbolic, not real—Mr. Vanhoven insists—despite holding the manuscript into his heart, like a sworn locket. But on the point of symbolism, I disagree with my sage. For these last few weeks, I have stormed mental corridors that remained but wisps, fantasy, in my preceding life. There is certainly

something that ties me to this place, that keeps me here and compels the action in my feet. To retreat now would be to flourish ignorance, invite the death of knowing. Instead, I choose wilfully to dream in art, to paint for work and apprentice in Lucca for longer, the foreseeable future.

I intend to confront the Prospero in the water, to ask him what he knows. In haste, let me add: a letter from my father has arrived. His tread marches like fury in my ears, outside the door of this apartment—he is constantly forthcoming.

Let me escape now and fiercely, to myself.

Yours,

Inayat



Dearest Beatty,

Yesterday's events, for your gaze alone:

At nightfall, I risked the implacable tide. Upon the water, I shouted from the brink of Ma's boat—as if rekindling an old, dwindled flame—imploing the drowned man to reveal himself.

Within minutes, his faceted form broke the surface, and he climbed onto the deck with a swift gesture. His two feet were astonishingly human, and he wore tights of slick, tensile black. At his intrepid advance I fell back: seized by fear of this sentient unknown, both dazed and elated. Crouching low, the glistening man or entity—I will call him Pietro—administered into view a snakeskin of similar fabric, a bodysuit resembling scuba gear. He wouldn't speak, but in his potent eye, I drew a clear intention.

Composure returning to my limbs, I raced into the cabin and returned with my notebook. I attempted a brief dialogue, '*Come ti chiami?* What is your name?' but it altered nothing; Pietro regarded the sketches absently and pressed the diving attire further into my person. At near distance, I noticed that his chest did not move, and he was straining to hold his breath. Retreating to the boat's edge then, with gentle, *pointe*-steps, he beckoned me follow him, down the unlit corridor.

I was intrigued, not afraid. My inclination instructed, 'Go,' and so I left my papers and donned the rubber cloak. Taking my chaperone's hand—which was icy, like a thrill—I stepped onto the treacherous hull and watched the water's jaw clamp open-shut underneath. In the next breath, we had dropped. Down a gruesome void, where I recalled neither the movement in my lungs, nor a flicker of cognisant light. I became the aggregate darkness of all purgatory; a warning absence of faith remained the only sensation on my skin. When my eyes did open (as though tickled by air), I plucked a glimpse of a second horizon below, wider than any expanse of my dreams.

A township emanated from itself, like a steam engine of shining ore. Down a labyrinthine ecology of marine animals—eight-armed, billion-eyed—Pietro and I dove, scot-free, and through an ancient archway, taller than any civilisation in Abyssinia, I walked across the literal base of the ocean-floor: an unthinkable feat. My presence, though noticed, went wholly unremarked, permitting my pupils to count marvels at every turn: storeys of white topaz, meticulous tunnels and colonnades of glowing aquamarine. Out from windows and doors, a familiar *arpeggio* arose: the sound of debate, orchestral music, and frivolity. The spoken dialect was charming; the inhabitants shone violet and blue, like figments

of a jewelled cosmos. The tour followed further into a towering conservatory, to a garden fashioned from the make of seeming prehistoria itself! A patch before Eden, with sparkling asters, lucent orchids, peonies, mimosas blooming madly for love. From this display I was tempted to reach out and collect a souvenir, but the natural arrangement was too serene-sacrosanct to interrupt, and so I feasted my primal eye, and together we carried on.

Pietro and I couldn't dialogue in any real mode, my protective accoutrement prevented it. Still, I recognised a narrative in his step, as we swam past emerald promenades and fluorescent vaults. He desired to show me *everything*, and my mouth agape of ceaseless wonder pleased him, in spades. At one point, I took a brief repose against a rock tableau and some neon-phosphorescent weeds. Taking a circuitous glance around, I inhaled the oxygen of a borrowed life, and casually looked up. Pietro was examining me with a curatorial look, and he flashed a sincere smile, which jolted me.

The moment of departure arrived (too soon), and I intended to keep my shutters closed firmly for the return voyage. Yet, my instinct betrayed itself, and both eyes flickered wide open for a terrific instance—where I captured infinity in my vision, and Pietro's arms held tightly around my frame, to a remarkable closeness. His skin was resplendent even in the void; he was the light-struck protagonist of a searing, dazzling Caravaggio. Soaring upward, agility and strength accoutred him, and even as my mind whizzed, I realised: athleticism and tour were firmly Pietro's element; he mapped the sphereless sea with ease.

Upon breaking the surface, I clambered onto the boat and managed a repetitious '*Grazie, grazie!*' back at him. The next moment unfolded precisely as so: he reached

forward and our lips brushed suddenly, twice, before he descended into his hearthstone of icy coal, and the tide overcame him.

I have since returned to the apartment, and showered, and brushed and combed and attired and the stars are very much in the sky as I remember, as memory directs. But simultaneously I recognise that this excursion was *crucial*. My clothes and hair and words, even the pen in my hand seem unlike themselves now, for I am challenged to the breadth of my expression, the length of my perspective. My list of words is perennially incomplete, and my form imprecise. I await precision, inspiration: inspiration is outside the corner, the corner of my own mind.

You must think the oceanic air has abstracted me, beyond sense. But beyond sense I understand: To recognise one's theme is pertinent. To unify one's activity to the theme is to become an object of beauty, unto oneself. Looking at Pietro, I feel certain: He cannot suspire for longer than a kiss outside his theme, and similarly, I am otiose in deep water, even in my hometown, in the assembly line or manufactured world. 'The pursuit' is crucial to this understanding; in the pursuit of experience I become myself.

With morning, Dad arrives. Will you have accompanied him, I dream...

Yours,

Inayat



To Miss Beatrice,

Your perch at home must be the epicentre of air and light, because the apartment in Viareggio—across the world—is recently bereft of both.

I appreciate your speaking with Dad in my absence. Of convincing him to postpone his visit till now, of begging his mercy and benevolence, for Ma's sake.

'Unconscionable!'

The word rang out the windows with the storm of his footsteps, as he turned the apartment over in the tempest of his eye, he raged! With deliberate ardour, an inconsolable gait, he trampled and traipsed and dallied into drawers and closets and outside the window, searching, agonising, for the image of his offspring. 'Where is my Inayat,' he queried, walking past me, peering into the crypts of the fridge, microwave, and washbasin. When he settled on the sofa and lit a cigar, his eyes watered from tiredness: prolonged theatricality had emaciated his spirit, and I fetched him some wine, and he took the glass sceptically, as though a phantom had delivered it into his grasp. With liquor, his colour restored, and he admonished my composition under his breath and said, 'You're a child. You have so much to learn.'

I was shocked at hearing these words, because earlier that day, Mr. Vanhoven had uttered the very same maxim at me, with his own sneer of agony. I had rushed, at the first stroke of light, to the raven's headquarters. Without any artistic appurtenance, how naked I felt! But I explained passionately to my tutor, that his mode of expressionism had inspired me to seek alternate shores, more definitions of aesthete, culture, and form. 'It is a compliment, Sir,' I said, 'that our time together has moved me to seek further knowledge, further dimension.' The painter construed it as an affront, and shuddered past me as an afterthought. He delivered a ringing conclusion:

‘Craft requires patience, but your well is drought-dry. Everywhere you go, you will recover the same prize: disappointment.’

How could I express that I was experiencing the very *opposite* sensation? That my time with him and his neo-Impressionism, equal to my time with Pietro and his neo-Pangea, had inspired an illuminating flame in my being: that urged not disappointment but hopefulness, a sense of optimism—an endless ravine or well, a dream of an eternal, internal spring! Everything I had learned or seen or experienced in Lucca, every extant of life here did present proof of even further life, yet un-lived (but within reach). Mr. Vanhoven didn’t appreciate my presence further, and so I left gallows for gallows, returning to the apartment. My father, upon his arrival, echoed largely the same tone of despondence. A grim cortege did wreath over his head: poppies of grave pessimism.

I asked him plainly if I might create productive work for myself as an apprentice, potentially an artist myself, in several continents, so I could embark on the pursuit of some knowledge as to understand myself—because how could I be expected to adhere to some predestination based on *his* expectations of fate? And Dad replied, ‘Immigrants like us are not given the luxury of individualism.’

“Immigrant,” a word synonymous to him with indenture, harpooned out of his mouth to string me to a definition of fear and smallness, to capsize my ambitions and drawer them, to stop my tracks before I had even built them. To stop a dream before it was even dreamed—a hell on Earth; for me, a coward’s paradise.

I refused him, and stated I would pursue myself, regardless of his emotional support or finance. I recalled kind words you’d recited to me, once, to soften



the blow of my future hours spent working under the knee of my father's misgivings:

'It isn't what you do—' you said, 'but *how* you see.'

And I concur faithfully! Even at the peak of his riches and health, my father sees only famine and impoverishment. His immutable syndrome, even these Tuscan shores cannot fix. For those who do not wish to find a second sphere, there is none, will always be none.

In the span of weeks, I have observed a new skill, courtesy of the usher who lives underwater. I have discovered there is more than one way to breathe, see, hear, touch, and feel. If wonder thrives submerged here in Viareggio, could a banquet in the sky await someplace other?

In the spirit of drama, Miss B., I should confess: My next set of letters will arrive from a different postcode.

For now, I feel my fingers lifting off this pen, and the tide laps in my ears like a sweet melody. I must venture presently to the shore, where mirth awaits, and whatever, perfect, else?

With love,

Inayat



**Armaan Kapur** (he/him) is multidisciplinary artist from New Delhi, India. His writing has appeared in *The Reader Berlin* and *Helter Skelter Magazine*. He is currently completing two full-length works: a debut novel about existentialism, and a collection of speculative, queer nonfiction. Find him at [armaankapur.com](http://armaankapur.com) and on Twitter @armaankapur.

# After Inventing Time Travel

by Mary Soon Lee

You will explore the Milky Way  
repeatedly pleating  
time and distance,  
leaping light-years, centuries.

Yours the first footprint  
on a hundred worlds,  
the first muttered words.

The laws of physics gathering  
the galaxy along its grain,  
past to future, near to far.

That first long stitch  
warping you  
to Tau Ceti, twelve years out,

the altered patterns of  
its constellations.

Time after time you will stand,  
hands outstretched, face lifted,  
alone in an alien rain.

Time after time until you pause,  
pin yourself in place,  
wait for someone to catch up.



**Mary Soon Lee** was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for over twenty years. Her latest books are from opposite ends of the poetry spectrum: “Elemental Haiku,” containing haiku for the periodic table, and “The Sign of the Dragon,” an epic fantasy with Chinese elements, winner of the 2021 Elgin Award. She hides her online presence with a cryptically named website ([marysoonlee.com](http://marysoonlee.com)) and an equally cryptic Twitter account (@MarySoonLee).

# Hitchhiker

by Lindz McLeod

**A**s a kid, I'd slipped inside animal minds plenty of times without really knowing what I was doing. Kittens left me milk-hungry and clingy for days. Puppies filled me with exuberant energy and the desire to gnaw on table legs. The chestnut pony, a wide white blaze splitting his face into two separate but equal halves, marked the first time I'd ever consciously tried to control another being.

The birthday girl was adorned in a dark blue sash—PRINCESS stencilled along in thick, golden letters—while dark hair buzzed around her head like a bulbous halo. I watched jealously from my vantage point on top of the monkey bars, as a big man in a collared shirt lifted the princess high into the air and settled her down onto the pony's broad back. Her friends gathered around, cooing and fluttering, while adults tried to stem the tide of children. My parents had thrown me birthday parties before but nothing as cool as this.

The pony flicked its tail once, twice, and before I'd really made a conscious choice to do it. I was forcing my way into its juniper-colored pony-mind, and staring through oval pony-eyes at the noisy rabble. Small,

sticky hands stroked his belly and legs in syncopated rapture. The pony's mouth still tasted of apple slices; he looked around, hoping for more, while I felt a breeze comb through his mane, felt his hooves sink into soft, damp grass. Finding no apples, but sensing my presence inside his head and not sure how he felt about it, he gave a loud whicker. The kids nearest us flinched. Others laughed. The small weight on his back shifted and sharp pain spiked our sides. *Go, horsie, go*, the birthday girl's shrill voice urged.

I winced, and tugged hard on the pony's mind. *No, wait. Go this way.* I had a vague idea of guiding him over to the playground, where I could jump down onto his back and join the birthday girl in celebration, showing off the skills I'd learned when I went horse-riding once with cousin Eddie. Instead the pony stepped backwards, shaking his head in quick, panicked jerks. Through his eyes, my human body seemed very small and far away; a motionless figure on the monkey bars, perched like a gargoyle. *Come on!* I tugged harder, annoyed that he wouldn't obey me.

Overloaded with instructions and alarmed by my presence, the pony reared, panicked. The taste of its fear was sharp, silvery, pliant. I was thrown back into my body a split-second before I hit the ground hard, in time to feel my wrist snap. Agony shot up my arm and chest like a comet, leaving a fizzy breathlessness in its wake. In the distance, above my shrieks, I could hear someone calling. "Damn horse broke its leg! How the hell—"

The pony and I screamed in unison until I passed out.

My parents never asked me what had happened. I guess they figured I'd slipped on the rungs like anybody might have done. I knew better than to try to explain myself—I'd done so once before, a couple of years

prior, to blank stares, after falling off a trampoline in a neighbour's garden. A blackbird, trilling a beautiful song, had distracted me. Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to me that other people couldn't see through the eyes of animals. *Your imagination is a powerful weapon*, my mother had explained, casting tight smiles over at the host family, watching my protestations with wary eyes. *Best keep it to yourself.*



Becky raised her head, tilting it sideways like a question. *Good dog*, I thought, and felt her tail thump the ground in response. Feeding off my excitement, she bounded to her feet and circled, looking for her new friend. *People where*, she thought. *People no?* She hesitated, one paw raised, tail slowing. *Scare? Bad?* Her ears pulled back. *Bark? Bark now?* A low growl rumbled through her chest.

*Good dog*, I insisted. *I'm your friend.*

Her ears raised again. Friend good! Good dog! Her tail thumped on the grass as she whined.

"—even listening to me, Olivia?" My mother touched my arm and I blinked, startled, to find her towering over me holding a glass of lemonade that sputtered like a failed firework. The colours of my own world seemed harsh and too-bright compared to Becky's muted surroundings.

"Whose book is that?" she asked. "Doesn't look like one of yours."

I squinted; the name of one of my classmate's was scrawled on the front cover. Not even the inside page, but the front cover, as if he was the co-author. "Yeah, I swapped with someone at school." I must have picked it up by accident. I'd have to remember to return it on

Monday, maybe try to slip it into his backpack without anyone catching me.

“Never give away more than you’re willing to lose,” she reminded me. “Not everyone can be trusted to return valuable objects, or to treat them with care.”

“Yes, Mum.” I let her ramble on about our weekend plans while I drifted back into Becky’s head.



In my small, high-ceilinged classroom, I saw through the eyes of a spider, dangling from an overhead pipe. I learned how to worry about building a web while girls passed notes in the back row, giggling to each other. Outside, a gardener dug up a flower bed and planted fresh rose bushes; the fuzzy, cotton-soft minds of worms chorused together in low song, occasionally cut off by a sharp, high shriek. In the surrounding trees and hedges that lined the playground, the minds of birds beat fast at acute angles, seeing in colours I didn’t even know existed.

My grades suffered. Teachers warned me to stop daydreaming. My parents, driven to despair, tried to bribe and then blackmail me into paying attention. Regardless of their offers, I couldn’t help it. A passing bee, bumbling against the window, could offer so much more excitement. A mind, however small, was always self-possessed, driven by some higher power. I wasn’t anything like a god to them. At best, I was just a hitchhiker; tolerated, as long as I didn’t interfere. I didn’t mind, though. They were the closest things to friends I had.

A plump rabbit, safe in the dim red knowledge that no predators could slip through the iron railings surrounding the school, sat brazenly on the concrete



slabs outside the main door of the building; I nudged him towards the headmistress' prized pansies, and indulged in his bunny joy.

Later, I learned that a few older boys—tired of skirting around the long fence to the school gates—found a rusted patch of fence at the back of the school and had broken a couple of slats off, creating a hole just big enough to slip through.

The rabbit, half-drunk on pansies, was too busy eating to notice the fox sidling up, using the rose bushes as cover. The first pounce maimed the rabbit, the sudden shock causing us both to freeze. The rabbit's mind held desperately onto mine, the only thing it knew and trusted in the moment of terror. I struggled, only wrenching free as the fox's teeth clamped onto the rabbit's soft, furry throat.

The girl I shared a desk with started to scream.

My arms were covered in deep cuts, bleeding profusely through my white school shirt; the teacher slung me over her shoulder and ran to the nurse's office while I dripped a scarlet breadcrumb trail behind her. "How did you hurt yourself?" the nurse kept asking, while my teacher repeatedly assured her that I had nothing in my hand at the time, not even safety scissors. "What happened?"

I couldn't answer; I was shaking so hard that my teeth chattered. The rabbit was gone. I could no longer feel its mind. As the nurse wound bandages around my torn flesh, I promised myself I would never access another mind.



Puberty changed my perspective. After all, I'd been so young, so naive, when I'd first flitted into the pony's

mind. I was older now. Worldly. I knew and understood the true danger of hitchhiking. Rebellious hormones thundered through my veins, elongating my growing bones, and trumpeted a call to arms. Tension built inside me, tight and twanging, until I felt as if I would burst without an outlet. I needed to run, to snarl, to howl, but none of these things felt like appropriate human behaviour. The solution seemed obvious; I'd allow myself to join minds again, but this time I'd stick to predators where possible, to offset the risk of injury. I'd only merge with creatures who could fight back.

I'd thought predatory minds would be like knives, gleaming bloody and glowing hot. Instead they were cold and curled, like pencil shavings made of metal. They thought differently. Most of them reasoned, however dimly, working through several ideas before finding a solution. I hopped into a fox's mind as he raked through discarded boxes behind a supermarket, looking for extra scraps of meat to feed his cubs.

I joined a feral cat on her midnight hunt, remaining poised and gargoyle-patient in the shadows for long minutes, while small furry bodies played and skittered around only a few feet away. Appreciating the lunge, the pounce, the satisfying snap of a neck, took time. The crunch of delicate bones between my teeth was a visceral pleasure while hitchhiking, but the memory never failed to send a shudder through my human body once I'd returned.

Some things couldn't transcend boundaries. The realization brought with it an assortment of horrible feelings: a hollow, Easter-egg loneliness. A burnt-sienna resentment. A dry-drowning in inadequacy.

After I left school, I got a job stacking shelves in the local supermarket and moved out of my parents house. My father wandered around my tiny bedsit, knocking

on plastered walls and checking window panes for draughts, pronouncing it *sound as a pound*. My mother lingered once he'd gone down to the car. "Are you sure about this, Olivia?"

"Yes, Mum." I wasn't sure at all, but I knew I couldn't live at home forever. They'd begun to get concerned about the amount of time I spent 'daydreaming', and their constant—if well-meaning—questions were fraying.

"Okay, then." She sighed. "I know all birds have to fly the nest sooner or later. You'll be alright, won't you?"

"Yes, Mum."

"And you'll ring if you need anything?"

"Yes, Mum."

She hovered in the doorway, biting her thumbnail—something I hadn't seen her do since my gran had last spent a fortnight in the hospital. "Come over on Sunday and I'll cook you a roast. Rare as you want. Never mind what your dad says about well-cooked beef, eh?"

After she'd hugged me and swept out of the room, leaving faint traces of black pepper and ginseng in her wake, I stared around at my empty space. The warning seemed futile; I didn't have anything left to lose. My job at the supermarket didn't pay enough for luxuries and I couldn't see the point in decorating my physical space. What did it matter, anyway, when I spent most of my free time gliding on air currents, the world below me carpeted with green, lush forest? Why bother buying expensive trinkets to clutter up my countertops, when I could appreciate sea-glass, smoothed to a fine sheen, through the eyes of a gull?

After a couple of months, the boy behind the bakery counter asked me out for a drink. I'd never mated

before—hadn't even stayed for the ride, as it were—but my colleagues on the checkouts encouraged me. One lent me a black velvet purse and shoes, while another lent me a dress, red and silky, unlike anything I'd ever touched before. In the boy's flat, he handed me a glass of white wine before putting on a record. Big band music played, slightly too loud for comfort, while he ran his hands up and down my body out of time to the beat. The mice in his walls skittered and scurried; their babies snuffled inside nests made of bits of damp cotton wool, fished from his trash. I couldn't concentrate on my own pleasure, whatever that might have looked like, so I let him indulge his whims. Afterwards, he seemed upset anyway. *You're not really here*, he accused, and I couldn't defend myself against the truth.

The checkout girls had lent me the outfit but hadn't tossed in any understanding of the social customs that went along with it. Growing angry, the boy kicked me out barefoot, and tossed my shoes into the hallway after me. I tottered home, shivering, escorted by a stray dog.



At work, colleagues gossiped about me behind their hands, peeping through shelves of stacked tins and laughing. It reminded me of school, but this time I wouldn't indulge in shame. Instead, I retreated into the safety of bird-minds in the trees outside; nervous sparrows, stoic ravens, and one arrogant buzzard, lingering on a high branch, talons still bloody with its last kill.

Their primary-coloured thoughts—eat, breathe, mate, protect—were so beautifully straightforward. Humans wanted me to parse their words for subtext, for hidden meaning, like listening to sound in real-time instead of examining a painted wall at my leisure.

I found the demands of those interactions exhausting, so when I saw a leaflet pinned to the bulletin board, detailing a job fair at the local zoo, I knew it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

I put on my whitest, cleanest shirt, and arrived early so I'd have a chance to speak to the animals. The primates were situated near the entrance so I halted by the macaques. Intrigued at my presence, several broad, butter-yellow minds poked and prodded at me until I couldn't help giggling at their childish, sweet insistence. The largest female knuckled towards me and tapped on the glass. I held my closed fist up, releasing one finger at a time until my open palm splayed against the glass. She copied my motion perfectly.

A keeper slowed to watch, lugging a heavy bucket of fish. A shiny silver whistle hung around her neck on a thick black cord. Embarrassed, I shoved my hands into my pockets, but a tiny chirp from the bushes caught my attention. One macaque, smaller than the rest, peeked out at the troop. Too shy to join in, even though she desperately wanted to be accepted; I knew how that felt. "Come on then," I whispered, holding two fingers up, then three. "If I can be brave today, so can you."

The tiny macaque hesitated, then held up a paw. I felt the matriarch's joy blossom, wide and proud, but she held still, waiting to see what her niece would do. One tiny finger rose, followed by another, then a third. I splayed my palm out, showing five fingers; the macaque inched out of the bush, intent on my hand and copied the action.

"Hey, how'd you do that?" a voice said, mere inches behind my ear.

I flinched—the moment was gone, but the macaques crowded around each other, shrieking, bouncing from

perch to perch and giving each other open-air high fives.

The keeper moved around so she could see my face, then repeated the sentence, enunciating it out loud but signing it too, her hands bouncing from one word to the next with clipped, precise grace.

"I like animals. They-they like me." I stammered, shame wriggling down my spine. Strangers didn't tend to talk to me. At least, not for long. The smallest macaque's mind shimmered past my consciousness for a brief second, just long enough for me to feel her new twinges of confidence. "I see them but, like, I don't see past them."

Dark eyes, fringed by a heavy band of streaky blonde hair, studied me. Feeling a need to fill the silence, I elaborated, "Like, they're not just animals. They feel like bright sparks of consciousness on a dark night." Sweat broke out between my shoulderblades. Not a great time to start waxing poetic. She was probably going to call security any moment.

The keeper frowned. "Okay. Come with me."

She marched off without waiting for a response—not back towards the entrance, but further along the path leading into the heart of the zoo. Baffled, I followed. She led me to the mustelid enclosure, where the otter minds were spiky crimson peaks—more intense than the familiar red colour common among dogs. The keeper let herself into the pen and blew her whistle; I couldn't pick up any sound with my human ears but the otters loped around her in excited circles, chasing each other with exuberance as if every moment spent motionless was a moment closer to death.

"A zoo isn't all fun and games." She set the bucket down on a small wall, while the bevy seethed around

her ankles in delirious anticipation. “Most of the time, it’s hard work and filth and sickness and heartbreak. Satisfying work, but hard. You sure you want to work here?”

“Yeah—” I started to shrug, but caught myself. “Yes. I definitely do.” People asked each other questions, socially. I picked something I hoped wouldn’t be offensive, and tried to make sure I was mouthing each word properly rather than my usual mumbling. “How long have you worked here?”

“Five years. Started with the giraffes.”

I could feel them across the zoo, tall and leggy; thoughts like pebbles, tumbled smooth by the sea. Faint memories of a yellow-haired human feeding them, speaking in a slow, kind voice. I trusted their opinions; maybe this human was better than all the rest.

“You know, almost any animal can be trained,” she told me, in between throwing fish to the ravenous pack. “You have to make it worth their while.” Holding up a fish, she made a circular gesture with her free hand. The pack members who hadn’t yet grabbed a fish immediately stood on their hind legs, looking like the world’s smallest attempt at a stadium wave.

“Does that apply to people too?” I’d meant it as a serious question but she cocked her head and smiled.

“Funny. The boss is going to like you. I can tell.”



The boss seemed too busy to care about me one way or another but the otterkeeper vouched for me as if we were long lost friends. Before I really knew what was happening, an HR representative was talking me through the salient points of the employee handbook. The otterkeeper presented me with a shirt, emblazoned

with the zoo's emblem, and tasked me with mucking out the elephant enclosure while the huge, lumbering beasts were safely locked in the paddock. "Come find me after your shift, kid. At the reptile house."

She looked the same age as me. I frowned. "I don't know your name."

"Saskia." She signed it, spelling it out letter by letter for me, then winked and disappeared.

Despite the weight and smell of the elephant manure, I felt happier than I had in years. The small herd seemed happy—the paddock was large and grassy, lined with trees and several interesting puzzle games designed to be manipulated by curious trunks. I shovelled another heap of dung onto the waiting wheelbarrow. Normally, I'd have let myself drift away in the minds of the nearby animals—the elephants were fascinating, and there was a hyena pack nearby planning some mischief—but despite these temptations, I couldn't help counting down the hours until I saw the otterkeeper again.

Over the next few weeks, Saskia took me under her wing and taught me the ways of the zoo; the right ways to clean hooves and paws, the best ways to tempt a sick baby to eat, how to treat the animals meant for wild release at a future date. "People aren't so different, you know," she signed. "We want the same things. Safety, nurture, affection. You can learn to read them too."

"If you say so." I turned away, not wanting her to read my expression, but her hand found mine, squeezed it hard, tugged me back around to face her.

"Take your time," she signed, eyebrows dipping to meet each other in a tender kiss. Even I could tell she meant the words in more than the literal sense. "No rush."



Buoyed by her encouragement, and despite my surroundings, and the availability of new animal minds all around me, I began to spend less time hitchhiking and more time in the real world. I learned to read the body language of the other keepers and customers, to know when a confrontation was about to get ugly, or when a conflict had been successfully averted. I picked my moment carefully and asked the boss for more responsibility—surprised, but pleased, he gave consent.

As the nights began to cool and the leaves turned yellow, Saskia finally convinced me to climb onto the top of the lion cage to watch the stars. “You have to take chances while you’re alive. My mother used to say ‘nothing ventured, nothing gained,’” she said, hands whirring through the motions. I’d begun to recognize words here and there—*me, mother, animal*—but I lacked the ability to replicate the language in any meaningful way.

“My mother is nowhere near that adventurous. She used to say ‘never give away more than you’re willing to lose.’” I shrugged, making a clumsy attempt at signing the word whatever, my cold fingers sweeping back and forth over each other.

She touched my arm before her fingers began to move again. My flesh prickled, a sudden heat flooding my cheeks. “What does that mean?” she asked.

I licked my lips. I’d never thought to wonder why my mother had warned me. “I guess she was saying that you shouldn’t lend something for a while if you’re not prepared to lose it forever. People don’t always give back what they take.”

She touched her whistle before she began to sign again. “Losing things isn’t always bad. Sometimes they come back. Or sometimes you outgrow the need for

them.” Her fingers hesitated. The moonlight hollowed her dark eyes. I felt as if I were seeing her for the first time, like a telescope in reverse; something too close to feel, too much to see all at once. “Sometimes forever is just a while. Sometimes a while is forever.” Her breath frosted out in small, dragon-puffs, but she was warm and steady beside me. “You know?”

The answer felt bigger than the question, but I gave it anyway. For once, I was prepared to lose. “I know.”

Underneath us, mammals breathed slow and heavy in their dens—nose to tail to trunk to hoof—and dreamed of one day running free. In the trees around us, birds roosted or soared silently through the night air, every eye a roving spotlight looking for the faintest bristle of leaf or twig. In their warm tanks, reptiles uncoiled, listened to the air with forked and flickering tongues, and deciphered all the languages written unseen on the scales of another. Saskia leaned in to kiss me. Her lips were cold and chapped but when they met mine, a thousand voices hushed until all I could hear was my own heartbeat, pulsing as steady as a star.



**Lindz McLeod** is a queer, working-class, Scottish writer who dabbles in the surreal. Her prose has been published by/is forthcoming in Catapult, Flash Fiction Online, Pseudopod, and more. She is a member of the SFWA, a Rogue Mentor, and is represented by Headwater Literary Management.

# While Alice sleeps in Wonderland

by Marisca Pichette

When Alice falls  
I place a ribbon in my book  
and walk through flowers  
too wild for gardens.

When my sister dives  
headfirst into another world  
I take down my hair  
and face the woods.

I don't have time—  
an hour at most, before  
Alice returns  
taking the door she opened  
and shutting it again.

I leave the flowers behind  
with my book and  
dear little Alice.  
In the woods, I breathe again.  
So little time.

I find your clearing and coat:  
grey fur, red trim.  
I follow your footprints  
my breath short and wanting.

Your cottage shines  
even in daylight:  
bright and open and  
smelling of sugar  
and you.  
Shedding your coat, I go inside.

Alice floats in a sea of her making  
and I find you at your  
grandmother's oven.  
We have so little time—  
Alice growing  
big again, entangled in  
houses too small.

Our clothes cover the floor

and I count the minutes before  
this world closes, before  
the cards collapse.

Alice is playing croquet;  
I am tangled in fingers  
and sheets  
that smell of wolves.  
Alice is angry. I am in love.

Before the court gathers  
you kiss my left breast  
and braid my hair, leaving me  
so I won't see how you disappear.

Under the apple tree  
I retrieve my book, face flushed,  
heart curling to see you,  
aching to lose you again.

When Alice climbs  
back into sleep  
her head in the sunshine  
I know you've gone—  
your world closed,  
your cottage lost.

I no longer fit in holes  
in the ground  
and mirrors are too shallow  
for women  
like us.

Alice, though.  
Alice is quick. She is small.  
Her dreams grow large enough  
to carry ours  
another day.



**Marisca Pichette** is a queer creator of monsters and magic. More of her work has appeared and is forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Fusion Fragment*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, *Uncharted Magazine*, *PseudoPod*, and *PodCastle*, among others. She lives in Western Massachusetts, surrounded by bones and whispering trees.

# The Grief Portal

by Aun-Juli Riddle

**Y**ou.

You're waiting for dawn on a snow-dappled hill at 6:50. The sky lingers in darkness, but edges of light blossom, full of sharp possibility, the way your lungs swell, filled with piercing air.

The way your heart swells, filled with quiet anticipation. It's been crushed beneath sorrow for so long that it unfolds painfully at the promise of uncertain opportunity, brittle like the frozen pines you struggled past to get here, the ache just as needling.

You've been awake for hours, though it feels like you've never slept, waiting for the spill of light to crest the peak of the foggy, distant mountains. The forest sleeps, but the wind carries birdsong meant to rouse creatures from their chilly slumber. It's so cold, you're so tired, but it doesn't matter, because once the sun rises you hope to disappear.



*Sarah.*

Sarah doesn't get to choose where she goes, but it's

better that way. She shields her eyes as the sunlight waves like a powerful goodbye from the ocean's horizon. "The sunsets don't look anything like this where I'm from."

Felix laughs and it makes Sarah smile because he's got a laugh for every occasion, and she can't remember the last time she's laughed at all.

Well,

She can, but she tries not to, and swallows the thought with her dreamy *genmaicha*. The subtle flavors remind her of lunches with her mother, and those memories aren't restricted—she's relieved that there are still memories untouched by mourning.

"You say that every time we watch the sunset," Felix remarks.

"Why do we watch so many sunsets?" Sarah asks. She doesn't mind them—they *are* pretty—but after zipping through countless portals and places, she could have a passport stamped with every sunset.

"I think they're pretty." Felix shrugs. "Prettier than sunrises anyway."

It seems like a strange thought to Sarah, but Felix adds, "Hellos are less memorable than goodbyes."

Clutching her teacup, Sarah looks into the dredges of her amber-colored tea and feels the hairs rise on the back of her neck, like someone is watching her.

It's no one, but Sarah knows it means it's time to leave. "Felix?"

Felix quickly takes final sips of his mango mint disaster tea and extends his hand. "Let's go." With his free hand, he waves a series of invisible symbols in the



air like a magic conductor and the telltale ripples of a portal appear.

Sarah takes his hand and, as she steps into the portal, she looks over her shoulder.

It's hard to outrun a memory.



You.

Your watch reads 6:52 a.m., but you're not in a hurry for once. You've waited this long for escape, for adventure. You've packed lightly for this trip since you're trying to leave your baggage behind.

You're not sure how long you'll be gone, and even though the guilt of disappearing is like a small parcel you carry in your pocket, now's not the time to open it.

You don't want to say you've been trapped in your current life because the word "trapped" suggests someone has done the trapping.

No, a better word is *stuck*, something you've done to yourself or something that's happened to you and is now your responsibility.

Waiting for a miracle on a frozen hill in the middle of winter feels like a drastic way to *unstuck* yourself, but you need to know if it's real.

"It's okay if it's not," you whisper to make yourself believe, the words escaping your lips like misty promises.

If the sun pops over the horizon and you're still sitting here, you'll breathe deeply, inhale the innocent, illuminated air, and hike back to real life, to whatever awaits you.

You can say you tried.



*Sarah.*

The portal takes Sarah everywhere and anywhere, from quiet islands to the tops of city buildings, and always somewhere close to good food. She's never traveled so much in her life, and her soul feels like it stood up and had the *best* stretch, even if her heart is still quite introverted.

The portal hasn't opened up to the same place twice, and it's never opened up somewhere Sarah has already been. Nowhere she's already been with *him*. She's grateful for that, even as she wonders if visiting a place they loved together would bring the memory of *him* closer.

These are the things Sarah thinks while in between places, while she's in those precious moments of portal travel, whirring between time and space, when all of the world around her looks like a crying rainbow. That's when she thinks about him, where she tries to whisper his name softly as though he's right beside her.

But she can't.

And then she bends at the knees and braces for the *halt!*, so she doesn't tumble away into eternity—or an unsuspecting stranger.

"Wow," Sarah says when she's finally oriented and staring out of an expanse of glass. The shadow cast by Saturn's rings is even more intense than photographs Sarah has seen. She doesn't touch anything, just in case, but a quick look around and Sarah knows she's in some kind of galactic diner. Oval-shaped booths contain guests of all shapes, and she's got the sneaking suspicion that some of the empty booths aren't really

empty, just that her underdeveloped human brain can't *perceive* them.

Felix arrives with a tray of what Sarah thinks is food, and he guides her to what she hopes is actually an empty booth.

"Strange, huh?" Felix slides the tray onto the table, little cups and pouches and plates of strange things, and sits in front of her. "I don't understand how we got here, but it's fucking cool, huh? Like something from sci-fi."

There's a guttural, clawing memory in the back of her mind, and Sarah pushes it away. "So fucking cool." She looks at the array of refreshments, and there's nothing that looks remotely familiar to her. "What is any of this?"

Felix shrugs. "The cash and phone in my pocket were gone when we got here, replaced with this?" He holds up a thin, glowing device. "I think it's money but also a translator, because I just told them we wanted to try a bunch of things, and they replied in French."

Sarah doesn't tell Felix that she doesn't speak French, but she wonders about him. Where he came from, why he's on his own journey. They've been together for a half a dozen portal trips, and she still doesn't know much about him.

"Has a portal ever taken you somewhere other than Earth?" Sarah asks over a frothing, smoking cup of pink carbonated liquid. She sips it, and it reminds her of watermelon, if watermelon went on a date with mint to a barbeque. The lingering smoke rolls over their table like tiny fog drifts.

"No, this is the first for me," Felix replies. He's holding a pastry of some sort that looks like cinnamon

star bread from Earth. "I didn't travel through many portals, but my guide told me that she'd visited places she swore were in the past or the future."

"What was your guide like?" Sarah asks. She remembers the speech Felix gave when he arrived for her.

*This is your journey, not mine. Any time you want to go somewhere new or come back to where you started, just let me know. I can't control where we go, I just open the portals. It's your journey. Your heart will tell us where it needs to go, and you will tell us when you're ready to come back. I don't know anything about the portal, who made it, why it's here, and I don't know anything about you or why you're here. I won't talk about me or my life because, well, you know. It's your journey. Are you ready?*

Felix looks towards the stars and smiles. "Mica. She was generous and firm and ferocious." When his eyes meet Sarah's, they're glistening. "I was a fool, wallowing in my feelings, and somehow she managed to," he holds up one finger, "have no time for my bullshit and," he holds up a second finger, "have an infinite amount of patience for me."

Felix is silent for a moment, for moments, for a while, and then he says, "I think about her a lot. She reminded me there are all sorts of heartaches, and they don't always feel the same. I'm not sure where I'd be without her. Or who I'd be."

"Is that why you became a guide?" Sarah hands Felix something with a strange springy texture that she doesn't think is supposed to be so warm.

"Yeah, I guess. I found the portal the first time because I needed a lifeline. I found it the second time because I needed to give someone else one? Like ... I knew how it felt to never think I'd be able to move forward, and once

I came out of that, I realized I needed to help someone else discover that.”

Sarah smiles. “Me.”

“You.”

Felix reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small worn pamphlet that reads “How to be a Portal Guide.” He hands it to her. “When I finally made the decision, this was in my coat pocket.”

Sarah takes it and lets her eyes roam the cover. It’s worn paper, designed like an old national park brochure from the 1970s. She wants to open it, but she slides it over to Felix instead, deciding that it’s too early in her story to solve that mystery.

As Sarah looks around, as she wonders how any of this could be real, she suddenly needs *him*. The way the feeling twists inside of her, wild and terrifying, demanding to share a moment with *him* because that’s how she made sense of life. A series of experiences, of memories, shared with someone else to make life feel more real.

Sarah doesn’t feel real anymore. She’s a daydream adrift without her person, a nightmare churning on the horizon.

If he’s not alive to confirm she exists, who is she? She’s a figment.

Sarah isn’t real.

Sarah can’t see anything, can’t see Felix through the water in her eyes, and her jaw is clenched, desperate to keep the hideous wail of her fresh truth from escaping her lips.

There’s a hand on her hand—Felix—there’s a thrum—the portal—and then she’s in the crying rainbow portal,

screaming his name so loudly from the inside she thinks she'll explode into nothing, but maybe it's okay, because she's not real anyway.



*You.*

Your fingers page through the notebook you've kept since you discovered the myth of the portal, cobbling together each piece of the mystery you could find, uncovering stories that overlapped, discovering this portal was real.

All of the stories suggested the same thing: Portals were triggered at dawn of a new day with each person having only one real thing in common—unimaginable grief. Inescapable grief. Grief that tethered them to the earth. The portals allowed them to escape, released them from the earth and into the sky like hot air balloons, like dreams escaping sleep.

They called them *Grief Portals*.

You have held it all in, held it all together, but even though you look like a full person, inside you're missing pieces. You wonder—with amazement—how you made it this far, how you fooled anyone into thinking you were okay. But it's easy for others to believe you when you say you're okay when the truth is an inconvenience.

You breathe in deeply, the chill of the air bringing your feelings in check. You know you're being unfair to everyone. Everyone is dealing with their own shit—*everyone is hurting*.

And so are you.

But you're here, desperate for the sun because you're freezing. You're here.



Sarah.

The way the light hits her eyes reminds Sarah of the day she's been trying to forget. There are many days she's struggled to shake off, more she's unintentionally forgotten, but remembering how she went from *there* to *here* lingers like an awkward stranger in the periphery of her memories.

Sometimes she still remembers things, like the warmth of his hand covering hers, that steadfast grip of certainty that held her in place when everything felt like it was tumbling out of control. The way he always looked at her with kindness, with awe, and how she made jokes to diffuse the intensity of their love because if she thought about it too much, her eyes would well at the thought of his absence. *It has to be forever*, she'd tell herself, *because anything less would be cruel*.

Sometimes she still remembers things, like when she smells waffles and her mind goes back to slow Sunday mornings with quiet, interesting conversations, breakfast, and the kind of music meant to sway dreamily to. Or late nights watching one last episode of a show with heavy eyelids, no words, just being near each other, experiencing a story together.

And when that happens, Sarah moves on.

When the sun gives Sarah one last glance, she sighs and wraps her hands tightly around her cup of cocoa. Felix looks out on the ocean with a smile, remembering something to warrant a tiny laugh. An "ah, yes, this is perfect" laugh.

"How did you do it?" Sarah asks. "How did you move forward?"

Felix looks thoughtfully at the last wisps of pink on the horizon. “You can’t move forward like you’re running away. You can’t move forward like you’re fleeing something.”

Sarah laughs, the first laugh in an eternity, a “well shit” kind of laugh.

Felix laughs with her. “Yeah, you know what I mean.”

“I don’t know how to stop.”

“I don’t either,” Felix admits. “But one day I was just tired of trying to outrun grief, tired of thinking I even could. It always catches up with you, even when you think you’ve escaped it, but only because it’s always a part of you.”

“I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to think about him.”

Felix shakes his head. “You want more than *anything* to think about him again. You want to remember every joy, every moment, every tiny little detail.”

Sarah’s cocoa is gone but she holds it close anyway. “How do I fill the space where he was?”

“He’s not gone.” Felix reaches out and takes her hand. “You are so full of everything, you can’t process *anything*.” He takes a deep breath. “You can’t outrun grief. Let grief be your passenger for a while. Take it out on the town. Buy it snacks and find common ground. Show it some sunsets.”

Sarah squeezes Felix’s hand. “Okay.” She looks out onto the dark water. “But maybe no more sunsets for a little bit. They make me sad.”

Felix laughs a little—an enigmatic laugh. “It’s okay, they used to make me sad too.”



As Sarah stands with Felix, she thinks of a future where sunsets aren't heartbreaks and the smallest laugh escapes her lips. A "maybe he's right" kind of laugh.



You.

You close the notebook, but keep it on your lap, because the weight of the stories collected inside brings you comfort. The gravity of feelings from those who felt like you feel now.

Like Mica, who waited for dawn on Hollywood Boulevard when the sun would hit the starry tiles and reflect in her eyes, swept away to a quiet farm where she finished writing her cozy mystery novel while sipping cocoa with the perfect amount of tiny marshmallows—her sister's favorite.

Like Felix, who unexpectedly happened upon the portal while sitting on the same peak he'd climbed with his father years before, swept to the smallest island with the tallest lighthouse in a world that smelled of vanilla and sounded like laughter.

You wrote it all in those pages, and you've reread those words and stories and hopes, made them your own because their stories were painful but triumphant. They brought you along on their journey and took you places you never could've seen on your own.

A fragment of doubt floats among your soul-pieces, poking at vulnerable parts, because you know you need this portal to be real. When bad things happen, people lose themselves, they distance themselves, they overwork, they keep pressing forward—they *become stuck*—and you have done all of these things trying to figure out how to move past grief. You know the answer

isn't as simple as a magical portal that takes you on adventures, but why not?

You remember Sarah's story, not for the places the portal took her, but the places she'd been before.



*Sarah.*

Sarah was twenty-seven when her father died, and she didn't mourn him. Instead, she hit it into high gear, a constant grind of working to get *somewhere*, to be *someone*, to not waste any more time, any more life. She crashed, an empty rocket burning back into the atmosphere.

When she stopped, when she breathed, when she gathered her pieces, she told herself it was time to change. That living wasn't the price but the prize.

But it didn't mean anything without context, and when she met *him*, it all clicked into place. When she met *him*, as she loved *him*, as she knew *him*, as he saw her, she understood what grief was created for. Not for the people who'd stain and ravage the world, but for people like *him*, someone gentle in a way she'd never known before. Someone who made her whole in a way she didn't think possible.

Remembering how hollow she was when her father died, Sarah grew increasingly afraid of loss, of losing *anyone*, *him* in particular. She wondered if future grief was real. How could she grieve for someone before anything happened?

And then,

How could she be so ill-prepared when the worst actually happened? Sarah spent so much time with grief running in the background, she was more surprised at

how a feeling she'd practiced for so long felt so different. So much worse.

And then she spiraled. Spiraling until she heard whispers of The Grief Portal.



You.

The sun arrives and you wonder if you're ridiculous, if you've let yourself be overcome by fantasy, that maybe you're too broken.

You must be, to believe something like this is real.

And the sun is bright and menacing, but to you it's a balm, a bright salve against the darkness you've steeped in. You feel the warmth on your skin and find respite in daylight.

Maybe there's no portal. No portal doesn't mean this is a waste of time.

No. Today is beautiful, and you feel wrapped up in the moment, cozy with relief that you've made it so far even with the ghosts you've dragged behind you.

It's so perfect you almost miss the rippling in front of you, like a mirage. But this is no desert, so you reach out, letting your fingertips brush against it. It doesn't feel like anything at all, but the ground around you starts to vibrate, so you take a step back and watch as the portal forms into a glassy oval.

Someone steps out of it, their shape dazzling briefly like a rainbow in rain.

"Hello." She waits for you to give her your name, but you're too shocked to say anything. You extend your hand as a compromise. She takes it in hers and shakes it. "I'm Sarah."

"I'm supposed to give you a little speech, but before that, I just want to say," Sarah looks towards the sunrise. "I'm grateful you're here. This is difficult, but you've made it so far."

Your hands are trembling a little, from cold or from nervousness, and you know you're smiling even if it's too cold to feel your face.

"This is my first time being a guide ...I'm not sure I'm supposed to say that, but you should maintain your expectations." Sarah's laugh is clear and it feels freer than you can ever remember being. "Okay, here we go." She pulls out a little brochure from her pocket and opens it like it's the first time she's reading it.

"This is your journey, not mine. Whenever you want to go somewhere new or come back here, to where we started, just let me know. I can't control where we go—I only open the portals. It's your journey, so your heart will tell us where it needs to go, and you will tell us when you're ready to come back."



**Aun-Juli Riddle** is a writer and illustrator living in Baltimore, Maryland with her partner and trio of cats. She runs an online tea shoppe and enjoys traveling the country to sell her wares and collect souvenir magnets. She has short fiction in *khōréō* magazine, *Luna Station Quarterly*, and *Glitter + Ashes*, an anthology from Neon Hemlock Press. Find her online at [aunjuli.art](http://aunjuli.art) or on Twitter as [@aunjuli](https://twitter.com/aunjuli).

# Working on Wanderlust

with Erika Hollice

**N**o one expects their creative path to be linear. When writing, there are branches, dead ends, and way too many on-and-off ramps. Trying to keep your creativity on the straight and narrow is, essentially, a fool's errand.

Cover art direction conversely, has been like navigating a gravel road in a small town. There's some kickups, but generally you can see the destination. Or, to use another comparison, Apparition Lit's cover ideas spring forth like Athena – fully-formed and ready to stab you in the eye.

Wanderlust's cover idea was one that had been germinating for months, spurred on by a discussion of favourite movie scenes during a game night. One everlasting scene for me is Wayne Knight's character Dennis Nedry, and his attempted escape from Jurassic Park. He thought he was free! The stolen dino DNA was safely hidden in a shaving cream container. His jeep was almost out before it careened through Isla Nublar's forest and crashed by the water.

Spoilers for an almost 30-year old movie, but Nedry dies after being attacked by a Dilophosaurus. I only knew the

basics about dinosaurs when I first watched the film. If it wasn't in Disney's Fantasia or the (unfortunately forgotten) We're Back: A Dinosaur Story, then it was basically a magical creature. The creature that Nedry encounters seems docile, even playing fetch, until unravels its frill and sprays venom.

That multi-coloured frill. That green reptilian skin. It's a combination that I could never forget.

When I contacted Erika Hollice for the design, I let her know that it was a bit of a weird concept. I wanted to merge that dino with something Elizabethan. I was sure there was a way to merge the frill on the dinosaur to a ruffled collar. I didn't want something too human but I also didn't want to veer too far into Madame Vastra's design from Doctor Who.

Bless Erika, who seems to understand every meandering thought I have. She took the concept to heart and let me know how excited she was to start the piece:

LOVING the thought of melding the  
character with the clothing itself  
in a cool & transformative way!

Four designs were produced and it was incredibly hard to narrow the choices. The first image had so many ruffles and a giant hat. Who doesn't love a hat? The second image had the same character but with their back to the audience, showing off a lovely cape. The third image added full details of a dress, complete with jewellery. The final image was more pensive, David in thought, pose. After consideration, we chose the second image with its mix of the ruffles and the neck texture.

The final image that Erika designed is delightfully murky with its deep greens, rich burgundy, and iridescent bubbles. When we finally revealed the cover

this Issue's Guest Editor, M.L. Krishnan took one look and said "I love that plankton lady."

Wait. Plankton?

There's a feeling you get when you arrive at your destination and it turns out to be something a little different than you expected? Instead of an ice cream stand, it's now a homemade cider donut stand. And after a long drive, doesn't a hot donut sound delicious right about now?

My dino lady seemed to have evolved during the course of her creation. Even though we had every intention of a reptilian dame who could spit in my eye (with my thanks), the frills became loose and limber like seaweed. The murkiness of the palette suited to the briny deep.

Creativity is a twisting path, even if you have a map you can't plan for every eventuality. Whether she is a Dilophosaurus Duchess or a Plankton Peeress, our cover art is its own destination.



Written by Rebecca Bennett

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

Find the sketches from Erika on our website.

# Multiverse Reimagined

by Kamilah Yasmin

**D**oes anyone remember Tumblr at its peak? I know I do. I spent a good amount of time there as a teenager. I guess I was finding myself, or at least trying to. I spent hours on that platform learning and building the aesthetics of Kamilah. My Tumblr search history looked something like this: Libraries. Logophile. Typography. Coffee Shop. Dark Academia. Dead Poets Society. Literature. Vintage. Books. Romanticism. Slytherin. Bibliophile. Wanderlust.

Growing up, reading was more important to me than sleep. I would stay up until I finished whatever book I was reading. It was something I did on a weekly basis. Being able to experience worlds beyond my own was very enriching. Not only did it foster creativity, but it challenged the way I thought about my own experiences. As the oldest of 7, reading about children fighting for the right to exist in a society that won't allow more than 2 children per household made me reexamine my own relationship to my family. Instead of consuming myself with negative thoughts about my life and problems I had at the time, I read about how the characters in their stories handled their problems and setbacks. Reading about children taking their lives into their own hands



and dealing with the cards they were dealt gave me hope and confidence that I too could do those things. So much of the media and stories I consumed were about adventurers who traveled and explored. And I don't just mean from place to place. These characters navigated their worlds & societies, social relations, new territories, monsters of all kinds, and so much more. Infinite universes all at my fingertips.

I was captivated when I came across the word Wanderlust. I looked it up, read the definition and said "yup that's me alright" even though the furthest I'd been at the time was about 4 hours north to New York. I started to think about all the places I wanted to go but couldn't. This went for the places in the real world and in the books I read. I made it my mission to incorporate exploration into my writing and into my life. I was so serious about embracing wanderlust I purchased a phone case with the view of mountains high up and the word printed across in huge calligraphy. In high school, stuff like this mattered. Your accessories were a direct indication of your interests, passions, and style. I wanted to let people know that I had so much more in mind for myself than the tangible things right in front of us. And yet using things like phone cases, screensavers, wallpapers, and journals, was the easiest way to communicate this.

I never knew that speculative fiction was its own separate ostracized sector of literature until I was in higher education. Of course, I played the role of the extremely well-read English Literature Creative Writing Major at a private quaker PWI. I was seething for that elite-ish, Ivy-like, Hogwartsy feel, I just didn't realize there would be controversy around everything that actually inspired me to be there as a writer and storyteller in the first place. In an ice breaker activity

for one of my classes, we were to go around the room and name a piece of literature or author that means something to you. Following my response, I was met with stares, silence, and scrutiny. Finally=[

I heard the professor say “I meant writing and writers of a certain caliber, but I’m sure that’s very fun too.” After that, everyone else made sure to answer the icebreaker with canon stories and authors. I felt a brief moment of shame and embarrassment. At that moment, I was being viewed as an unserious English student. On top of all my other setbacks, I didn’t need to have a reputation of being less capable than my peers just because I like spec-fic. Upon realizing this, I’d work to prepare talking points in order to defend me and (some of) my peers’ perspective on the very real impact speculative fiction has to inspire people like us. In class I would challenge the relevance of outdated works used to explain and examine the various forms of literary theory. I took every opportunity I could to push the bounds of what was considered acceptable or “real” literature. Over time, I learned which classes and professors would support this, and where it would be more difficult.

The literary canon is supposed to be the foundation that represents the most influential forms of literature, but rest assured Charles Dickens and Mark Twain were not the reasons I loved reading. The closest I’ve gotten to that is Bram Stoker and Edgar Allen Poe. I enjoyed book series like Mary Pope Osborne’s Magic Tree House, R.L. Stine’s Goosebumps, Mary Downing Hahn’s ghost stories, and Margaret Peterson Haddix’s Shadow Children Series. Best believe I was also reading those vampire and wizard books too. Horror and mystery will always be my first love, but dystopian lit really has my heart. What can I say? The further corruption of man’s inhumanity to its fellow man intrigues me. Not only

the creation of a world, but the reimagining of our own world's entire existence.

My first time on a plane, I was headed to the Midwest to see a college. I received their acceptance letter in the mail and was invited to tour the school and stay for a weekend. I knew I wanted to go to a school that had a great international population, but also opportunities for work, study, and immersion abroad. I wanted to have access to experience as many worlds as possible.

**Wanderlust:** *noun* – a strong desire to wander or travel and explore the world

As I went through my years of undergrad, I kept my love for speculative fiction close to me. I'd include elements of magical realism, Sci-Fi, and Horror in all my creative writings. I'd use the works of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell to argue their importance beyond social commentary and entertainment. When I wasn't focusing on how white-cis-het people reimagine the world as they know it, I was learning myths, folklores, fairytales, and fables of Afro Indigenous Cultures. The worlds and life experiences of deep Darkskin people across the globe are being erased before our very eyes. This is when I tapped into Afrofuturism. Engaging with worlds that envisioned Black futures that stem from afro-diasporic experiences excited the hell out of me; and still does! Collaborating with writers, artists, and historians to watch fact + fiction intermingle to make such a beautiful transformative creation of art filled me with purpose.

The more I embraced my wanderlust, the more I experienced sonder.

Having the opportunity to live, study, and work internationally was such a privilege within itself. I gained so much perspective and it helped me grow and

evolve. I not only developed my relationship with myself and others, but with my writing as well. I began to understand whose stories were at the forefront, whose were being ignored, and how I can begin to bridge that gap. Everyone deserves the chance to see, explore, and learn about the things that make us all uniquely human. We are comprised of so many resplendent and horrific moments, and they need not go untold.

My experience as a wanderer has been amazing but things have been drastically different since the start of the pandemic. I, like many folks, had no choice but to wander as they battle housing, job, and medical insecurity. Ultimately, it feels lonely at times. Even as a wanderer, I find myself longing for the stability of a familiar place. A home if you will. There is a sense of belonging that's been missing since leaving for school. All the I love yous and goodbyes in airports. Long road trips across the country. Plane and train rides to new destinations. And yet, my suitcase and my stories remain the most consistent thing about me. They both allow me to continue exploring worlds and universes far beyond my own.



**Kamilah Yasmin**

# Thank You

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