



APPARITION

Literary Magazine

*Issue 16:
Wonder*

ATREYEE GUPTA
YIWEN BU
ALEXANDRA SINGER
ALYSON GRAUER
MARIE CROKE
MAY CHONG
SHAONI C. WHITE
JESSICA CHO
GUEST EDITOR MARIA DONG

COVER ARTWORK
ERION MAKUO

Apparition Lit

Issue 16: Wonder, October 2021

Yiwen Bu, May Chong, Marie Croke, Alyson
Grauer, Atreyee Gupta, Alexandra Singer,
Shaoni C. White and Jessica Cho
Guest Editor: Maria Dong

Cover Art by Artist-in-Residence, Erion Makuo
<http://www.erionmakuo.com/>

Edited by

Maria Dong, Guest Editor
Tacoma Tomilson, Owner/Senior Editor
Rebecca Bennett, Owner/Senior Editor and Cover Art Director
Clarke Doty, Owner/Senior Editor
Amy Henry Robinson, Owner/Senior Editor,
Poetry Editor and Webmaster
Marie Baca Villa, Assistant Editor, Marketing,
Blogger, Submissions Reader
Maria Schrater, Assistant Poetry & Fiction
Editor, Submissions Reader

Copyright © 2021 by Apparition Literary Magazine

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a review.
Fonts used: ITC Avant Garde, Merriweather,
Skullphabet <http://www.skulladay.com>

<https://www.apparitionlit.com/>

Contents

Editorial

A Word from our Editor by Maria Dong

Short Fiction and Poetry

A Home for the Hungry Tide by Alexandra Singer

Flocks of Words and Wonder by Marie Croke

Beefriend by May Chong

Lavender, Juniper, Gunpowder,

Smoke by Alyson Grauer

Cocoon by Atreyee Gupta

Stranger Organs by Shaoni C. White

Feudal Superstition by Yiwen Bu

Artwork

Working on Wonder with Erion Makuo

Essay

A Deeply Rooted Wonder by Jessica Cho

End Stuff

Thank You to Our Sponsors and Patrons

Past Issues

A Word From the Editor

by Maria Dong

A few years ago, a friend of mine was speaking at a humanities conference near my then-home in Pittsburgh. I was dying to see them talk, but I didn't have any money, so my husband and I snuck in and nervously spent the day pretending to be intellectuals. There were so many fascinating new perspectives and terms and lenses that when it was over, I felt both thrilled and vaguely hung over.

As I was reading for this magazine, I kept going back to that day—particularly one lecture that discussed James Vandemeer's exploration of hyperobjects: things that have a scale so at odds with our experiences that our brains can't fully process them, like how long styrofoam lasts or how the wealth of a billionaire compares to the average person.

As a concept, the topic was both illuminating and unsettling—but I was struck by the deep ties the hyperobject has to the SFF space, the way we writers constantly try to process and represent phenomena that defy description. Over and over, we find that the substance, scale, and tempo of things isn't how we assumed, and we strive to give the reader a sense of that wonder.

Take, for example, our place in the world. We are insignificant meat-beings in a possibly infinite, ever-more-quickly expanding universe—one we now know is not empty, but instead 95% full of an occult combination of dark matter and dark energy. And yet, within each of us, there is an entire microcosm of atoms and organs and neurons and emotions. Somehow, from these disparate progenitors, we draw love, justice, and art.

Each of the pieces we have for you this month in some way addresses these questions of substance, scale, and tempo.

- Marie Croke's *Flock of Words and Wonder* explores the magic behind the creation of new writing against the backdrop of a magical library that descends into chaos when its librarian disappears.
- May Chong's poem *Beefriend* is a sharp, beautiful invitation to marvel at the multitudes contained in the smallest of insects.
- *A Home for the Hungry Tide*, by Alexandra Singer, subverts classic western fantasy tropes to explore the limits of a god's power and the division between human and ghoul.
- Shaoni C. White's poem *Stranger Organs* is a haunting, visceral education on the exotic multitudes of the body.
- Atreyee Gutpa's lyrical yet unsettling cave-diving story, *Cocoon*, asks a trapped miner to give up the body entirely.
- In *Feudal Superstition*, by Yiwen Bu, we explore the limits of the modern and rational against the backdrop of a rapidly-changing, drought-ravaged China.

- *Lavender, Juniper, Gunpowder, Smoke*, by Alyson Grauer, encapsulates the wonders of growing up and finding our place via a magical presence at school.
- Finally, we have an essay by Jessica Cho that explores a writer's journey of curiosity, doubt, and diaspora.

I and the rest of the editorial team are so excited to share these pieces with you, with their wealth of curiosity, awe, dismay, and joy. It is my greatest hope that you find them illuminating, unsettling, and moving, and that you come away seeing the world just a bit differently than when you started.



A prolific writer of short fiction, articles, essays, and poetry, **Maria's** work has been published in dozens of venues, including Apex, Lightspeed, Augur, Nightmare, Khoreo, Apparition, and more. Her debut novel, *THE CONFIGURATIONS OF KATRINA KIM*, comes out from Grand Central Publishing in winter of 2023.

Although she's currently a computer programmer, in her previous lives, Maria's held a variety of diverse careers, including property manager, English teacher, and occupational therapist. She lives with her partner and a potato-dog in southwest Michigan, in a centenarian saltbox house that is almost certainly haunted, watching K-dramas and drinking Bell's beer. She can be reached via twitter @mariadongwrites or on her website, MariaDong.com.

A Home for the Hungry Tide

by Alexandra Singer

When the ghoul dragged a third man off the boardwalk, the priests of the Marsh City of Nadia rang the bells. That evening, the acolytes fastened pinwheels to the docks and scrubbed the quay, the one at the end of the pier, which no living sailor used. Tailwind's silver boat arrived with the next tide, cutting effortlessly through the waves from the light of the horizon. A god always answered the bells.

Tailwind found the wretched ghoul in the northern swamps, under the boardwalk. Crouched in the muddy shallows, the muck lapped at her knobby knees, but she was well into her meal. The pieces of the man were scattered around her bent and ragged figure, but as the soul was the real thing that would nourish her, she'd taken her time with it. Tailwind followed its flagging light.

"Halt, oh sinful slur upon this world," declared Tailwind, his black and grey robes drifted in the winds of his own power. He levelled his spear at her back. This ghoul was a particularly nasty specimen. She must have

died in still water, for her hatred warped her halfway to the thick skin and slippery form of a snakehead. Her human arms and legs were spindly and pale grey. Her fingers were stretched unnaturally long, a faint webbing formed between them. "Take another bite and I shall retrieve it from your belly."

"Oh shove off," gurgled the ghoul, turning in the marsh water, mud clouded about her feet. "My belly, my business. Since when do you care what's in it?"

The dead man's foot had been dangling from her jaws, but it fell and splashed into the muck as the ghoul spoke.

Tailwind hesitated. The battered remains of her mud-stained wrap were knotted high over her waist, meant to give way for an expanding abdomen. She'd been pregnant. She must've met a bad end, with no one to guard her body in death, as she was missing the middle two fingers of her right hand. Sure sign of a grave robber.

Tailwind coughed. "Lady, my faithful have called for that soul's protection. I shall never allow you to feast upon it"

"Feast," she laughed, straightening in the water. It made her shape more apparent. Only her body was bloated. Her limbs were skinny and pale. Hanks of matted hair hung in her face like marsh weed, and her eyes were wide and cloudy like a dead fish. "Some feast he is. And some faithful. Real quality there."

She had a point. The soul still clinging to the torn remains was almost as murky as the water lapping at the ghoul's tattered hem. The young man must've spent his few years on this earth in the enthusiastic pursuit of spiritual pollution.

Still, Tailwind shouldered his spear. Ghouls played these games, sometimes. He refused to fall for them.

“Nevertheless,” he said. “There is no soul that may claim perfection, but all may claim my protection.”

“Yeah? And where were you when it was his wife wailin’ for protection, eh?” coughed the ghoul. She gave the dead man’s chest a nudge with one of her dirty, bare feet. The soul cringed and cowered away from her. “You know he spent all her money on dice? You know he smacked her around when she complained about it, right?”

It was an accusation so bald that Tailwind paused and plunged his shining hand into the muddy waters. He dragged the wavering soul out from the pieces of this body.

“Ridiculous,” pronounced the god, with a flash of his light-filled eyes. “Faithful one, is this true?”

The soul cringed and wavered, but it couldn’t lie.

“Heh,” said the ghoul. She did not say, “I told you so” but the rather smug way she popped one of the man’s hair beads into her mouth and crunched down on it said it all.

“How...disappointing,” muttered Tailwind. “But nevertheless. No matter how, erm, unsightly this soul may be, I cannot allow you devour it.”

The soul drooped pathetically under the god’s criticism. The ghoul threw her head back and laughed. “Hell else do you expect me to do? Wait around for a righteous one?”

“Move on. Return to the ocean. Give your name to the winds and sail out to the horizon. You shall be carried out by the tides, fresh and new—”

“Spare me the sermons. I’ve heard ‘em. Sure, I could,” huffed the ghoul, waving her bony hand in the general direction of the mess. “But what about him?”

For the first time, Tailwind noticed the second form shivering around the muck. It was only about the size and hue of a rockfish, equally mottled and horrible, with eyes like glass marbles, rolling in their sockets. The infant ghoul opened its mouth and yowled.

The ghoul took one look at the god’s face. Her rubbery lip curled. “Yeah, that’s about right. You didn’t hear my prayers either, when they did me in. So what’s it going to be? You going to run me through? Smite me? Sew my skin into your sails?”

“I shall...” And for once in his many years of service to the people, the shining, silver Tailwind found himself at a loss for words. He plunged his spear into the water and lifted his chin, attempting to regain some of his grandeur. “I shall do what must be done. You, wretched soul. If I am to judge you —”

He lifted the tip of his spear and levelled it at her face. The ghoul stared at the point, murky eyes cold and resigned.

“ —tell me your name.”



Tailwind found a shrine out in the border marshes, where the ground firmed up just enough to build a little clay hut. A few pinwheels blew raggedly in the weak winds of the hot mid-day, and the streamers hung limp, their colors long ago bleached by the sun. The priest here was a sweet old woman who kept the boards washed and the carpets laundered, despite the muck brought in by farmers who worked in the marsh. She

brewed an excellent hot chocolate, melted from well-spiced, dark blocks she made herself.

He didn't bother to announce himself. His outdated dress and his antiquated way of speech would give her enough of an idea of who he might be—but Tailwind never came for bows or supplication. The old woman kept her silence on the matter, as he hoped she would.

His companion was a bit harder to place, a grey-skinned woman in a sopping cloak, her hood pulled over her matted black hair. She didn't have the brightness of a god, nor the breath of a living soul.

But still, it never paid to be nosy. Especially with a hungry god.

"I'll get another pot going," she said, and toddled out into the yard, leaving all her questions unasked.

"Your good priest threw a bucket at my head last week," muttered the ghoul. Her name was Atzi and she kept her hands firmly bunched in the borrowed cloak.

"With these offerings to sustain your form, she should not trouble you as long as you are under my auspice," promised Tailwind.

"Yeah? And how long do I got that?"

The little fish ghoul wriggled out from under her robes. It used its fin-like hands to dump the bowl of chocolate into its wide mouth. Its gurgles morphed into a much happier burble.

Tailwind pushed his own unfinished bowl across the table to join the first. Atzi eyed it warily. "As long as you need. I promise you, this shall fill you better than any faithful's tarnished soul."

After the first few mouthfuls she did look a bit brighter. Some of the sallow tint left her grey skin, its original brown luster coming through. A few beaded braids replaced some of her matted hair, dangling against her jaw.

“Well?” asked the god, duly smug.

Atzi glared at him, her eyes notably less bulbous. The webbing on her hands had gone down. She laid her notably shorter fingers on the fish ghouls now rounder head. The “S’not bad.”

When seconds came, she drank down that whole bowl, too.

“Will you tell me your story?” asked Tailwind, when the fish ghouls now resembled a little fuzzy peach, curled up on her now dry leg. Its tail thumped happily.

Atzi wiped her mouth and grimaced. “What’s there to tell? I was a rich man’s side piece. He decided two women were too expensive. He dropped me in the marsh to keep me quiet, despite promising to take me on.”

She leaned back and stuck her leg out, showing off open cuts from the ropes around her ankle. He must have weighed her down with stones.

An awful way to die. Tailwind grimaced. “Did this man of bad faith know about the babe?”

“Yeah,” said the ghoul, distantly. She pulled her leg back under her wrap. “Didn’t stop him.”

The table clattered as the god attempted to kneel. Her gills flared in alarm—they hadn’t quite melted back into her neck.

“My lady,” he said, bowing his head. “You should know that if you were to haunt one of my priests, we would deliver you satisfaction—”

“Oh, I got satisfaction,” she said, quickly. “I pulled him in right after me a week later. Tied him up in his own rocks.”

Tailwind looked up.

She smiled, showing her long and still-pointed teeth. “Seemed faster than waiting for him to bribe the magistrates.”

“A just death,” agreed Tailwind. This time, she looked at him. “He forfeited his rights to my protection. But if you have achieved justice, why do you yet linger, lady most aggrieved?”

Her torn hand stopped over the smaller ghoul’s slippery head. “There’s a weight on me yet.”

“What weight is that?”

“If you have to ask, then it ain’t worth answering.”



He did not smite the ghoul or her child that day. Instead, he took an extra bar of packed cocoa from the priest and pressed it into the ghoul’s hand.

“Brew it with clean water, if you can find it,” he said, “And seek offerings in the shrines when you feel empty. They shall offer you safety.”

“Safety,” husked Atzi, shaking her head. Her uncovered beads clacked. “As if they wouldn’t drive me away at first glance.”

He touched the shimmering ends of the cloak he’d draped around her. “Wear this and they shall know you have my blessing. Let them try to deny you. I will blow down their doors.”

She laughed, but when he vanished like a breath of wind, and the robe was still settled about her shoulders,

she had to admit maybe there was something to all that pomp.



He found her a month later, holed up beneath a bridge during a stiff summer rain. A wanted serial killer lay dead at her webbed feet. The ghou child gnawed on one of the dead man's shoes, and the beautiful woven cloak Tailwind had given her had gone nearly black from mud and blood.

"Don't look at me that way," she muttered, giving the uneaten soul an angry flick with her hand. It was sour and shriveled looking. She must have been working up the nerve to eat it.

"I wanted better for you," said Tailwind.

"Better doesn't exist for me," she hissed, gathering the squirming fish ghou to her sagging breasts.

Tailwind flexed his fingers along his spear, feeling the well-worn grooves of the grip, worn by centuries of divine purpose. Then, sharpened by that purpose, he thrust the spear into the blackened, wicked soul at her feet, banishing it on.

"There is a shrine not far from here," he said. "Come with me."



If anyone thought to question the ghou's appearance, the god's arm around her shoulders made them think twice.

This shrine was run by a sea captain and his first mate. They'd promised to build one if they survived a particularly powerful storm. They'd kept their promise and, as they'd earned much gold over the course of

their careers, the shrine was particularly idyllic, built overlooking the city's north-most pier.

Tailwind and the ghoulish sat at the feet of the shrine's sizable statue. They drank chocolate and ate candied figs, swapping stories and listening to the rain.

"Doesn't look much like you," said Atzi, looking between the shrine icon and its god. "You tell them to add on all those muscles?"

"They see me in dreams as you see me now," said Tailwind, gesturing. "They are the ones who make their decisions on how to translate that image to stone."

"Doesn't seem to bother you."

"When I walked yet among the living, I did once hope to be tall."

That earned him a true laugh from the ghoulish. It sounded like a boat scraping up against a pier. "What, you didn't spring into existence ten feet tall with four extra sets of abs?"

"The people of the ocean are mighty in heart, but not, ah, stature."

"You wasted your breath on your huffery, is what you did."

"And who were you?" he challenged. "When you yet lived?"

Atzi had been an innkeeper among the border marshes. She'd done reasonably good business, offering rest and solid ground to merchants who'd made their way across the endlessly wet floodlands. Since her inn was clean and the rooms were cool, her clientele had gotten wealthier and wealthier, until she'd met Eztli, her lover and killer. He was a shipping agent. He stayed

regularly. He brought her fresh flowers, from the firm lands.

“Guess that makes me easy,” she sighed, but the chocolate worked through her as she spoke. Her hands grew more tanned and lively. Her eyes became brown and deep with memory.

She bounced the small ghoul on her knee, pouring a half cup of chocolate into its gaping jaws. Its fins almost resembled fat infant hands.

“My lady,” interrupted Tailwind, with an earnestness that made her gills raise. “Please know that if you’d like shelter for the night, this house of worship is open to you.”

The ghoul froze with her knee raised. She dropped her dripping heel back to the floor.

“You.” Her eyes went wide and truly fishy in their alarm. “You really think that I...Pah.”

She clutched the little fish ghoul to her chest and slithered over the rail, back into the frothing shallow sea.



Tailwind did not return to the horizon. He spent many days idling among the streets of his faithful, spinning pinwheels and stirring banners.

Until the little fish ghoul led him to her, screeching like a seabird. He found her half dried out on a beach, a vestal spear buried in her side--but alive.

He broke off the shaft and carried her to the nearest shrine, a tidal cave hollowed out by an old monk and his students. She was too weak to protest. He wrapped her in one of his spare sails, carrying her and the smaller ghoul close to his chest. Too much time had passed since

she'd fed. Her fetid flesh sagged even more. Only after three bowls of spiced pudding did she at last resemble a person again.

"My faithful have shamed you," whispered Tailwind, holding his hand over her open wound. "Name them, and I shall bring them to heel."

"Don't be too hard on your idiot priests," she said, once her lips were wet enough to speak. The shrine walls were painted with images of the god in his boat. It only kind of looked like him. The priests let him lay a woven blanket over her twisted form. "They were ready to let me in fine. But they saw him—"

She gestured, vaguely, downwards. The fish ghoul blew water out of his newly formed nostrils.

"And started ringing those bells. I told them he wouldn't hurt anyone if I said not to, but they kept ringing 'em and ringing 'em. Got chased out of three shrines before I was just, ah, well. These places smell too good for me anyway. Last one just managed to nick me, is all."

Then, more quietly, she added: "Tried to stick to eating just the real rotten souls, anyway. Thought that'd be less hassle for you."

Tailwind sighed. A disappointed breeze tore through the cavern. A few acolytes lost their papers. "You deserve a far better meal. When you are turned away again, call upon my aid. I will fly to your side."

"Oh, god."

"Exactly!" cried Tailwind, grinning with all the wildness of a sailor with a full gale against his back. "Exactly, that is what I am, and that is what I shall be for you. Pray to me. Pray, and I shall protect you. Sail with

me. I shall take you to the horizon. You and your son will be welcome among us.”

Atzi looked over her shoulder. The fish ghouls puffed their bodies out, spines shivering. “You’d really take us,” she realized. She turned to face him, holding up the little monstrous creature in her arms. “But would the rest of you godly types be able to stand us as we are? There’s more than just you beyond the horizon, isn’t there?”

She smiled bitterly, so he could see her stained, needle-like teeth. She held out her maimed hand, slippery and webbed. Everyone knew tidal deities were spun from the silver of the moon.

Tailwind was not a god capable of lying. He froze in place.

“Go help the living,” sighed Atzi. “I’m tired of promises no one can keep.”



The tides had cycled three times, and Tailwind’s boat remained moored at the pier. He paced restlessly along the deck, but made no move to raise his sail.

No doubt the wicked thing and her monstrous son would soon fade to nothingness for lack of soul or faith to sustain them. There were only so many truly wicked people in the world, and their shriveled souls provided little sustenance.

When that happened, the priests would be satisfied with their god’s work. Atzi and her child’s end would perhaps not be a glorious smiting of the wicked—but a ghoulish would no longer stalk the boardwalk. Who would mourn? Weren’t ghouls creatures of hate and vengeance in violation of natural law? If their souls refused to leave

on the tide, shouldn't they accept the point of a spear or fade away?

"But it's simply abominable," cried Tailwind, who now knew better. He was a god, was he not? It was his duty to challenge the world's injustices.

He drove away the heinous thought with enough divine ire that the temple bells rang on their own all through the city. The people held their ears for an hour afterwards.

Boats rocked in the night. Roofs rattled. Tailwind blew into the dreams of the priests. He arrived in an explosion of light, as big and as broad as the icons they built of them.

He blew through the cavern on the beach, where the acolytes slept in their neat little lines. He stood towering over them, allowing the silver of his sails to flap behind him, majestic as a sailboat in a full run.

"My good faithful," he bellowed, like a great flap of canvas in a gale. "Rejoice. For I, the mighty Tailwind, have a commandment."

The next morning, all the clergy of Nadia woke bewildered. For once, they shared a common revelation:

- 1) Their ears were ringing.
- 2) This meant their dreams were an actual visitation and not the result of too much incense.
- 3) They ought to do what their god said.
- 4) They didn't want to know how loud he'd get if they didn't.



For Atzi the water ghou, the world soon became a very different place.

The first faithful to find her was a wader picking snails from the tidal pools, near the inner marshes. Not Tailwind, but a mortal beachcomber, the kind who searched beneath docks for dropped treasures.

“Oh,” she said, lifting her straw hat. “Darling, do you need somewhere to go?”

The next of the faithful found her after she’d failed to drown a cowardly fisherman who’d tried to leave his wife. She’d almost had him, but the feckless man had taken one look at the grinning ghoul and running home shrieking, begging the woman to take him back. Good for the wife, if she really wanted the snail of a man, but it left Atzi with only a mouthful of cloth and an empty, wavering belly.

She slouched in the shallows. A priest offered her his oar.

“Going to rain soon,” he said, with a glance at the darkening skies. “Got a place to stay?”

She spent the afternoon in his raft. It rocked with the rising waters, but it didn’t sink. He spiced his melted chocolate with cinnamon.

“Oh, don’t smother him,” he said, when he caught sight of the child, worming around beneath her cloak. Atzi expected a scene when she set the little thing loose, but the priest offered him a ball with a bell in it. His sons were all grown, he explained. They wouldn’t be back for it.

“You’re taking this well,” said Atzi.

The priest laughed. “Children come in all shapes, don’t they?” He nodded to the wall hanging. “It’s the winds’ will, isn’t it?”

“You all keep saying that,” said Atzi, the third time it happened. This time, she sat in a lighthouse temple,

the kind that kept streamers outside. The bell remained suspiciously unring. The head priest even dared offer the little ghoul a cake with her own hands. "What's that mean, will of the winds?"

The priest shrugged. "Well, the Tailwind mainly."

Atzi groaned. "Gah, that does sound like him," she muttered as the priest peered at her. "But I thought those winds blew for Nadia? The sailors and the lighthouse keepers and the like? The ones that stay on the boardwalks."

"You forgot lost mothers on the marsh," said the priest, her expression warm. "And their children. It's a new one, true, but I can't say it's a bad one. Perhaps, like all of us, parenthood gives even gods new perspectives."

"What gives them the who now?" asked Atzi. She chanced a glance over at the icons, laid out on a table across from her. They were a pair of dolls, sewn out of sail canvas. One of the figures she recognized as Tailwind.

The other was new: a hooded woman in grey, its driftwood arms wrapped around a dried hazelnut. The hazelnut had two big eyes carved into it.

Atzi looked between it and the cooing ball in her lap. She could almost see a resemblance.



Even the minor shrines told similar stories. Atzi traveled between them to check. She loitered on the boardwalks and the stilted temples, dangling her feet in the muddy water. The webbed claws became toes four dinners ago. She couldn't summon her tail at all.

Word rang out like the morning bells. Tailwind had

made a proclamation. Tailwind had become a family god.

“Oh, yes. The mighty Tailwind’s found a bride,” said the acolyte in the tidal cavern, as mug youth with a shaved head.

She vaguely remembered scaring the light out of him when she’d fled to the sea.

“Know a lot about your god’s private life, do you?” asked Atzi.

The young acolyte flushed. “Well—I mean—why else would she be in his temple?”

Atzi eyed the mural on the wall. This one depicted Tailwind on his boat, a newly sketched-in voluptuous mermaid by his side. Atzi couldn’t help but poke one of her own breasts in comparison. They were a little more plush than the last time she’d checked, but she hadn’t been quite that busty even when alive. These acolytes had way too much free time.

“What’s the name of the babe?” Atzi pointed to the little blob on the bow of the ship. It didn’t look much like her own, who’d grown arms and legs just that morning. She was very proud of him.

“Gust,” said the acolyte, with the confidence of a total liar.

“Gust,” mused Atzi. “Eh, it’ll do.”



The old sea captain and his first mate unveiled a new statue in Nadia proper. Atzi scowled when she saw it. The woman looked ready to brain a sea serpent to death, all bulging muscles, with one leg propped up on the head of some kind of unholy amalgam of horse and fish.

At least the infant in her arms looked fairly cute, even if it had visible triceps and a confusing amount of teeth.

“What, you couldn’t find a woman to model for it?” she asked the sea captain. The woman’s physique bore a suspicious resemblance to the captain himself, minus the beard.

His first mate came to his defense. “She’s Lady Rain. The mighty consort to the mighty Tailwind! She should look strong. It takes muscle to hoist a sail.”

The captain smiled under his bristly beard. “Indeed it does. Did I ever tell you...”

Atzi watched the gathered faithful, an even split of those who looked forward in interest and those who yawned and wandered away.

She picked up one of the bowls of figs from the feet of Tailwind’s mighty consort and fed it to the little gusty thing chewing on her wrap. If a few of the other faithful shot her dirty looks, she flashed them a pointy smile. They moved on right quick after that.

“Hey, now,” she asked the sea captain, who’d just finished with his latest tale of woe. “Since when does Tailwind have a consort, anyway?”

A smile rippled the sea captain’s salt-encrusted beard. “Tailwind requested we make a place in his house for a rain-soaked woman and her child. Well, who else belongs in the wind’s house but the wind’s wife? Not every sailor’s married to the sea”

“Some marry other sailors,” said the first mate, archly.

“You people,” said Atzi. “All these assumptions.”

Atzi’s feet left no wet tracks on the boardwalk as she left. As she marched down the hill, no one stopped her.

Her wrap was a little dark for daywear, black with only a few silver threads dangling from the sleeves.. One or two travelers stopped to eye the bundle in her arms, but there wasn't a spine or flipper in sight. She'd wrapped him up in a nice little woven blanket she'd nicked out of the tidal shrine. She'd bled into it. That made it hers, right?

"Imagine that," she said to the little thing in her arms. "Just 'cause he says to let a lady in, they all decide she's his consort. Little bit of misplaced faith can go a long way. How about that statue, huh?"

The only answer she got was a garbled mewl as the creature pressed his face against her front.

"Hungry again?" sighed Atzi. "What, those figs weren't enough? Careful, there, or I really will name you tit-biter, no matter what those idiot priests have decided to name you."

The quay at the end of the pier was made from fresh white wood, newly washed, freshly patched, not a single board left a snag or splinter on her bare feet. Pinwheels were posted along the sides, fluttering freely as she passed. The guards at the docks uncrossed their spears at the sight of her. They hurriedly stepped aside.

"What's all this?" But every time Atzi tried to look one of the guards in the eyes, they dropped to their knees and began to pray. They were temple guards, the kind that manned the lighthouse itself. They really liked their prayer. Atzi thought about nudging one of them with her foot, but she'd felt one of those spears in her side once before and didn't care to again. She gathered the babe to her breast, lifted her chin like a queen, and stepped around them.

A silver dinghy rocked at the end of the pier. A one-man dinghy, hardly fit for open sea, but its pointed prow shone like a knife against the deep green waves. Shrouded in silver, Tailwind was hard at work rigging his boat. He fixed his spear back into a boom, and fastened it to the mast. She watched him work.

"You know." At least when she cleared her throat, it still sounded a little like a croak. "They're saying I'm your wife."

Tailwind knocked his mighty head against the boom as he looked up at her.

"Ah, lady," he said, the delight in his eyes completely inappropriate, but when he streamed from the deck of the boat to the pier beside her, there was a nearly bashful tilt in his shining gaze. "I thought perhaps if they thought the babe mine—well, no one can question the child of a god, now can they?"

"You tell me," said Atzi, and she pulled the woven blanket out of the creature's face.

The baby was on the small side, but his eyes blazed with the sort of soupy life you found in the marshlands. The bare thatch of hair on its head was prickly, like a spinefish, but his cheeks were fat and full, glowing from fresh cocoa, figs, and milk. He looked, perhaps, a bit like those sketches in the sea cave. He looked a lot like that statue up on the hill. It must've given him some ideas, she thought, as he crossed his feet and wriggled his toes.

When Tailwind reached to tap him on the cheek, the boy bit him. The god pulled back with a laugh and shook out his hand.

"Gust, hm," said Atzi. "Was that your idea?"

"Not at all. I thought *Typhoon* would be grander."

“You would,” sighed Atzi. “What about the *Lady Rain*? That one you?”

Tailwind froze. He really couldn’t lie. Atzi wondered if that was a god thing, or something unique to this particular god.

“Atzi means rain,” he said, with a sheepish sort of pride.

At the mention of the name, the guards on the dock bowed even lower, if that was possible.

“That boat’s awful small,” said the Lady Rain, a tall broad woman in a black and silver cloak. “Could it really fit two more?”

She held out her hand like a queen and waited. There was neither fin nor film in her upturned palm. Her beaded hair hung nearly to the small of her back, and her brown eyes were fierce but warm. Her deep brown skin brimmed with all the earthy life of the shore. How mighty this goddess looked, standing there beside her slender, windy consort.

The bracelets were a little much.

Ah, well. She supposed it came with the job. She *had* planned to be a goddess of vengeance, after all.

Tailwind laid his hand in hers. It felt cold, like a stiff breeze. She was still missing her two middle fingers, but from the way he folded his fingers over hers and held it tight, he didn’t mind.

“My lady,” he promised. “You gaze upon the mightiest sailor upon the horizon.”

“Prove it,” said Lady Rain.

She climbed aboard.



Alexandra Singer lives on coastal Connecticut with her wife, two cats, and too many fantasy novels to count. She is the author of indie titles *MINOTAUR*, *SONG OF THE BULLRIDER*, the graphic novella *SMALL TOWN WITCH*, and the ongoing webcomic *SFEER THEORY*. Her short stories have appeared in *Crossed Genres Magazine*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and *Sledgehammer Literature*. For more, visit her website at littlefoolery.com or on twitter @sfeertheorist.

Flocks of Words and Wonder

by Marie Croke

Each morning the daily flock of new words from all the countless realms streamed in—fluttering, dancing—paper and hide manuscripts nudged freely about by heartier stones and thick wooden tablets. They organized themselves: perching on railings and stools, stacking precariously on edges of tables, teetering on backs of chairs. They waited patiently for the Librarian—the only one capable of reading them, understanding them, sorting them to their proper places within the Library of All.

Each morning, their wait was rewarded, until the day the Librarian did not come. Could not be found, not within the maze of scroll chutes nor wading within the stone streams nor lingering too long among the paper bridges.

Until the day our Librarian disappeared.



Those of us left of the Librarian's assistants herded the flock. Rolled the tiny pebbles and rounded stones

down ramps, up ramps, until they begrudgingly hopped into churning, bubbling streams that flowed over and under halls and shelves. We coaxed splintered-edged, wooden tablets toward the craggy wooden hooks dangling from revolving boughs of aged oak and beech. Fanned flimsy papers until they settled in haphazard, unordered stacks within stained glass sleeves betwixt leather-bound books and metal engravings.

Our efforts kept the Library of All neat, but not orderly. My efforts alongside the others proved ambitious, but not well-informed.



Far above my head, where the arches of the Library of All pooled its shadows, the Informed Causeways would continue to open each morning. Regardless of backlog, regardless of how many stories and magnum opuses clung to the stone, the causeways never ceased to spill the day's deluge.

We read what we could, bursting our minds with what words we knew, praising ourselves if we managed to order the pages of an unbound book, even if only in part, or set a stone rolling through its proper stream.

More often than not, though, we sighed wistfully at glyphs or squiggles that not a one of us could decipher. Was that stone a note on politics of its realm, or a riddle children told to entertain, or both? Should that other be rolling in the historical stream? Perhaps instead it should be settled in the flow of the children's gurgling path, where the stepping plates lay close to help short legs.

We didn't know.



One by one, the others gave up. The Librarian of All no longer cared, they said, why should we? They filtered away. Some grandly, goodbyes all around. Some mutely, despondent. One or two snuck away during particularly busy mornings, when the immensity of the flock could not be faced, not even one last time.

They left out the front door. Out the side doors. Out the back doors and the secret doors. They left to worlds we'd visited with the Librarian and to worlds we'd never seen before, all of them either trudging slowly with uncertainty or sprinting in a desperate bid to escape the backlog of words begging for attention.

Thirty became twenty, became thirteen, became nine, became four, became two—

But that last assistant did not go grandly nor despondently nor silently. He didn't really go at all.

He grew angry: at the Librarian for abandoning us all; at the realms who could not cease their incessant writing, not even for a day; at the flock who could not organize themselves.

And angry at me, though I didn't know why. He called me too-optimistic and naive. He claimed my focus a facade, which I thought was the same as a lie. I argued, hoping he'd stay so I'd not be lonely.

He did stay, in his own fashion; he dove headfirst into a scroll chute.

Once in a while, if I'd managed to calm and herd the flock that day, I'd hear him talking to himself within the gnarled tree trunks, where the scrolls poke free from knots. If I placed my ear against one of the larger knots, I could almost make out his words. He'd sound as if he was reading, but I couldn't be sure. Couldn't even be sure I was hearing him at all.

Two became one, leaving me alone to face the ever-growing words.



As the realms became more literate, the flocks descended ever thicker. The Librarian would have liked that, I thought. Maybe.

Maybe the Librarian would have hated the extra work, as I did. I began to get behind even in my meager attempts to settle each day's words into some semblance of neatness. Yesterday's flock intermixed with today's. Last month's with this week's. I no longer saw words; they blended together in a rush of crinkling, tapping, slapping, rustling. I could not waste time deciphering language and thesis, not with the flock pressing into every crack and alcove and having to be shuffled into scroll chutes, plopped into streams or hung on hooks.

I missed the evening's silence.



I slept in uncomfortable beds made of other people's words. With no one to read them, care for them, understand them, they populated.

I ached for the time when I could reach my hands to the boughs and pull down a tablet I knew to be there. Dreamt of the days the Librarian would open the Library to a new people—or an old one—who would scamper through the halls like children, dipping their fingers into streams of pebbled fairy tales, running their hands through chiming legislation, looking through scrolls of information on every subject known to all. I missed their excitement to learn, and the Librarian's desire to share.



Some mornings, I would wake smothered beneath words clamoring for someone I was not, forced to dig myself free.

I wandered overburdened bridges and climbed hide-strewn ladders. Pretended I could read epic sagas from a time and place I'd never been. Realized I wanted to have been. Realized I no longer cared that my abandonment would leave the Library empty, bereft; that our number, once thirty, would become none.

So the next morning, I found the path—forced a path, more like—to the dizzying heights of the Library where the vaulted arches opened to the Informed Causeways. When the day's flock came streaming in to join the disarray I no longer sought to control, I almost fell. Papers flapped in my face, stones smacked against my head. I clung to the curved column beside the gaping entrance to the Causeways, my toes barely touching the topmost branch of an ancient oak scroll-keeper of philosophy. Down below, the collected manuscripts bulged and undulated like distant waves. I held on and watched the new flock confusedly flit about until they crammed themselves into holes and crevices not yet filled to capacity.

Then I let go.

The scent of the Library faded behind me as I tumbled through the Causeways, my bearings lost, my body as untamed in its flailing as every manuscript that had ever come fluttering into the Library of All.

Scorched bits, water-stained words, ripped and shattered and slashed and muddied castoffs lurked in the shadows of those endless informational passages. They came out of hiding as I passed through that soaring channel between the worlds, their approach cautious, tentative, as if scared I'd smack them away. These poor

fragments must have been left behind by the bulk of the flock. Too weak, too blurred, too fragile to be added to the Library of All.

They smelled of muck and char. They reminded me... of me. Not good enough for the Library; not intelligent enough to give up trying.



In my confusion, I tumbled from the Causeways through a gap, finding myself abruptly shoved into an unfamiliar realm, one of countless worlds connected to the Library. About me were streets of dirt I could not feel beneath my feet, lilies I could not touch rising from the banks of a river that could not dampen me.

I listened to those who made this place their home, but I did not speak its language. Wandered, deaf to this people's words, dumb to their minds, the Informed Causeway blinking above their riverside city, and my own body a thing outside of existence. As if I'd lost my sense of solidity by passing through the Causeways, rather than the doors the other assistants had taken.

So I floated, through slanted rooftops and down limestone walls, searching the city, observing its people, wondering if any of them had visited the Library of All, wondering if any of them could. I might have continued like that forever, harboring a loss of purpose, had I not passed through an open doorway into a sunlit room and come upon a woman writing.

She used thin wire, wrapped it into shapes, and tapped those shapes into a dried pallet that gave off the same scent as the encroaching lilies on the river. I became breathless, eager to see the final product once she hung her shapely wires in their bag. The pallet shivered, its soul rising like a ghost from her work.

I'd never seen a birth. The way the new words flopped and floated about made me laugh for the first time in years. So this was why they needed the Librarian to organize them, why they couldn't do so themselves. They were fresh and new, like babes, confused and riding on instinct as they winged their way toward the Causeways, unable to even decipher themselves, to know what secrets they contained.



All the worlds became my professors, their aged knowledge mine to take. The Informed Causeway mine as much as it was the flock's. I hoped I might one day see the other assistants who'd left the Library, but no. They'd taken different highways, leaving only me to this one.

I discovered many just-birthered thoughts before they joined a conglomerate flock. One on one, their rustling, their scratching, their flapping, tapping, snapping, took shape, no longer a cacophony of language, ideas, and history I could not decipher. Individually, they held meaning.



The current of the Informed Causeway coursed slower—

—and slower.

With the passages crammed thick by a flock too huge to flow, I found myself crawling rather than flying, shoving over a deluge, the flock ripping, cracking, bending beneath my knees. Like when I'd slept in piles of words back home. Yet this time, I heard their cries, felt their sentences split when I moved too roughly, saw their fear arise, fear of becoming obsolete before they might be filed by the Librarian.

I ached for them, reading their desire to be read before I saw the thoughts they harbored.



I found my way home, back through overwhelmed passages to the end of the Causeways that were no longer a mystery. Shoved my body through the bottlenecked manuscripts of stone and wood and hide until I fell inward onto sluggish streams and clogged boughs. And there, I struggled to stand within an oak so thickened, it leaked pages like tears each time my shifting weight shuddered the branches.

I'd abandoned the Library, and disarray had bred malcontent. The tablets no longer gently chimed, the knots were invisible behind bent and crumbled scrolls, stained-glass had shattered and sliced through papers they could not contain.

Military-strategy engravings fought with hide-wrapped mythologies. Children's crass jokes punched holes through linen nautical charts. Unbound pages of referendum smothered a woven tapestry depicting one world's botanicals in miniature.

They saw me reading them and paused.

A whisper shivered through a sea of needy, needy writings. A sudden patience descended upon them, tablets straightening, hide unfurling, stones rolling such that their words turned right-side up.

All ready to be seen, and understood, and sorted to their proper place.



Each morning, the daily flock streams in, fluttering, dancing, nudging one another in excitement that they have finally arrived. They organize themselves the best

they can: eager, quickly-scrawled words perching on railings or stools while long-to-completion opuses and charts stack themselves on table edges and teeter on chair-backs. They calm, but for whispered wonder, and wait patiently for the Librarian.

And when I come, they listen.



Marie Croke is an award-winning fantasy and science-fiction writer living in Maryland with her family, all of whom like to scribble messages in her notebooks when she's not looking. She is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop, and her stories have been published or are forthcoming in over a dozen magazines, including Apex Magazine, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Dark Matter Magazine, Deep Magic, Cast of Wonders, and Diabolical Plots. You can find her book and short story recommendations at mariecroke.com or chat about writing woes or being book drunk with her [@marie_croke](https://twitter.com/marie_croke) on Twitter.

Beefriend

by May Chong

Now I hold no fear
of bullet-bright wasps,
scorch and sting, watchful,
wax-silent. All know
I am with the bees,
dusted with secrets.

The carpenter started it,
web-befouled and ebony
exhausted. I offered quarter-
oranges from my plate.
How she sipped sweet life
back into her body, then
buzzed off. Next day

came the honeymaker,
humming copper, bumbling,
battering framed air.
I unlatched windows, crossed
her wings with my breath.

Then third, a blue traveler,
far from native hills,
wiggling belly-up
on my dawn-dodged pillow,
righted and forgotten
until the fourth night, when

my dreams were fur, dense
as angšana bloom. Eyes gleaming
in obsidian billions, spine
and humming.
One million pinpricks. Yet
I was clean from fear.
Chosen. Now

where I am they follow,
claws kissing skin, humming
with hornet gossip, bark
and blossom, span of swarm-
sun-secrets, too many
to recount. No half-tame hive
has since swelled unwanted
in my streets. Pollen
no longer glasses my eyes.
I am marked comrade, or at least
advantageous
to whatever plan of the hive
mind, guiding every loop
of a dance beneath the sun.

Perhaps the wasps hum other truths,
or remain jealous
they did not sting me first.



May Chong (@maysays on Twitter) is a Malaysian poet/speculative writer who aims to tackle the heart and tickle the soul. Her verse has been featured in *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Anathema Magazine* and *Bending Genres*. She is also a double Rhysling Award nominee for her poems *Esprit d'escalier* and *Cursebody* (published in *Apparition Lit* #1 and #11). Away from the keyboard, you'll find her birdwatching, playing video games or enjoying the worst possible puns

Lavender, Juniper, Gunpowder, Smoke

by Alyson Grauer

They are always at my heels, this pack of girls who might as well be wolves. No matter how hard I try to ignore them, pretending they haven't hurt my feelings, I can't seem to shake them off. They stalk me in the hallways between classes, each girl smelling of plastic flowers, raspberry, and freshly applied nail polish. The scent choke me in the school's enclosed cinderblock halls. I miss the woods of home.

"Hick," Marie's voice whispers at my back.

I glance back to see Marie's wide smile, her teeth white as the moon. Hannah, lean and narrow-boned, slouches beside her.

"Where's the flood, then?"

Hannah's words echo in my head as I turn to face forward while ignoring the squirm in my belly. I don't know what she means by flood. Or hick. I rarely understand what they say to me, but I know they mean to hurt me.

Maybe not wolves, then, but hyenas. Always giggling, always staring and baring their teeth.

Dominique steps into my path out of nowhere. I stop abruptly, hugging my books to my chest.

"Hey," Dom barks. "She asked you *where's the flood*, hick."

My voice is small. "What flood?"

"The one you're gettin' ready for. Look at yourself!"

"Maybe she can't afford any other pants," suggests Marie, as though talking to a baby. "Like how she can't afford a haircut."

"Or a brush!"

I look down. My hair falls over my shoulders, frizzled and tangled. My overalls are a little shorter than they used to be, so I've rolled the cuffs up neatly. I don't mind because it shows more of my colorful socks this way.

It dawns on me that the Girlpack thinks all of it is ugly: my hair, my pants, my socks. They're judging me on something I didn't know I could be judged on. The squirming in my gut increases.

What do they want me to say?

"No excuses?" Hannah chides.

Marie shakes her head, honey-gold hair curling prettily about her shoulders. "Disgraceful."

They start to move past me, but Dom reaches for me.

"Lemme see your book covers." She grabs for the top book of my stack, pulling it out of my arms and holding it up.

"Are those *dinosaurs*?" Hannah chokes back a laugh as Dom passes her the book to examine.

"No," I protest, "they're dragons."

I painted them before class started on plain brown-paper wrappings for my school books. It had taken me a whole week to finish them all. Red ones with spikes, green ones with swirling patterns on their hides. Blue and black with icy white wings. Gold with glittering silver claws.

“You are literally the weirdest person I’ve ever met.” Marie holds my biology book, covered in my painted beasts. Her eyes gleam dark with malice.

I feel a familiar tight heat building in my chest. It frightens me, this feeling, and I only ever feel it when the Girlpack is doing this thing they do.

“Can I have it back?” I ask, careful not to let the heat into my words.

“Oh! Sure thing,” she says, and tosses it up in the air. “Catch!”

I lunge forward to meet it on the way down, and its weight throws me off balance, bruising my hand. The paper rips as I grab it, my dragons crumpled and torn in my own hands.

Hannah howls with laughter as they push past me into the music hallway.



Before we moved to this town, I was sure there was magic in me. Like Mama’s healing and herbs, I knew my magic would come slow, tender as spring shoots and buds, but I didn’t know what it would be. I looked for it everywhere, in every cloud, on every flake of tree bark, in ponds and under stones. Every day I felt closer and closer to finding it, until we moved last year, and Mama had to start sending me to public school.

In the woods, I felt my magic growing every day, like a seed under the soil, almost ready to sprout. Now, in school, I feel this shame over things I do not understand. If I know anything at all, it's that this complicated, uncomfortable feeling is the opposite of magic.

I stand in the door of the den watching Mama work. Sometimes she knits or crochets, sometimes she embroiders, but tonight, it's charm beading. Her needle flashes in the bright light of her desk lamp, dipping like a hummingbird's beak into the pile of beads again and again. She strings them together too fast for me to follow, but I know when she's done, there'll be a spell there to heal hearts and offer comforts.

"Homework all done?" asks Mama, without looking up.

"Yes, Mama."

"Teeth brushed?"

"Yes."

"Goodnight then, love."

I linger a moment more. I don't want to ask for help. I know it will hurt. But I have to.

"Mama, I was wondering if you could... you know." I tug at the ends of my hair. "I can't reach it."

Mama looks up over the wire frames of her glasses. "Oh, Bri. Honey. Again?"

I nod. I hate having Mama brush my hair. It tangles awfully when it gets too long, but I can't stand it when it's cut short, either. I try and try to get the snarls on my own, but if I miss them, they get worse. The Girlpack noticed this recently, and if I don't have Mama take care of it, they'll notice again. And again.

Mama sets down her beadwork carefully. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Come here, let me see."

I pull the little footrest from the armchair over to Mama's desk and sit. Mama angles the desk lamp to see better and pulls the toughest brush from her desk drawer. I close my eyes and try to concentrate on the comfort of her smell instead of the knot of hair at the back of my neck. Mama always smells like fresh linens and wildflowers and green things. Anytime I smell clean soap or sweet clover I think of her. Has she always smelled this way? And if not, what did she smell like when she was my age? What do I smell like? Maybe this identity of perfume will come in time, along with growing up.

In silence, Mama gently sections out my long hair. Then she pulls the brush through the very ends, little by little, working her way up toward the tangled knot hiding at the back of my neck. I cover my mouth to keep from crying out.

"That's quite a snarl, there, honey. I'll see what I can do here. This is why I keep telling you, if you learn to braid your hair, you'll avoid this kind of thing. Wearing it long and down like this, especially in the windy season..." Mama sighs. "But I know you don't want to cut it."

"But if it's short, it will look so much worse," I mumble into my sleeve.

"Maybe, maybe not. Maybe you'll find a shorter style that suits you. And it doesn't have to be *short* short; it could be shoulder-length, even. I think you'd look marvelous."

I know what she wants me to say, but I won't say it. All I can hear is the Girlpack making fun of a classmate who'd gotten a short haircut earlier in the year.

"I'd rather die than have short hair," Marie announced.

"Short hair looks bad on literally everyone," agreed Hannah, "It's so ugly!"

"And if not a drastic cut, there are so many pretty kinds of braids! Different ways of plaiting can be so lovely, and very functional. It'll keep you from tangling, and it will help your hair stay strong. At least let me braid it for you."

"Ew, braids?" Dom groaned, flipping her silky brown hair over her shoulder. "Anybody who wears braids looks like a little kid."

"Seriously! So childish!"

I don't need the Girlpack to like me, but I do want them to leave me alone.

Not for the first time, I think about telling Mama what the Girlpack have said, what they've done. When I think about it, it seems far away and small, as though it doesn't really matter. No, I decide miserably. Mama doesn't need to know. If I'm careful enough, they'll leave me alone. None of this will matter in a year.

"Bri?" Mama prompts, taking my silence for consideration.

"Please don't braid it," I beg softly.

Mama sighs again. "I know it's hard, honey. You can make any choice you want, but right now, you're not making any choices at all, and it gets all tangled up."

My scalp tingles. No matter how gentle Mama tries to be, pain races across my skin like lines of fire. I close my eyes and think about the woods.



I can't sleep.

It took hours, but Mama finally got the tangle out, and then she braided my hair—but not too tightly. I hate the braid. I hate the stinging. I hate the feeling the Girlpack made me feel earlier – like I wasn’t good enough, like I was doing things wrong without even knowing it, things I could never change.

It’s been a very bad day, so I go into the secret drawer under my bed and pull out my candle.

I used to have a few of them—Mama bought them for me when we left the woods so I could remember my favorite smells. When we first moved, I lit them all the time, watching the flame dance from the end of the match to the wick, the candle filling my bedroom with warm light and the smell of my trees, my ponds, my boulders and moss and wet leaves.

They burned up quick, though. I only have one left, and I try to save it for when I really need it. It’s my own little ritual: strike the match, light the wick, watch the glow turn to a flame. I try not to think about the school, the homework, the Girlpack’s stares. Think about the woods, think about the magic instead.

The last candle smells like juniper and lavender, clear water and damp stone. It smells like soft soil, bright sunlight, and crisp leaves, like spring and summer and autumn all at once. It smells like home.

I inhale deeply and close my eyes. I try to quiet my mind the way Mama taught me when I was younger. *One more breath. And now another.*

But what if there is no magic for you? What if you left it behind in the woods and now you’ll never find it again?

I can’t accept that. I take another breath and start over.

Time to get over it and grow up. These wolves will eat you alive.

No. They won't.

I breathe slowly until I feel myself begin to relax. My eyes drift open.

I watch the ivory wax of the candle curl inwards on itself as the flame burns. It melts slowly, softening into new shapes and curved edges. I don't want to burn it too long; I need to make it last. I take one more breath, then blow out the flame.

The sharp, smoky scent of the now-doused wick cuts through the smells of the forest. I run my finger along the still-warm curve of the newly melted edges, and a piece of it breaks off in my hand like a twig.

I hold it until its warmth is gone, and then I set it on my bedside table with the candle and crawl under the covers, taking a deep breath of the woods. And now another.

In the dark behind my eyes, I see curling wisps of smoke outlining the shapes of dragon's wings, dragon's claws, dragon's bellies full of fire.



My alarm is too loud, and something is burning.

I fling myself out of bed, searching for the fire. I'm sure I blew out the candle last night. I see no smoke, no flame. I check under the bed, under the desk - nothing.

I reach to slam the alarm's off button on my bedside table, but stop halfway, my hand frozen in midair.

There is a dragon on my alarm clock.

A tiny, delicate, smooth-featured, white dragon with a little wedge-shaped head and elegant little feet. A

long tail shifts back and forth, catlike. Wings lift from its back, half-unfurled in a playful posture.

“Bri!” yells Mama from the kitchen. “Your alarm, honey!”

“I know!” I shout back. I creep cautiously towards the dragon. “Excuse me,” I say, softer now. “Can I turn that off, please?”

The little dragonet peers down at the alarm clock under its feet, as though it hadn’t noticed the sound. Then it flutters up and away, landing on the back of my desk chair to watch. I hit the off button, fingers trembling, and stare at the tiny creature. It stares back.

I can smell smoke, but I can also smell my familiar candle underneath: juniper, lavender, moss, clean waters.

“How...?” I whisper, even as I start to piece together what I’ve done.

The dragon flies forward, dancing in happy circles around me.

“Briannel!” Mama calls. “You’ll be late!”

I scurry to get dressed, but my mind is reeling. If I leave it in my room, Mama will find it and there’ll be questions, or worse—she might not find it, and it’ll disappear while I’m at school. I can’t let that happen.

I open the front zip-pouch of my backpack and beckon to the dragonet. It climbs inside, tiny silver swirls of steam rising from its smooth snout, its white eyes round as marbles.



School is no place for a candle-wax dragon.

It huffs and puffs anytime someone talks over me in class. It squeaks and hisses like a too-hot coal in a hearth when someone bumps into me in the hallway. Pale gray smoke occasionally curls from my backpack. It's only a matter of time before somebody notices.

In Earth Science class, I zip the front pouch mostly shut to hide the dragon's glowing eyes, but it doesn't last. I start to feel bad for it, trapped in there, so I unzip it a little, then a little more. Eventually Mr. Kelvin stops mid-lecture and asks me to leave my backpack in my locker next time, since the zipper sound is disrupting the focus of the rest of the class.

I mumble an apology as the dragonet claws at the inside of my bag with its white wax claws.

At lunch, I hide in an empty practice room in the music wing and try to figure out how I brought this dragon to life.

"I'm sorry, I don't want you to be uncomfortable, but I can't let you out in the middle of school like this. I don't want anything to happen to you."

After a while, the dragonet stops scratching. Maybe it's asleep. I finish the second half of my sandwich and carefully unzip the pocket to check on it.

A rush of smoky breath throws me back against the wall. The dragonet clambers onto the piano bench and presses its waxy claws into the keyboard, making a booming, dissonant chord.

It's grown bigger.

It's the size of a watermelon. Panic surges into my throat. I reach for it, but it flaps out of the way, toppling the chair. It dodges me, wings snapping open and shut like folding fans in a dance.

Like an eager puppy, it exhausts itself after several minutes, and I coax it back into the bag with pets and soft praises. By the end of the period, it falls asleep.

Its body nearly fills the entire backpack, so I have to carry my books in my arms. Its warmth bleeds through the padding into my spine, as if I'm carrying around a little sun, and I feel sweat begin to seep through my shirt.

I keep my eyes down, hoping nobody will notice.



“Good Lord, that *smell!*” Hannah howls in the locker room before P.E. “That can’t possibly be human.”

I wince as I pull on my uniform shorts. The Girlpack can’t see me around the wall of lockers, but they know I’m here. The dragonet sits puffing indignantly from the shadows of the half-open backpack in my gym locker beside me.

“What do you think, *eau de skunk?*” Dom muses. “Or maybe a rat died in the vents!”

“Some kind of roadkill, but mixed with something else,” says Marie. “Ugh, you know what it is? Days-old underwear!”

The Girlpack erupt into shrieks of horrified, choking giggles.

The dragonet’s eyes blaze white-hot.

“Please don’t listen to them,” I mutter. “It doesn’t matter. They’re just being mean.”

The dragonet reaches forward with waxy claws to pull the zippers further apart, but I gently push it back inside. I zip the bag mostly shut and then carefully close the locker door. “Please, it’s fine. Just stay here, okay?”

I can almost feel its molten eyes follow me through the locker, through the walls as I head into the gym.

I told it to ignore the Girlpack, but now I can't help worrying about them myself. I did remember to put clean clothes on, didn't I? Have I already worn these socks, this shirt, these corduroy pants this week? I can't remember.

And what about deodorant? I sweated through my shirt thanks to the little furnace in my bag, and now I have to survive basketball of all things. I try to give my classmates a wide berth, just in case they can smell me, too. During class, I focus on keeping control of the ball while standing still, rather than dribbling up and down the court and taking shots at the hoop.

A ball slams into my arm out of nowhere, hitting my funny bone so hard it makes me gasp. Heat blossoms in my chest.

And, of course, there is the Girlpack.

"Oooh, sorry," croons Marie. "My aim sucks."

Hannah covers her mouth to muffle her gasping laughter.

I force myself to go back to dribbling, carefully trying to ignore the pain in my arm.

Another ball crashes into me from behind. I take a stumbling step forward to keep my balance. The warmth in my chest turns to a scorching blaze. I let my words unfurl into the air like hot smoke:

"What, exactly, is your problem with me?"

Dom's eyes flick wide open in surprise; I never talk back to the Girlpack like this.

Coach Restin's whistle shrieks across the room. "What the hell was that, Dominique?"

“Sorry, sorry!” Dom puts her hands in the air, dropping her chin as though embarrassed. “I totally biffed that, my fault.”

“Go get your ball and watch what you’re doing, for heaven’s sake.” Coach looms near me, her face pulling into a hard frown. “You okay?”

My chest feels tight, my belly full of fire. I see the flash of Dom’s cocky smile over Coach’s shoulder. I consider telling Coach the truth. But what would come of it? The flame hisses out, and my throat starts to close up.

“Yes,” I say, “I’m fine.”

“Do you need to go to the nurse’s office for an ice pack?”

I shake my head, and Coach makes a sound of disapproval.

“Brianne. Why don’t you go ahead and change out early?” Coach puts her hands on her hips. “That’ll give you a little head start so you can...catch your breath.”

I stammer a thank you and walk as quickly as I dare back to the locker room. I hear my own voice replaying in my head: *What exactly is your problem with me?* I didn’t even sound like myself. Talking back like that probably earned me even more of the Girlpack’s scrutiny.

I push through the double doors of the locker room and walk straight into a wall of silver-gray smoke.

#

Just like before, something is burning—but bigger, heavier: like a cannon instead of just one candle.

I run to my locker, but the door is wide open. My backpack has spilled onto the floor, and there is no sign of my wax dragon.

Each row of benches and locker banks are empty, abandoned and eerie in the smoke. I hurry past them, searching for bits of wax or any other sign of where the dragonet has gone.

“Hey, where are you?” I swipe aside the shower curtains, checking each tiled stall. “What’s going on? Please come back!”

No answer. I double back to do another lap of the lockers, and then I hear it: a deep, resonant scraping, like a smooth river stone being dragged across the tiled floor. I turn toward it, squinting through the smoke.

Then, there it is: a glimpse of smooth, waxen hide between a gap in the lockers. My stomach plummets as I lunge after it.

It’s bigger. *Much* bigger. And it’s heading for the pool.

Triggered by the smoke, fire alarms begin to blare overhead, echoing throughout the building. A short hallway from the lockers leads to a high-ceilinged room without windows, with a large pool at the center. It’s dark and humid, lit only by rows of lights beneath the water. The shadows are wobbly, hazy with the movement of the water. The fire detector high on the wall flashes a bright white light in time with the shrill siren.

In between its blares, my gym shoes squeak across the damp concrete as I pass the shallow end of the pool. The water is empty, so I head for the bleachers along the far wall.

“I know you’re in here!” My voice cracks, my throat tight from the smoke. “Please come out!”

I can see movement under the bleachers at the far side of the pool. My candle-wax dragon is hiding—from

what? I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with warm, chlorinated air. *"Come out from there right now!"*

The yell that comes out of me is enormous, passing through me like a lightning strike from the crown of my head to my heels inside my sneakers. It fills the whole room, ringing off the metal bleachers and wobbling the diving board at the deep end of the pool.

I catch a glimpse of a molten glow: my dragon's eyes, watching me in the dark.. The dragon growls low, a belly-deep warning. Slowly, it steps out of the shadow of the bleachers into the pool's dancing, eerie light.

My wax dragon—as big as a draft horse—is as smooth and white as the candle it came from, but glowing hot and gold within, its fire hidden inside. The air is sweltering. The dragon hisses softly at me, arching its neck. I raise my hands slowly.

"I'm sorry. I know none of this makes sense to you, either." I hold its melting gaze as I move forward. "I don't know what to say except I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you upset like this."

The dragon bares its wax fangs at me. They drip all over the concrete floor. It isn't only the shivering pool-lights that make the dragon look wobbly and soft around the edges. The hot glow inside its belly is making it melt.

"I didn't mean to drag you into this." I take another step. "I'm sorry you had to feel all that stuff I was feeling. That wasn't very fair of me."

The dragon rears back, its feet shifting and sliding on the ground. It opens its broad wings to balance, unsteady as an oversized baby bird.

I take one more step. The wax dragon slowly lowers its warm, soft head into my palms. It feels like my own chest when the Girlpack makes fun of me: soft but hot

as lava inside. My heart is pounding so hard it almost drowns out the fire alarms.

“You can’t protect me like this. You’re only wax yourself. You’ll melt apart feeling this way inside.”

A sad rumbling croaks out of it, and my dragon’s eyelids begin to droop.

“It’s all right, now. They don’t matter. I promise. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I’m not going to let things stay this way.”

My big, beautiful dragon closes its white-gold eyes. It sighs forest-scented smoke all around me, obscuring my vision, and when the smoke clears, my dragon is gone. In its place is nothing more than a shapeless, smooth lump of white wax. It is very cool to the touch, and I know my dragon is gone for good.

It’s the first thing I have ever made with real magic—my own magic—and it is the first thing I’ve made that I’ve lost. I feel like I’m going to cry. I wait, but no tears come. The smoke begins to clear around me. I feel calmer or taller, or maybe both.

The fire alarm flashes and screams overhead. I put the wax lump in the pocket of my mesh gym shorts. I go back through the smoke-filled locker room, through the empty gym, and down the hall. I push through the emergency exit on the side of the building and into the too-bright sunlight. Coach Restin’s frantic yelp of relief at seeing me shifts abruptly to gruff scolding.

“Good Lord, Brianne! Scared me half to death! Smoke everywhere, locker room empty, what gives?” I stammer an apology, and Coach tuts, clapping my shoulder and bringing me over to the rest of the class. The fire department comes and does a sweep of the school, but there is no fire. Not even smoke.

The Girlpack clusters by the oak tree on the school's lawn with the rest of my gym class: wide-eyed, confused, shivering in the autumn sunlight. They fix their wary eyes on me while we wait to be let back into the building. The burning heat in my chest builds as usual, then dissipates for the first time, replaced by calm, bone-deep certainty: I *do* have magic. In time, I will find out what else I can do with it.

I lock eyes with Dom, who scowls, and then I take a deep breath. The Girlpack smells exactly the same as always: cold plastic, tart berry, nail polish. But then there is something new and familiar on the breeze. There are notes of lavender, juniper, gunpowder and smoke. Like my candle. Like me.

I exhale, smiling. I wonder if anyone else can see the silver smoke on my breath, curling away into the afternoon sky.



Alyson Grauer is an author, actor, and podcaster based out of Chicago. Her first novel, “On the Isle of Sound and Wonder,” is a steampunk Shakespeare retelling. Her voice can be heard on such podcasts as Skyjacks: Courier’s Call, Apex Magazine Podcast, and A Knight of Shreds and Patches. She’s also known for performing at renaissance faires and world-class theme parks. Find her at dreamstobecome.com or on Twitter & Instagram @dreamstobecome

Cocoon

by Atreyee Gupta

Now

I watch calcite flowers sprout from my achilles. Petal by petal, the minerals blossom to the tune of dripping water. This is how I'm undone: as a translucent growth, as flesh vegetating into stone. I taste death, peaty and stale. Was it only hours ago that I was double checking the harness of my descender?



Then

My headlamp picks out moist stalagmite fangs jutting from the floor. I inspect the cable a final time before lowering into the crevasse. My body swings above the pointed mounds as the pit widens. I inhale in an effort to relax, coughing the cavern's dusty meteor-breath back out. "You are yoga flame, you are wild plum, you are possibilities," I chant. It's a mantra I've been reciting ever since the separation, to keep from drowning in fear.

I suppose one can view this expedition as a desire to retreat into the womb for solace, but that's wrong. I confess I'm afraid of subterranean spaces. Also: heights,

arthropods, needles, licorice, bridges. It's astonishing I've survived this long. Chalk it up to my cautiousness, or rather, my luck, since we do not design our futures. Our totality is merely the scattering of relentless days, which we shape into omens. Call this, instead, my journey out of an interior labyrinth.

I land, unclipping from my tether. Shadows of stalactites, amorphous and jagged, dance beyond the reach of my headlamp as I walk. I stumble, clutch awkwardly at a tapering column. "There're no monsters here," I say out loud.

"Stalagmites are the bones of the forgotten," Sahel had joked when we first came here. They weren't wrong, for everything beneath us is a graveyard, the accumulated bodies of flora and fauna.

In the beam of my headlamp, a stalagmite throws a silhouette upon the wall that bears some resemblance to Sahel's scythe-nose, tuft-chin profile. Suddenly, the past rushes towards me, a bogey unspooling souvenirs. I can hear them laugh, cynical as straw, "from ghosts and ghouls preserve us!" I shudder and quicken my step.



Now

The calcite flowers have expanded into branches that reach my knees.

I close my eyes. The shifting colors behind my lids form into an image of Sahel. I think about them every three or four hours. It used to be more often, but the details are getting hazy. I chuckle at how memory performs tricks upon us. I used to crave withdrawal from their company...now, how frightening the solitude is!

“What’s in the past is past,” Sahel would say, after one of our spitfire quarrels. That’s a lie. History refuses to be static: erupts into our cadence, vomits significance out of our foolish secrets, evades our endeavors to pin it down. In this catacomb, the past engulfs me like a thunderhead. All the losses whorl, white massifs rolling upon one another: houses vacated, books mislaid, friends buried, a litany of disappearances.

I, too, am lost.



Then

No matter how much I wiggle, my torso won’t pass through. Perspiration trickles from my hairline and lathers my back. I curse again and exhale slowly, my nose plastered to the ground. Why certain aromas contain potent powers, I don’t know. Sniffing the mildewy odor, I recall when I first maneuvered this portion with Sahel. How easily they’d slid through the tunnel, encouraging me from the other side. “C’mon luv, c’mon, ye can do it.”

I’d stretched to my fullest length, twisting sideways. “This is exactly why I didn’t want to come,” I had wailed, “I’ll never get out!”

“Not with that attitude. C’mon, I believe in ye. Push!”

My sweaty palms had scrabbled against the slick surface. I’d torn at the rock, ferocious. “I am pushing! Pull me out!”

Sahel had grabbed my wrists and grinned.

I had squirmed. I had shoved. I had hyperventilated. “Pull me out, pull me out, pull me out!”

“I told you I can’t. Not without breaking your wrists. If you really can’t do it, I’ll have to get help.”

“No! No don’t leave,” I had panted, my right eye leaking, “don’t leave.” I’d pressed my forehead against the fungus-scented sod, gagged, and instantly slithered out.

Crawling forward through the tunnel, now without Sahel, I scoff at how naive I’ve been to think that love was enough. Loving someone cannot show me their interior realms. No matter our social status, we’re all alone. We’ll abide apart to our death.

The art of cave exploration lies in adapting oneself to the environment. I’ve fought every nook and bore, unable to bow before stone. Each underground region we’ve probed, I’ve gotten stuck at some crevice — whining, sobbing, profaning — until exhausted, I relinquished command to the turf.

I got jammed inside a six-inch shaft in the western Belize foothills, once. Sahel had to pickaxe me out. I remember yearning to be free, the hatchet’s thwack unbearably sluggish as I huddled in the chamber. Eventually, as they chipped away, the unstable walls crumbled down upon me. I realize this might be my recurring story: unable to accommodate myself in the world, stupidly hacking away until the entirety collapses.



Now

The calcite branches fractal in continuous motion, supported by the trunk of my lower body. I’m disoriented, an angry buzz in my inner ear. Pain and confusion prickle my skin. I grit my teeth as spasms rocket up my spine. Blackout is preferable to this agony.

Then, a vision of blue-green grass eclipses my view of the cave. I dissolve into its undulating tentacles. I feel...unmoored, like a body buoyant in saltwater. A spectacle both inhabiting my corpse and outside it, infinitely connected to everything.

Is this what sadhus define as divine inspiration? I've never undergone any sort of disembodiment before. Never taken narcotics or stimulants. In fact, my routine has been circumspect, narrow, full of the shouldn't and couldn't which purport to keep my gender safe. I've long been jealous of Sahel: athletic, bold, impudent. Success allows them to navigate unhindered in so many capacities—but now I see that the threat of harm has wrecked me before I've ventured into risk.

I descend through aged compost until I am cocooned. I am soil. I am earth. Maybe, this is how all nonhumans experience existence.

If nothing matters, then why have I spent my energy fleeing death? The thought leaps from the shadow play of my flickering light. So many years steeling against grief, terrified of losing Sahel, of being unable to carry on, a maimed, half-souled creature. Our choices pinball us recklessly into unforeseen consequences.

Now, I surrender. In this tomb, I no longer have to question my destiny...nor be chained by guilt.



Then (And Now)

A stream gurgles somewhere miles beneath as I procure a slim purchase along the ravine. My cheeks scrape against the sandpaper ridge as I prod blindly for the nearest toe-hold. "Don't rush, don't rush," I remind myself.

“Hurry! Hurry!” the brook below mocks, the echoes taken up by the surrounding cavity. I try to catch a glimpse of the chuckling water, but rivers are adept at concealment.

“Though, what is reality?” I muse, straining my right leg to reach the next overhang. I operate under the delusion there are numerous choices to be made, when so little is under our control. For six years I compromised and yielded and contributed, quite happily, convinced I was securing our marriage. None of it made any difference. Perhaps my mother is correct: everything has been pre-ordained by Indra; therefore, nothing matters.

My back foot slips out of its pocket. I scramble for anchorage, but my hands meet emptiness. The stream’s chatter races as I somersault in the air. A jab against my elbow. A smash across my hips. I land on my side, left bicep, left pelvis, left ankle arresting the brunt of the fall. There is silence, by which I mean I can only attend to the deafening thump of my heart. There is quiet, by which I mean the darkness roars around me.



It will not be long, now. My skin feels cold and glitters like quartz in the darkness. And for some reason, this translucence brings me back to the beginning.

The first spelunking expedition with Sahel was at a Yucatan cenote. We entered another realm, crouching through limestone tunnels into a sunken peacock lake. We floated in the chilled pool, my sight adjusting to the dimness until I could discern above us a ceiling of crystals twinkling like stars while moss threaded down like rain. I understood then the origin of afterlife myths—from such antipodes sprang Patala, Elysium, Xibalba. With such wonder at our feet, we lust for the

same beyond our physical subsistence. “Is this all there is?” we question, seduced by the prospect of aliens and multiverses.

Isn’t this enough? Unasked, we’ve been deposited into a marvelous cosmos composed of tigers, daffodils, and weevils from loam, water, and air. On this spinning globe we witness fog, lightning, volcanoes. Bud fluorescing, larvae expelling wings. Galaxies boiling, matter metamorphosing in every conceivable manner... and death will deliver me into this symphony.

The cauliflower florets on my arms have unfurled into saplings. I am not vanishing, but reintegrating. Step by step I stalagmite. My hide crystallizes, each pore a hexagonal deposit. My skeleton fuses to the cavern floor. A new batch of cauliflower florets sparkle from my head. I am both cocooned and cocoon.

All my life I’ve resisted my mother’s philosophy. As sleep gnaws my eyes, I succumb to her words: *everything is that which it is*. Restored to a childhood when nothing mattered and everything mattered, I hang, suspended between the stillness of now and eternity. My lungs swallow the dirt I shall become. The elusive stream burbles a melody.

All the panic which possessed me after my divorce ebbs out.

Ping, ping, ping. The ringing drifts from an unknown source. Joy suffuses me.

I am not alone.

I am enclosed in an animate barrow...I am in the womb.

The hollow is my friend.

I focus on the sound—*ping, ping, ping*. The notes are balm.

They welcome me home.



Atreyee Gupta is a chronicler at the intersection of geographies, identifies, and perspectives. Atreyee's work has been published in numerous venues including Arc Poetry, Jaggery, Rigorous, Shanghai Literary Review, and Vagabond City. To discover more of Atreyee's writing, check out Bespoke Traveler, a digital alcove for curious explorers.

Stranger Organs

by Shaoni C. White

1.

Think a kitchen knife, cold enough, old enough
to sever the knots of night. Then take away the hilt
take away the blade. Leave only the gleam.

This is your knife. And when they say
let go, when they say enough
your palms will feel your knife—
like fingers, like air—
and say no.

2.

Your river learns from the aspen grove.

It has distance and in its distance it
holds swans for safekeeping.

Your river is a voice and it is saying the river
the river

the river is a voice and it is saying the river
the river

the river is a voice and it
is saying the river
the river

the river is a voice and it is saying—
The world breaks it in half, spills its blood
but inside your river is only more river.

3.

Your torch dreams
the redwood, the wildfire.
In the dusk the fox is first a shadow
slipping over gnarled root.
Before your eyes adjust, your torch
knows the fur, the swift dark fire.
The fox's eye a lantern, and in its pupil
your torch alight.

4.

Sure, your cup will yield
to your torch or your knife.
Your river with its hoard of swans
shines finer in the sun. Your cup is nothing really.
A dull unconsecrated shape, a dusty no-thing
that will make no money at auction.
It's just a wine-slackened mouth
that ever flows with praise. Just a wound
welling with garnets. Just snowmelt
in the river gyred with sewage. Just
scarred hands gone unbeautiful with time. Just
scarred hands shaking. Just scarred hands
joined together, shaking. Just these scarred hands
flowering with sapphires



Shaoni C. White writes and researches speculative fiction and poetry. Their poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fantasy Magazine*, *smoke and mold*, *Channel Magazine*, and *Vastarien*, and their short fiction has appeared in *Uncanny Magazine* and *PodCastle*. Raised in Southern California, they are currently working toward a BA in English Literature and Linguistics at Swarthmore College. Find them at shaonicwhite.com or on Twitter at [@shaonicwhite](https://twitter.com/shaonicwhite).

Feudal Superstition

by Yiwen Bu

Two hours after sunrise, the caustic heat burned the skin. The doctor showed up at Little Two's house with his dirt-worn face on his dirt-worn bicycle. He had jolted across ten miles of rough mountain road from where everyone called "the other side." The other side had everything the villagers did not: telephones, TVs, a tractor, a doctor.

"They said your mother's ill," the doctor greeted. The pity in his eyes convinced Little Two that "they" had said something about his baba too.

"It's not true, sir," said Little Two, hopping off the stone rim of the well.

"She's fine then?"

"No, not my mama, sir," said Little Two. "I meant my baba—he will come back to us." A week ago, his baba had left them with a stuffed canvas bag slung across his shoulder and his big straw hat low above his eyes. Rumor had it that he was in Shanghai now—finally—after he'd talked about it for years.

"If you need a diagnosis for it," said the doctor, "nobody comes back here."

The doctor had a point. It was March, time for sowing, but it was hotter than midsummer and the land was dry as a bone. Fist-wide cracks divided the earth; reach an arm down and all you touched was a foul odor—dead rodents and reptiles, decomposing in the depthless maze. Even if, at six years old, Little Two could work the plow like the Wu brothers two houses down, he had no water for irrigation. The well was drying up and, with it, the hope inside him.

“It’s fine, because I’m here with ma,” said Little Two, raising himself aloft on his toes so he appeared bigger and older. “And we’re thankful you’re here, sir.”

The doctor patted the dust from the road off his clothes, and followed Little Two through the creaky front door. As they passed through, Little Two noted that the Spring Festival Couplets glued on it had faded from scarlet red to coral pink. Little two showed the doctor his mama, lying like a stiff plank on the four-poster bed. Her eyes were wide open, her dilated pupils gaping like groundhogs’ holes. The doctor snapped his fingers before them. Two rotund tears rolled out a second later, slithering across her cheekbones and scuttling to her dry, hay-like hair.

They looked at each other, the doctor and Little Two.

“She can’t sit or stand, sir,” said Little Two.

The doctor took her temperature and pulse, kneaded her abdomen, and listened to her chest with a stethoscope. “Is she in pain?”

Little Two shook his head. “She hasn’t said a word.”

“Has she eaten?” The doctor shined a flashlight into her ears. Then he moved it directly above her eyes, his brows knitting as her pupils stayed fixed at the blinding beam.

“I killed our hen the day before,” Little Two answered. “She only drank the soup.”

The doctor placed his stethoscope on her chest again. “There is something between her heart and lungs. I can hear it restricting her breathing, but I can’t imagine what it is—hard and ungiving.”

“Could you remove it, sir?”

The doctor turned to Little Two. “If I could,” he said, sniffing with those big, flaring nostrils like he always did, “I would have gone to Beijing or Shanghai.”

“But you can give her medicine? That’ll make her better?”

The doctor sniffled again, then, without a word, he proceeded to pack up his tools.

“How about Old Snail’s trick? Do you think that could help?”

The doctor’s busy hands halted abruptly. “Shh!” He scowled at Little Two. “If you want to live, you’ll stop mentioning Old Snail’s name. The Liberation Army took him away, handcuffs and shackles and whatnot. They are purging your village of *feudal superstition*, and Old Snail’s just the beginning.”

“What’s feudal superstition?” asked Little Two.

“It’s all of your outdated beliefs and strange tricks. This is 1979, not the Qing Dynasty. Us Chinese need to catch up with the West.”

Little Two bit his lip. He’d first seen Old Snail’s trick at the village fair last summer. Old Snail had himself a small podium laid in brick and topped with a stained red rug. The podium was set right by the big rock carved with the village’s name: “Fortune Joy.” Old Snail’s face was tan like tree bark and his long beard white like

snow. It cascaded at a distance from his body due to his severe hunchback, accentuating the impression that his bony, kerchief-wrapped head was floating on its own. Old Snail stood with his cane, puffing a slender pipe in the clamor of the band's trumpets and gongs. On the bench behind him, a rooster poised haughtily on one leg, flaunting his jaw-toothed cockscomb. The purple feathers on its muscular chest glared under the sun.

Little Two bought a gigantic cotton candy with the coins his mama had given him—she and his baba couldn't come because they "had things to talk about." He was licking away the spider web of sugar, about to go home, when he saw the crowd gathering at Old Snail's podium. A man from outside the village was sitting on Old Snail's bench. The man was as old as Little Two's father, but unlike men of such age, he was so pale he mustn't have worked a day in the sun.

"The guy's blind," Auntie Li told Little Two. She'd left her noodle stall unattended. "Mama Kang brought him to Old Snail from the other side. No one wants to marry a man that can't farm."

"The other side doesn't have everything after all," Little Two said proudly.

He watched Old Snail, who had a silver case laid out on a tall table with carved legs. Before the case was a cast iron cauldron, in which Old Snail had planted three sticks of burning incense. He backed up three steps and knelt, like a timber warping slowly in the fire—Little Two could hear his bones cracking—and kowtowed three times at the silver case. Then he prodded himself up with the cane, shambled forward, and took a pair of chopsticks out from the sacred container.

"That's what's in it?" Little Two was disappointed.

“That’s from his grandfather’s grandfather,” Auntie Li told him. “It’s older than the whole village put together.”

The man on the bench had his eyes open: two turbid and lusterless orbs, like Little Two’s old ping pong balls. Old Snail asked him to close his eyes. He held a chopstick in each hand and started rubbing them over the blind man’s eyelids like one might press on a pouch to squeeze out the juice.

“Old Snail should be rolling dumpling skins,” Auntie Li joked.

White specks started to shed from the blind man’s eyes, skittering over his pale face and dropping on the rug of the podium. They looked like fragments of uncooked rice, small and hard. Just then, Old Snail’s rooster trudged over and pecked viciously at where the specks had fallen. That’s when Little Two saw them unfurling to lash-thin maggots, squirming sightlessly.

They scared Little Two. He buried his face in Auntie Li’s thighs. She picked him up, cradled him in her arms, and whispered in his ear that it was just a magic trick. Little Two didn’t believe her. He had nightmares of the worms for weeks on end. One night, they’d been bouncing like froghoppers. Another night, they’d grown into thick, eyeless eels, tangling in a phosphorescent web on Old Snail’s podium.

Before the doctor left, Little Two offered to pay him with a watch his father had left behind. The doctor brushed a finger over the torn seams of its leather belt and put it back in Little Two’s hand. “When the time comes,” he said, “you’re welcome at the other side.”

Little Two knew that “the time” meant the end of something—his mama, his village... Little Two wasn’t sure, so he expunged the phrase from his mind.

Late that afternoon, he scooped out the last bit of rice and made a porridge. His mama didn't open her mouth the whole time he was feeding her. Everything in the spoon spilled down her cheeks onto the bed, and Little Two licked it clean off the sheet before it dried.

That evening, he waited till sundown. Old Snail lived at the other end where the hundred-year-old elm was, and Little Two was heedful of not being seen heading there. He stole briskly along the band of pigsties and chicken hoops, away from the houses. The poplar woods on his other side were bare and thin, fallen trunks crisscrossing here and there over the dead grass. He could see the lights from the windows of the houses, but only some of them. Whenever it was dark and quiet, Little Two hastened his steps—ghosts like deserted places, his mama had taught him.

When Little Two reached the great elm, its ragged shape outlined by a thin, melting moon, he saw only the bottom of Old Snail's house. It had been burnt down perhaps just a day ago. The remnants of the walls were still warm to the touch, and cinders blinked among the debris. Little Two took off his straw sandals and stepped barefooted into the bowl of soot. There he shuffled, his feet searching while his hands picked out anything that stuck out of the ground: the carved leg of a table—the same he had seen at the fair, perhaps—the top half of a bodhisattva figurine, a piece of warped metal, but not one from Old Snail's silver case.

Little Two emerged from the ruin empty-handed, except for a sneeze like a wrecking ball. He rubbed his stinging nose and put on his sandals. The Army would have confiscated the chopsticks, he should have known.

A short clucking sounded behind him. He turned: under the squat crown of the elm was the silhouette of a big bird. As he approached, he realized that it was Old

Snail's rooster, slowly strutting while flapping its regal wings.

Chicken soup for his mama, Little Two thought to himself, perhaps she would like it better than the porridge. He hunched down, then sprinted and lurched at the bird but hit the ground with nothing in his arms. A few stray feathers floated leisurely down as a spurt of soil dried out Little Two's teeth and tongue. When he looked up, a glint of purple traced a sinuous route into the woods.

The ground Little Two's elbows rested on was peculiarly soft. The hard-baked soil had been loosened and heaped, as though by a colony of ants. Little Two grabbed a handful of dirt and let it sift through his fingers. Then he pranced upright on his knees and dug at it rapidly. About a foot down, the loosened soil gave way to a patch of silver. Little Two laughed. He scooped out the silver case and opened it. The pair of chopsticks was nestled safely in two grooves lined with a soft silk, mercury-colored in the watery moonlight.

Little Two ran home in one breath, lit up a candle, and found the incense among the fake paper money they burnt every year at his grandma's tomb. He took out three of them exactly like Old Snail did, burned their tips with the candle and, since they had never owned a cauldron, stood them up in their salt cellar. Then he placed the silver case behind it and knelt, kowtowing three times—at the grandfather of Old Snail's grandfather, he supposed.

Immediately after, Little Two unbuttoned his mama's shirt. Nothing but bones in her bosom. He tried to remember how Old Snail rubbed the blind man's eyes—with his hands stretched and the chopsticks against his palm. Little Two placed both chopsticks where the doctor had mentioned the blockage was at,

somewhere to the left of her heart. Then he laid his palms flat on them and rolled them gently. His mama's lips quivered. Little Two waited and waited, but no white specks fell off her chest. He kept rolling the sticks, changing directions, shifting to different spots. The two chopsticks hovered like long bridges over the valleys of her rib bones. Perhaps the rain would come and fill them up like it would the cracks of the land, and his mama would be well and happy again.

But, the rain never came, and white specks never fell.

Little Two ran out of food.

He took a bowl to his next-door neighbors every day, who would spare him a ladle of their porridge or half of a steamed bun. Then, no one answered the door anymore. On their windowsill was a pot of rice with pickles and a goodbye note: "Get out before the Army gets to you."

Little Two continued rolling the chopsticks on his mama. It would take him longer, since he was no Old Snail. In the morning, he walked from house to house with his bowl and begged for food and water. The sun scorched the blood out of him, and his straw sandals were on the brink of incineration. At Auntie Li's house, she called him to the shadow of her thatched eaves and gave him a bowl of noodles.

"The village is dead," she said to him, flapping an enormous cattail leaf fan. "They have this thing called *moderna*—*modernition*—*modernization* at the other side. And they said it's why the other side has rain and we don't."

"Who said?" asked Little Two.

"The Liberation Army," answered Auntie Li. "Do you know that Grandpa Niu's oldest son, Big Niu, was taken? He was making offerings to the Dragon King, hoping to

quench his anger and bring us rain. But someone tipped the Army off and they took Big Niu away. I bet whoever gave the tip got themselves a nice portion of water and rice.”

“Why won’t the Army give that to everyone?” asked Little Two.

Auntie Li laughed. “Because they want the village gone. We stand for feudal superstition; we are in the way of moderna—moderni—”

A uniformed officer plodded by, darting a suspicious glance at them and then at Little Two’s feet, which were still black from shuffling through Old Snail’s ruined home. A cold draft seeped up Little Two’s spine when the heavyset boots landed before him.

“Why’re your feet black, boy?” the officer growled.

Little Two looked conscientiously at the subject of inquiry. “They are...dirty,” he mumbled.

“Particularly dirty,” the officer appended. “From what and where, I’m curious?”

You know from what and where, Little Two thought to himself. “From cleaning the earth stove at home, sir,” he replied, looking directly into the man’s eyes.

The officer chortled. “Then we should take a look at that stove.”

At this, Auntie Li chimed in. “It is true, officer. The dad left and the mom’s ill. The boy is the only one taking care of the house.”

The officer studied the woman cautiously, then he turned to Little Two: “And where do you live?”

“At the south end, sir.”

It was a long way from the south end, and the heat, for once, saved Little Two.

"I will stop by," said the officer. He rumbled his throat and spat, right before the two of them.

They watched the boots stomp away. Soon, the silence crept back again—one that permeated the village. No leaves on the trees fluttered in the wind. No birds chimed. No dogs barked. No merchants yodeled on their bikes.

"I'm not leaving mama," Little Two said, having guessed what was on Auntie Li's mind. "If I leave, she's going with me."

"No one can haul your mama over those mountain roads, can they?" Auntie Li said.

"They can't," said Little Two. "That's why I'm not leaving."

She heaved a long sigh. "How is she doing?"

Little Two lowered his eyes. He had felt her pulse on her wrist before he left this morning, fainter than a spider's footsteps. "She just needs to eat more."

When Little Two got home, he filtered the last cup of water he'd drawn up from the well with a piece of gauze and brought it to his mama's bedstand. He turned to fetch Auntie Li's noodles when his foot slid on something round.

His hand grabbed hold of the bedpost, breaking his fall. He took a candle and looked down. On the floor was a purple bead the size of a thumbnail. He held it closer to the light. It was heavy and glass-like, but warm like the human body. He tilted his hand and let it roll off. When it hit the ground, it morphed to a splash of liquid, but then it balled up instantly and was round again.

Little Two inched two fingers around it and picked it up. There was another bead by the nightstand, another by the bedpost. He dropped down on his elbows and

looked around. None more in the open, but under the bed hundreds of them rose to a sharp peak, just below his mama's chest—where he had been rubbing the chopsticks.

The visit promised by the officer was tolling like a bell in his head. It could be the next day—or the next minute.

Little Two contemplated where to hide the heap of beads. They had a large wooden barrel by the stove. It was taller than Little Two himself, but he could reach the top standing on their stool. He filled a bucket with the beads only halfway—just heavy enough for him to raise it above his head. Not until a few transfers later did he notice a purple liquid seeping out of the bottom of the barrel, as though from between the fibers of the wood. And as soon as it touched the ground, it divided neatly and sprang into perfect spheres again.

Little Two opened the door and surveyed the yard. The silence had congealed in the night, and he felt it looming like a scarecrow in the vacant farmland, ready to seize the last of all beating hearts. Little Two put the beads back in the bucket and jogged it to the well and dumped them down. They clunked loudly as they struck the bottom, and Little Two clenched his teeth. Several of the beads splashed onto the dirt ground and disappeared quietly into the cracks—the quieter the better, Little Two thought.

He carried the rest of the buckets to their farm. In the moonlight, he started pouring the beads down the wide, meandering cracks, spreading them apart so they flowed down and into the beyond.

Old Snail's trick must be working, then, Little Two thought to himself as he removed the last of the beads. But when he rolled the chopsticks on his mama's chest

that night, he couldn't detect a trace of change on her haggard face. Her eyes seemed to be looking at a distant terrain he couldn't reach. When he pressed his ear on her heart, he heard a muffled howling, like wind trapped in a cave.



A few days passed, and Little Two couldn't find anyone anymore—no one in the center, no one in the houses or on the road. The patrolling officer must have departed too, now that there was nothing to patrol. Little Two dragged himself mindlessly through the village like the sole survivor of a plague. He was faint with thirst, his swollen tongue choking him. He passed out while picking a dozen rice grains up off the ground. When he woke up, he found a pool of brownish liquid in the gutter of a pigsty and buried his face in it. Then he coughed and gagged till the last foul taste left him in a bloody spit.

A sun-dried radish still tasted of radish. What about a sun-dried little boy?

He crawled onto the bed that night, next to his mama. He put his arm around her protruding ribcage and closed his eyes. Her skin was cold against his fevered forehead, but she smelled warm and musty, a little like the plum sake she used to make for the Spring Festivals.

Little Two did not want to wake up again. He liked his mama's smell. He was back to when the village was alive, the firecrackers booming for the dragon dance, the ribbons twirling in the air, the confetti falling on his arms and shoulders. His pa was playing the drums in the band, and behind them, in a corner of warm and aromatic steam, his mama was leading the cooking team for the celebration at noon. Because he was her son, he could go over and get himself a treat any time. A

slippery dumpling, a slice of sticky rice cake, or a cup of strawberry water.

Strawberry water, that would be just perfect. Little Two was licking his lips when he felt a push on his shoulder. He opened his eyes, and his mama was there—sitting up on the bed right next to him. He opened his mouth but was too weak to make a sound.

“Shhh.” she whispered. “I feel much better now, Little Two.”

She no longer looked like a rickety hanger for her clothes. A lovely color flushed her face.

“I’ll make you something to eat,” she told Little Two.

Little Two shook his head slowly. He thought he was dead, wallowing in the cloud with his dead mother. But no divine vapor obscured his sight, and his back—after the incalculable time lying on the bed—ached like it had been thrashed with a flaming whip.

“Oh, no. Don’t you worry,” his mama said, propping up Little Two’s head and bringing a cup to his lips. Water. Clear, purple water.

“From the well,” she said. “It is full now. All the way up.”

Little Two gulped it down. It had an earthy taste to it, like the smell of minerals on the surface of a sun-baked rock.

“And let me show you this.” His mama stood up—she stood so fine and moved so fine now. She picked him up from the bed with those arms that once swaddled him.

They went out to their yard, and Little Two cringed at the searing heat. It was early in the morning, and half of a gory sun was glowering at the horizon.

But, among acres of barren land near and afar, theirs

were no longer so. Water had flooded their land, and rice crops were thriving, tall as his mama's waist, with fat, crowded kernels bending the succulent stems. A breeze combed through the field, and Little Two saw the shimmer bouncing off the purple leaves, like the feathers on Old Snail's rooster.

"It's a wonder," his mama said.

Little Two held her tight. A soft patter of rain moistened his forehead—but when he looked up, he realized that they were not rain, just his mama's warm, purple tears.



Yiwen Bu is a first-generation immigrant. She is still catching her own grammar mistakes 11 years after her move to the U.S. She has a PhD in Science and Engineering, but sometimes she's just so sick and tired of theories and orders. That's why in the wee hours, the restless, unruly creature in her would be typing away with a sinful grimace, while her husband, 18-month-old daughter, and orange Tabby are soundly asleep.

Working on Wonder

with Erion Makuo

Illustration and writing are close siblings. Both are conceived from kernels of stories that shift under the artist/authors pen. Initially, this cover was inspired by the Inuit creation myth of Sedna, the goddess of the sea.

There are so many variations to the myth. In some Sedna is a giant, or a cruel daughter, a resentful maiden, or an unwanted orphan. In all, she is a woman who doesn't fit in her society and becomes punished and thrown into the water. When she tries to save herself by clinging to the kayak, her father chops off her fingers which then transform into seals.

Sedna was the basis of inspiration for the cover but, as Erion worked on the illustration, the concept transformed. The initial sketches Erion provided for three tendrils of the Sedna mythos: an independent woman, a bodily change, and a woman under the sea.

The second image, with the broad parka and the curled antlers, grabbed my attention. The weight of the dress on the bottom half of the image and the breadth of the antlers created a balance.

Once the sketch was chosen, Erion sent us three colour options: a bright sky and a parka with red and blue

details; a warm sepia-toned colouring; and a darker forest background with a red and grey parka. Although Apparition Lit had now chosen the theme for the issue and knew that the cover would be associated with Issue 16: Wonder, the darker background made the bright colours of the parka pop. Although I loved the width of the shoulders, Erion and I spoke about reshaping the shoulders to have the softer weight of a parka rather than the harder material of armour.

We exchanged reference images of summer parkas and Erion quickly sent an updated illustration with more accessories and a slightly different dress composition. The shoulders were more sloped and ribbons and beads were tangled within the girl's hair and antlers.

As the details became more rendered and shadows added, the character seemed much younger. Throughout the process, the character de-aged from a woman to a young girl. The girl looks small with her antlers and parka, but she's no less powerful. The peace in the girl's face fits the wonder of the concept and is an excellent image for Erion to end her residency.

As our first Artist-in-Residence, Erion has created exquisite artwork for us. She wasn't afraid to produce varied art options and trusted us when we needed to hit pause to bring in subject experts. We have loved the colour and composition of Erion's work and will be cheering her on during the award season. We hope you will join us in spreading the hype of Erion's outstanding covers and get her a well-deserved nomination.

Thank you Erion for all your hard work.



Written by Rebecca Bennett

Erion Makuo was our Artist-In-Residence for 2021. You can find more Erion's art at their website: <http://www.erionmakuo.com/>

Find the sketches from Erion Makuo on our website.

A Deeply Rooted Wonder

by Jessica Cho

It's the early 2000s and I'm sitting in my college Language & Thinking workshop as we share creative non-fiction based on where we grew up. When I finish reading mine, my crit partner looks slightly disappointed.

"I was expecting something more... you know." She gestures at me. "Cultural."



Wonder: verb - to be curious about, to desire to know

I've always loved stories. Reading them, telling them, acting them out through long excursions through the woods, swinging sticks like swords as our small pack of neighbourhood kids set out on epic quests with nebulous but lofty goals. Stories allowed me to view the everyday world through a lens of pure wonder, driven relentlessly by the perpetual question: what if?

Like many writers, I began my foray into the world of SFF through reading. Growing up, my shelves were full of swords and sorcery, kid-horror and dozens of dog-eared Choose Your Own Adventure books that I now realise were the gateway to creating my own stories. Even before the events that would lead to a less than

idyllic home life, I gravitated towards anything that could pull me out of the mundane world, and while I read my fair share of *Boxcar Children* and Judy Blume, in my heart I craved anything that let me escape to more fantastical realities, with magic and monsters and clearly laid out problems that could be solved with the right amount of heroic gumption.

When I started writing my own stories, it only follows that I dove straight into the realm of speculative fiction. As fascinating as the real world was, there was always something more that could be added, something deeper and richer and more wondrous.

I think that, even as I began to explore creating, I was attempting to build a space for myself that didn't exist. Instead of trying to figure out where I belonged in a neighbourhood where I didn't look like any of my friends, where I was caught between what felt like two conflicting parts of my identity, I could take the simpler route: creating an entire world from scratch, where none of those differences mattered.

What if, what if, what if.

My parents never tried to separate me from my heritage, even going so far as to bring me to Korean cultural events specifically designed for adoptees and other diaspora children. I was encouraged to learn more about my birth country as I grew older, but in the days before widespread home internet, the kind of detailed information I was interested in wasn't readily available. So I grew up with only a handful of stories, some colourful illustrations and a deep appreciation for seasoned soybean sprouts and bulgogi. Was I curious to know more? Of course. But in the end, it was easier to embrace what I was surrounded by every day.

That day in freshman workshop, sitting across from my

expectant crit partner, was the first time I considered that the distance between me and my heritage might be considered odd. International friends were surprised at how little I knew about the country of my birth. When I mentioned it in passing to my first year advisor, she gently pointed to Asian Studies courses to round out my curriculum.

And so, driven by a curiosity that was only partly my own, I made a concerted effort to find out more about this part of me that had begun six thousand miles away. And, as with everything else, I started to incorporate what I found into my writing.



Wonder: verb - to doubt

But no amount of research or student connection or even blood in my veins is enough to dispel the persistent doubt: Am I Korean enough to write Korean stories?

It's a question that I and many others have struggled with. Sure, I was born there, but is that enough? It often doesn't feel like it, especially when writing outside the boundaries of personal experience. Especially when writing SFF.

As a speculative writer, a lot of my focus is on looking at old stories in new ways, pulling from the traditional and applying that endless what if? In doing so with Korean mythology, am I trying to lay claim to something that isn't mine? What right do I have to alter this culture that didn't shape me, to reshape these stories from a country I left before I was old enough to hold a memory?

When I was writing to an audience limited to the seven other people at the workshop table, it wasn't a significant issue. But when I started submitting work and getting published, new doubts arose. Would I be looked down on

by those closer to the sourceland? Derided for “getting it wrong”? I spent hours researching even the smallest cultural reference, afraid that if I didn’t get every detail exactly right, I would invalidate my writing and, by extension, myself.



Wonder: noun – the feeling caused by something surprising, beautiful, or inexplicable

I’m not able to point to any single moment of revelation that cured me of these doubts. To be honest, they never fully went away. I still find myself second guessing my own authenticity. But I’ve been helped and heartened by the growing prevalence of writers from the Asian diaspora, many of whom have been open about their own diasporic experience. Reading authors like Aliette de Bodard, Nghi Vo, Fonda Lee and June Hur and seeing how varied and brilliant their work is has helped me understand that it’s not a question of being “enough.” I was attempting to judge myself by an imaginary quantitative standard, when the reality was qualitative. To be diasporic isn’t to be a diluted version of an original, it’s to be its own entity, with its own facets and nuance. And that is enough.

I will never write from the same perspective as someone born and raised in Korea and that’s never been my goal. Instead, I write from where I stand, not pulled between two places, but firmly in the space that spans them both. Cultures are not rigid, static structures.

They’re constantly changing, shifting with the experiences of the people who comprise them, and their stories do, too. Diaspora writing is a natural part of that growth, not a usurpation or a corruption. A function of myth has always been to explain, to give shape and form to our experiences and make sense of the world

around us. In reshaping traditional stories and myths according to my own diasporic experiences, I'm not taking away from the original source, but adding new growth.

And always, I strive to do so with respect. My love for stories never stopped and that encompasses those from my Korean heritage. I write from that same love, from that driving curiosity, that sheer wonder. Every time I fit some aspect of Korea into my work, it's to pay homage to the impact it had on me, the way it shaped me as I grew into both my identity and my craft.

My roots are integral, but so is the trunk they nourish, the branches, the leaves that stretch up to infinite heights, carrying me across oceans while still keeping me connected, however distant, to the soil where I was born.



Jessica is a Rhysling Award winning SFF writer of short fiction and poetry. Born in Korea, they currently live in New England, where they balance their aversion to cold with the inability to live anywhere without snow. Previous work has appeared in *khōreō*, Flash Fiction Online, Fireside, ApparitionLit and others. They can be found at semiwellversed.wordpress.com and on Twitter: @wordsbycho

Thank You

to Our Subscribers and Patrons

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

We'd also like to acknowledge the following efforts that made this issue truly shine:

Our staff for volunteering their time and effort:

- Marie
- Tamoha
- Maria
- Seen Robinson, our designer and keeper of the guitars
- and Maria Dong

Please consider supporting us on Patreon and following us on Twitter. Additionally, if you liked this issue (or our previous issues) and would like to support us non-monetarily, a review online goes a long way and also lets the authors know you loved their work.

We want to extend a special 'Thank You' to our 2020 patrons who generously donated \$50USD or more:

- Esmeralda Languzzi
- Iain Davis
- Lauren Schellenbach

To our Patron's who are supporting us on a monthly basis, not only do these contributions help pay our writers but everything donated stays in Apparition Lit's bank account. You're helping us commission new

artists, pay better rates, and slowly climb that ladder of success.

- Akash Kapur
- Alexander Langer
- Alyson Tait
- Anna Madden
- Ashley Gloria
- Aurelius Raines II
- Brian Hugenbruch
- Casey Reinhardt
- Chelsea Cohen
- Chris
- Christine McCullough
- Clemence Deleuze
- dave ring
- Devon J.
- Drew Brooks
- Elizabeth R. McClellan
- Isaac Lockheart
- JJ
- Janeen
- Jeane'D. Ridges
- Jeffery Reynolds
- Jordan Hirsch
- Julia August
- Kristina Saccone
- Laura DeHaan

- Lindsay Scarpitta
- Maria Haskins
- Maria Schrater
- Marie Croke
- Matthew Bennardo
- MBV
- Nate DeVillers
- Nettlewildfairy
- Rhian Bowley
- S. Kay Nash
- Shannon Lamb
- Shawn Frazier
- Xan van Rooyen

Past Issues

Not subscribed for a full year of Apparition Lit? Pick up past issues online.

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



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



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



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

