

# APPARITION

## Literary Magazine

ISSUE 12: SATISFACTION



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# Apparition Lit

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## A Word from our Editor

by Tiffany Morris

I am so grateful to have been guest editor for this issue of Apparition Lit – it's an absolute favorite publication of mine, always satisfying my hunger for a variety of the speculative, the slipstream, and the strange. As we worked through the submissions for this issue, it was exhilarating to ask questions about satisfaction and what satisfaction means. The questions are existential: what brings satisfaction, in mind, body, and spirit? The questions are also editorial: what brings satisfaction in reading a story, poem, or essay? I've realized that it's an important element in how we read and what resonates with us. It cajoles and consoles us in equal measure.

To what extent does satisfaction require a sense of truth, justice, coherence, pleasure, or alignment? There are times where satisfaction is the right thing in the right place. It presents a universe that makes sense, that looks or feels good, that somehow acts "correctly". But there are also ways in which satisfaction meets the incomplete: something is "satisfactory", something is sufficient for a purpose, and the pleasure we derive from it is tied to that purpose.

As you read this issue, you'll encounter work that falls into a coherent universe and other work where there is

satisfaction in purpose and the incomplete. Still others will vacillate between the two. Where satisfaction may immediately call to mind food, sex, and revenge, our selections in this issue will take you to the places where completion, desire, and tension meet.

In *A Bird Always Wants More Mangoes*, we tangle with isolation and consumption.

*The Gorgon's Epitaphist* asks us what completion means.

*Sunrise, Sunrise, Sunrise* examines desire in what seems inevitable.

*You Do What You're Told* demands an assertion of the self.

The poems *Dream Weaver* and *My Internal Advisor* interrogate the shape of reality.

*Meandering Through Definitions of Satisfaction* both defines and declines to define, looking at where satisfaction can be found in speculative fiction, in resisting oppression, and in dreaming.

May this issue give you bold answers, thrilling questions, and provide what is demanded. May it captivate you with strange worlds and comfort you with beautiful words. May it meander through meaning and give dimension to how we define.

May it satisfy.

Tiffany Morris

Guest Editor, Satisfaction Issue

## A Bird Always Wants More Mangoes

By Maria Dong

**B**irdie looks in through the open window at the body, and she just knows. There's a stillness that can't be faked, like when the wind dies to nothing and the sun's pounding the asphalt in a deserted hour of the afternoon.

*Maybe that new virus got her. Shame.* Mrs. Farber is one of Birdie's favorites, always happy to talk about life "way back when," even if she prefers that Birdie listen and not add in the parts she still remembers. For a plate of delightful finger sandwiches and some of the best coffee Birdie's ever tasted, she's happy to keep her mouth shut. It's not like anybody ever hears what she has to say.

She turns away to head down the fire escape—someone like her being found around a body is always bad news, everyone so quick to point the finger—but she stops and turns back around.

The Farbers will never let Birdie come to the funeral.

Birdie thinks about being fifteen, squiggling in that hard seat at the back of the classroom, back when Mrs. Farber was just *Catherine* and Birdie was still *Beatrice*—and here, everything goes fuzzy, because the room's too still, just heat waves rising off that windless asphalt—

—but she *blinks-blinks-blinks* and she gets it back: the scent of chalk, the sharp line of a wooden chair cutting into her sweating thigh.

She presses the pad of her finger to her top lip, feeling the slope of the gum underneath, feeling for the teeth that once were—that would still be, if Birdie had her dentures, but she lost those the last time she was mugged.

Who could've known that Catherine would marry that piece of shit Frankie Farber? Something tells Birdie he never cornered *Catherine* in an empty classroom and pressed her up against a wall while asking her about Beatrice.

Catherine married money. *Beatrice* told the truth and got thrown out—

And here, Birdie bristles, because really, she isn't even *gay*, isn't anything, but she didn't figure that out until later, and it wouldn't have mattered. Still, somehow, this injustice is the worst because it's the only one Birdie ever worries about. If the expression on her parents' faces was somehow her fault—

She lets that go. She holds her breath and listens—*still, never going to be not-still again*—and then she climbs in the window. Five steps and listen, five steps and listen, and Birdie's extra careful, because she's been thinking lately that her hearing's going, although some of the sounds that plague her these days seem more ghost than flesh—

Until she finds it. The key to the cottage. How many times has Mrs. Farber shaken this odd, shiny hunk of metal at Birdie over a plate of finger sandwiches while lamenting the hustle-bustle of the city?

Birdie likes the city, but she's also never taken a vacation.

There's a small wad of bills in the dresser, along with a black leather address book. Birdie tears out only one sheet: the one that reads *cottage* at the top.



Birdie's not young and pretty anymore, which means that hitchhiking isn't so much dangerous as it is fruitless. She buys a bus ticket—they almost chase her out when they see her face, until she waves the bills, and even then, she has to make up a story about where she got them.

They don't believe her, but they take her money, because everybody's got camera-phones these days.

Nobody sits next to Birdie, but that's fine. She enjoys the air conditioning and the thrum of the wheels. For the first time in years, she doesn't wake up in a cold sweat at every rustle.

There are four transfers in all, four huge vending-machine meals, and then she goes the last fifty miles on foot—places like Oakvine Corners make sure they don't have bus stations.

She stays as far away from the road as the trees allow, doesn't trust whoever sees her to keep their foot off the accelerator. She's used to walking, but covering the distance takes her almost a week.

She enjoys it, though. The air smells fresh, and there are trees everywhere, behemoths that reach in with their long branches to block off the view. At night, the ground is soft, and the sky is filled with stars.

Beatrice might've seen a place like this, once. But Birdie never has.

## 2

The mailbox is marked with an address plaque that also says *Amoenus House*. Birdie's bag is heavy with packaged food from a nearby gas station. She double-checks the address, and her heart pounds. Over a week has gone by, long enough that a relative or a lawyer has probably changed the locks.

She didn't think of that. She holds her breath the entire walk down the long, curving driveway, waiting for a glimpse of the end. The trees have tightened, have woven together until they're as impenetrable as a sewer grille. Her hearing's cooperating all of a sudden, and the birds are so loud that she can't hear herself think, can barely make out the crunch of her feet on the gravel, and she swears she can smell chalk—

Then she turns a corner. Everything falls away, and Birdie breaks out laughing.

This isn't a cottage. This is a *fucking mansion*. It's three stories tall, so big its builders tore a hole in the canopy. A glass castle, shiny and modern and pretentious, a line of black solar panels rimming the edge of the roof.

She stands up straight and walks to the door and thinks about not getting shot. She alternates knocking and waiting until her knuckles are swollen and sore. Only then does she push the key in and give it a good turn.

It's dimmer inside, but not dark. Birdie can see just fine. She reaches for the switch on instinct before realizing how wrong it is, like adding insult to that hacked-away canopy.

She feels an odd affinity for those missing trees, all removed for the Farbers' convenience. She leaves the lights alone and goes looking for a shower.



When Birdie turns the tap, blood hammers down and splashes the sides of the tub. It stinks like copper, but she closes her eyes until the water's clear. Still, it's unsettling, so she waits until the room is dense with steam before she pokes her hand in—but the water's hot, and the pressure's perfect, and Birdie dives in.

There's no soap. She'll find some later. For now, she concentrates on this feeling of being made new. When the skin of her fingers looks like wicker, she climbs out and drips all over the floor while she searches for a towel.

She finds some sheets in a small closet in the hallway. She uses three of them to dry off before wrapping the last around herself in an impromptu dress.

She found a living room and a kitchen while searching for the bathroom, and although she's hungry, the tiredness is worse. She makes it to the black leather couch, turns on the massive television, and she's out like a light.



Birdie wakes to the morning news. To *good* news, because it looks like the virus has gotten worse, and the governor has put the state on lockdown, which

means no evictions or power or water cutoffs. The vast majority of businesses are closed.

In other words, this house is *hers*. Nobody's coming, at least until everything opens up again. She made it just in time.

She whoops for joy, and in that moment, her stomach growls. She opens her bag and pulls out a honeybun, before realizing she needs to save her supplies. That gas station might be closed, and she doesn't know if there's anything else nearby.

How odd it would be, Birdie starving to death in a glass castle.

She'd better check the kitchen. She tucks her sheet-dress tighter and makes it as far as the hallway before she turns around.

Wet footprints streak across the floor. They have to be hers—even though she's been asleep since yesterday afternoon.

The hair stands up on the back of her neck. She closes her eyes, hard, and opens them. This time, the floor is dry.



Although the fridge's shelves are mostly bare, the door is full of condiments and one of the crisper drawers holds an odd variety of mango Birdie's never seen before—dark red and about the size of a small potato, with stickers that say “Irwin. Product of Ecuador.”

The fruits are mushy to the touch, although still probably edible—which gives her pause. Were they forgotten? Or does someone come by regularly?

Will they still come, now, with everything shut down?

She takes two of the mangoes and rifles through the cabinets. They're chock-full of boxes and tins, and most of the varieties are new to her. She wishes she had a grocery cart, so she could stick out her arm and let it all fall in.

She finds a package of cigarettes in one of the drawers, still in the cellophane, although Birdie doesn't smoke anymore.

She breaks open a can of kippers—which apparently are fish—and pairs it with a box of crackers. She doesn't love fish, but she's starving. She makes miniature sandwiches in her mouth, crushes the crackers against the roof with her tongue.

After they're gone, she cuts the mango into tiny pieces and swallows them individually. She washes her plate—*dish soap*, good to know for her next shower—and decides to investigate the rest of the house.



Birdie makes several important discoveries. The top floor has a bed and bath, as does the second floor—although these are smaller, to make room for a second living room and a small library, complete with a fireplace. The bottom floor has the kitchen, living room, and bath that Birdie used, as well as the entry foyer and an exit to a back patio, the sliding door hidden behind long, heavy drapes.

There's also a narrow door in the kitchen, but when Birdie tries the knob, it doesn't turn. Her key does nothing.





Despite the house's position right under the opening in the canopy, it doesn't get too hot. Birdie passes several hours watching television with a found bottle of wine. It's half-empty when she decides to enjoy it on the patio.

It's silent, the trees around her swaying with a faraway wind Birdie can't hear. It makes her feel like dancing. She slips off her shoes and rubs her feet on the rough wood. On one of the boards, someone has scratched *OUTSIDE*.

She goes back to looking at the forest. She spins a slow circle on the patio, but the trees beckon. *Come closer.*

She descends to the earth, presses her bare toes into its warmth. Crosses to the forest and finds that the trees here are less tightly interwoven than the ones lining the driveway, that the earth turns cool as soon as she leaves the sun.

She turns slow pirouettes, occasionally catching herself on a trunk for balance. Before long, the world's spinning harder than she is, and she sits down.

She leans her back against a large trunk and stares at the house, rendered orange-red by the setting sun. Already, the lowest parts of it are in shadow, and—

Birdie gasps. There's a face in one of the windows, up on the second floor.

She blinks and closes her eyes, opens them again—*why did she have to drink so much?* She can't get the world to stop spinning—

But the face is gone.



The air fills with mosquitoes, desperate to feast on her flesh, but Birdie waits through the sunset. She knows what she saw wasn't real, and yet, she can't force herself to go in.

The warmth leaches out of her bones, taking the last of her buzz with it. New sounds emerge in the trees, sounds Birdie's never heard before, hoots and squawks and chirps and brap braps that she prays are frogs. Rural spaces are supposed to be quiet, but compared to this place, the city's sounds were always muffled, like diving underwater.

When she turns and looks behind her, she sees a thousand shadow-faces in the dark.

No choice but to go in. Her joints have stiffened, and her body complains as she scrapes her way to her feet. She sets off for the house—slow at first. Watching. Wary.

She makes it halfway to the patio when something big and dark looms in the glass. She thinks it's from inside, but then she finds her own face, and she knows it's a reflection of something behind her.

She turns, almost stumbling. There, at the edge of the trees, is a massive, eight-limbed creature.

She screams. Its heads pop upright. It breaks in half and bounds away—because it's two creatures, not one, two white-tailed deer that she scared the bejeesus out of.

She laughs, but not until she gets inside.

## 3

In the morning, she has a jar of olives and some more Irwin mangoes. The first one she fishes out of the crisper is shaped like a human heart, so soft to the touch that its own weight threatens to drive her fingers through its flesh.

She shudders and puts it back, before finding another, safer (rounder) one. She catches up on the news. When she goes to shut the television off—with the remote, which she has finally found—she notices a button with an icon of a globe and presses it.

Well, *holy gee*. The television's connected to the internet.

She surfs for a bit. It's clunky, but she enjoys the luxury, marvels at the leaps of technology it takes to get high-speed internet into a place like this.

An odd word pops into her head, *amoenus*, and it takes her a second. It's the name she saw on the mailbox. *Amoenus House*. When she closes her eyes, she can see the metal of the plaque, each scratch and fleck of rust.

(Was it rusty, though?)

She swallows uncomfortably, focuses instead on getting the name typed in through the impossible interface, and leans forward to scroll through the results.

There's nothing relevant, which makes her nervous enough that her stomach riots, although that could be the aftereffects of the night's bacchanal pleasures.

She heads upstairs for the library, where she finds framed photos of Mrs. Farber (*keep*) and a young Frankie Farber (which she throws rather indecorously out the

window, taking pleasure in the *crack* it makes as it hits the ground.)

The books vary widely, from atlases to classical history to silk-punk romances, and looking at all the mismatching titles, Birdie feels an odd pressure in her head, begging her to make things right. She flips open a volume and finds it is about something called "Keynesian economics" and drops it on the floor. A book of art she re-shelves; a book on Roman history she sends sailing out the window to join Mr. Farber's photograph.

She makes it halfway through the books before she finds a small, handwritten journal. The first several pages are a mish-mash—dates and times of day, bird sightings and descriptions of their calls (she searches for *brap-brap*, but doesn't find it,) sketches of leaves and seeds. The penmanship is neat, almost cramped.

She flips to the back. The pages are blank. She backs up ten pages, twenty, looking for the last entry. When she finds it, she can't make heads or tails of the heavy scrawl. Several words are scratched out—vigorously, almost angrily—and there are brown flecks and odd stains marring the pages. She picks out two words—*natural law*—before she gives up and backs up further.

And here, Birdie hits paydirt. She was right—Amoenus House isn't a cottage. It's a *statement*: built by Frankie's architect father in the eighties, meant to represent "the key to environmental conservation: technological progress."

Birdie looks around the house, and she's got to laugh. After all, the whole thing's *made from glass*. It's a residence big enough for ten people that's only occupied a fraction of the year—and as soon as she thinks that, she pictures the trees, that devastating hole in the canopy, and she hears a voice, one so loud she knows

it was produced somewhere in her brain, that it didn't stream through the hearing she can only sometimes rely on.

*This place shouldn't exist at all.*

Auditory hallucinations don't bother Birdie like the visual ones. She nods in agreement and goes back to sorting the books.



That evening, before nightfall, Birdie dances again with the trees. She doesn't bring any wine with her, but still, she feels transported, like everything is spinning and touched with light.

#### 4

On the morning of the (third? fifth?) day, Birdie opens the fridge and finds the mangoes have been replaced by a wet, pulpy mass an inch thick, as if the remaining fruits have all exploded.

She thinks about sticking a finger in it but doesn't. She breakfasts instead on a tin of caviar. When she's finished, she wipes her lips with her new napkin—the ripped corner of one of the sheets—and touches something hard and painful in the front of her mouth.

Birdie runs to the mirror and opens wide. She's surprised to find what looks like the start of a new set of teeth.

She shivers—but she's delighted, too, delighted that for the first time in a long time she'll know what it feels like to tear into something with flesh. She half-opens the fridge, before remembering the mangoes are mush, now.

But they're back, all made anew, each one shaped like a small, red heart.



By mid-afternoon, Birdie's head aches. It's these new teeth growing in—there's a pounding in her sinuses that just refuses to quit. Her face feels sticky when she moves her mouth, as if it's still covered in juice—but when she touches it with her fingers, it feels normal. Well, except for the teeth.

Her belly is still too full of mangoes to do anything, so she settles on the leather couch and reaches for the remote. All she sees is snow. The cable's out.

She sucks on her sticky lips and picks up the journal again. As soon as she opens it, the pressure in her head lifts, enough that it can't be coincidence. She reads, and when she comes up for air, it's almost sunset. Time for her dance with the trees.

She tries to remember what she read, but it's static, like the television.

There's a dead bird on the patio. It must have flown into the glass.

*Poor thing*, she thinks, before she notes its position—right above the *OUTSIDE*.

She chuckles darkly, shows her teeth, and goes to dance.



This night is the first one that Birdie dreams—of sparrows, flying into the patio glass, over and over, until Birdie can't take it anymore. She picks up a rock and flings it as hard as she can, and it shatters the door.



The sparrows stop coming, scared. Dream-Birdie sighs, open-mouthed. One-by-one, all her teeth fall into her waiting hand.



In the morning, Birdie checks her teeth—first by feel, and then in the mirror, and the reflection confirms what her fingers know. Her teeth are still there, but they're different, pointy and sharp. Like fangs.

She takes out her daily ration of mangoes, before putting them back and opening another tin of the kippers instead. She decides to eat on the patio, but when she gets to the door, the drapes are moving as if hiding a cat, and the room smells like wet earth and pine.

She pulls the drapes back and stares at the shards of glass coating the patio.

The bird's missing. In its place is a scratched word.

She crosses over the glass—*crunch, crunch, crunch*.

SAFER, it reads.

SAFER OUTSIDE.

She nods to herself and sits on the edge of the patio. She eats her kippers while reading through the journal, grease dripping from her fork onto the pages.

## 5

Something tells Birdie to go upstairs. She stops, first, at the library, sure that whatever itch needs scratching will be satisfied there—but it's premature. The ache in her sinuses guides her to the top floor, where she checks the bathroom, then the massive bedroom—

(Birdie knows she hasn't slept here, although right now, she can't remember which room she's been sleeping in)

—and looks out the window. Somehow, she can see past the canopy, past the rows and rows of curving trees and all the way down the driveway, to the mailbox with its little, rusted plate.

There's someone coming. A drifter like Birdie. She can even see his faded army-surplus backpack, the holes in the fingers of his work gloves.

*He's coming, she thinks. Coming for Birdie.*

Birdie backs up swiftly, before flying down the stairs. She dashes to the kitchen, throws open the fridge, and takes out all her precious mangoes, grabbing the hem of her dress and filling the skirt like a sack—

(Was she wearing a dress before? Birdie doesn't remember)

—and for each one she manages, another one escapes, goes rolling across the floor, poor Birdie and her mango babies, can't save them all.

She grabs a can of kippers, too, and a long, sharp kitchen knife—

She hears a click. She turns, and the door—the skinny door, the locked door, the one she couldn't open her first day here—is open.

Birdie runs for it. Makes it through and shuts it. Her chest heaves, but it's okay—he can't come down here, because the house doesn't want him to. This room is only for Birdie.

She descends the stairs into the cavern of the dirt basement, mangoes flying, thudding and splatting as they hit the ground below. It's dark, but it's okay,

because surprise, Birdie has new eyes to match her new teeth. Birdie, Birdie, all new ever since she got in the shower, no matter what's written on the patio.

At the bottom, there's a new scent. Something deep and primal, like sweat and blood and too-sweet mangoes—so big and loud, it brings her to her knees. She crawls forward, the last of her mangoes held awkwardly at her breast, until she's close enough to touch this thing, this two-headed beast.

She reaches for it. It tells her to be still.

Overhead, she hears the man enter. Hears him groan and cuss and clomp, the *crunch crunch* of his boots over glass. Surely, he will stay, the same way Birdie stayed, will realize this house is a drug with a fridge full of mangoes, ready and waiting for new teeth to scrape their flesh.

Birdie closes her eyes and imagines the day they cut down the trees. Imagines their shrieks and their blood, the way they died and left the forest canopy a still-festering wound. She'd ask herself how she didn't see it before, except that she did. Birdie sees everything with her new eyes, even sees when people are just too still.

But Birdie doesn't know everything—which is why she can still be surprised, like she is now, by the sounds of the man leaving.

## 6

When Birdie exits the basement, she realizes her mistake. The man left, but he's coming back. She can tell from the pattern of his boots on the floor, the wet puddles each step has left behind. He circled through the downstairs three times, and she knows he imagined himself in this place, eating the food, watching the television.

Birdie feels so jealous and hot, she wants to vomit. The glass castle is a bad place, a place that shouldn't exist—but it's also hers. She's eaten the mangoes, and she's been in the basement, and it's *not* for people like him.

Birdie has new teeth and new eyes and new muscles. She fills the front of her dress with cans of kippers and cooking oil and runs up the stairs to the second floor. She opens the cans and flings their contents wildly on the furnishings, before drawing a line on the floor with the oil. It doesn't go far, though, and before she can even catch her breath, she's back in the kitchen, looking for anything that might burn and recovering dropped mangoes.

Birdie makes a dozen trips. She doesn't waste any oil on the library; it's a room filled with paper.

When she's done getting the house ready, she makes a final trip to the basement to say goodbye. She pushes her mangoes toward the scent.

There's a sound in the dark, wet and scraping, and then everything goes quiet.



Birdie waits on the second floor—waits, because some things are not real unless they are witnessed. The man doesn't come back until the sun has almost set, which makes Birdie even angrier, because he's cost her what might be her very last dance with the trees.

He's not alone. There are three people, which explains why he left. A woman and a child.

The latter's enough that she almost changes her mind—but she doesn't, because in that moment, she hears the trees beckon, hears the hollow wetness of sparrow after sparrow, flying into the glass.

She lights the bed, and it flares up, as if it's been waiting as eagerly as she has. She looks out the window—it's too bright in here, too dark outside, and she can't make out their expressions—but she can see their bodies, frozen at the edge of the clearing, unsure of what to do next.

She runs from room to room, lights them in turn, blessing their voyage. When she's finished, she retreats into the basement and closes the door behind her. There is a click, the sound of a lock turning, too loud to be real.

She hears a crash, and then another. The bangs of exploding windows, glass tinkling as it rains on the floors above.

Birdie shuts her new eyes, curls up, and waits for the tree canopy to mend



**Maria Dong's** short SFFH has been published in or is forthcoming from Augur, Fusion Fragment, If There's Anyone Left, and Decoded. She was featured in the 2018 PitchWars showcase and is represented by Amy Bishop at Dystel, Goderich, & Bourret. When Maria's not walking her potato-dog or enjoying southwest Michigan's exquisite craft beer, she can be found on twitter at @mariadongwrites or on her website, mariadong.com

## Dream Weaver

by Blaize Kelly Strothers

As my children sleep,  
I seize their sorrows  
Looming uncertainties  
Become a tapestry of bliss

Knitting new reveries,  
I cast out their worry  
They stir –  
Deft fingers daren't drop a stitch

I weave tales of far-off tomorrows,  
Shimmering, incubating nebulae  
They are reborn! Invincible, pure  
Astral entities, stellar souls at play

Deep space enormous embraces them  
They plot new paths, new galaxies  
Try infinitesimal on for size  
Endlessly changing; in flux, at ease

Their lashes tap dance as I spin new fates  
I sew vermilion fields under sequined skies  
They whirl and frolic, woozy frothing joy  
All overlapping laughter and leaking eyes



No more monsters, no more demons  
 Grasping, grabbing at young lives  
 They delight in shadows, phantasmal playmates  
 Reeling, wheeling lullabies

Ragged breathing turns slow and sweet  
 Plush arms lose their grip  
 Plusher bears plummet, having  
 served their purpose  
 Smiles caress pale lips

I lay down my tools; careworn hands rest  
 Silence, save soft exhales  
 Nascent dreams have been repaired  
 In the moments between breaths



**Blaize Kelly Strothers** is a writer and artist from NYC. She lives in PA with her husband and sons and gigantic cat, Ozzy. You can find her at [blaizestrothers.com](http://blaizestrothers.com).

## The Gorgon's Epitaphist

by KT Bryski

**P**erhaps I had known, even before I stepped into the richly panelled drawing room and found her hunched before the fire, thick woollen scarves wound about her head. The notice in the newspaper had carried a grating haltingness, the stony hesitancy of a tongue too long accustomed to silence. An assistant was wanted at the estate up the hill. A short-term engagement. Handsome pay. A proficiency in shorthand and a working typewriter were essential; the vain and timorous need not apply.

Newly penniless, newly solitary, and too exhausted for either vanity or timorousness, I ironed my best skirt and climbed the hill with my typewriter in tow. The house crouched like a vulture at the top. All around it, silent and scattered as bones in a ravaged ossuary, there stood the statues. Scant mind I paid them, as the falling autumn dark drew its cloak over the house's turrets and shadowed the overgrown front path. No servant answered my knocking; a cavernous foyer yawned before me.

"Upstairs," came the voice.

Mounting the stairs, I met another host of statues in the halls, their features worn and fresh by turns, some caught forever in surprise, and a very few in ecstasy, but the majority in terror.

She sat hunched before the fire, thick woollen scarves wound about her head. Beneath the hearth's crackling ran a sibilant whisper, as of silk rubbing against itself, or scales sliding over scales.

"You've come for the position?" She spat the consonants as though they offended her; she held vowels in her throat like bones she could not swallow.

Quickly, primly, I outlined my typing and secretary work, the four years spent toiling amidst the dust of a basement archive. At length, she raised her hand. It was liver-spotted and gnarled, the fingers curved into claws. Still, she had not looked at me. "Do you like my statues?" she asked.

I did not, but I forced a smile. "They are remarkable."

"You please me so far. Shall we greet each other, face to face?"

Yes. I knew then. But I stood rooted to the spot as she turned. The scarves hid her hair, obscured the shape of her head, but beneath the wool, great coils writhed and squirmed, the hissing undeniable.

A white mask hid her face. Porcelain, smooth and cold as snow, it made no attempt at expression. It gave nothing, asked nothing. My gaze slid again and again to the floor. Two perfect circles of darkened glass were set in the eyeholes, impenetrable.

"Surprised?" she asked.

"The statues are telling."

She snorted. "Are you frightened?"

"Nothing scares me anymore."

If she noticed the pang in my words, she ignored it. "I wish my collection catalogued. Names, provenance, history." Another pained snort caught and broke. "I grow old, unimaginably old. Their stories cannot die with me."

"As you wish."

"You will live here. Three weeks, no longer. Room, board, and generous reward." She paused. "You will need to be frightened, here. You will succeed in your task, or you will petrify—through carelessness or failure, one way or another. Do you understand?"

"Certainly."

No sooner had I spoken than she reached for her mask. I acted on instinct—cold, swift, unthinking. My hands flew to my face; I shielded my eyes.

As I stood there, she laughed. Low at first, then louder and louder, guttural barks that hurt my ears. "Well, well." Fabric rustled, a snake hissed. "Perhaps I've removed my mask. Perhaps I've left it on. What do you think?"

Blood boomed at my temples; fear pressed like a knife at my throat.

"You can turn around," she whispered. "Leave this room, this house. I won't follow."

"How can I trust you?"

I swear before every god, I *heard* her smile. "You can't."

Finding myself on a precipice, I drew a breath—and looked.

Medusa sat there, serene, the mask securely in place. The featureless white porcelain gleamed. "I'll show you to your room."



It held little enough, my room. Perhaps it belonged to a governess or ill-favoured cousin now long in the grave. A child's desk, a four-poster bed, a wardrobe, a window. "Have you brought any mirrors?" she asked. "I permit none in the house."

I had a small looking-glass. She handled it like the holiest relic—or damnation. "I will destroy this."

So saying, she left. Silence fell, absolute. Outside the window, statues stood row upon row against the night, their shadows still upon the dying grass. I closed the curtains. I set my typewriter upon the desk. I readied a notebook and pencil for the morning.

And then I crawled into a bed too large for me. The sheets smelled musty; black mould speckled the ceiling. I lay curled on the very edge, my hands clasped tight before me, knees drawn to my chest.

I could not bear to reach out and feel emptiness beside me. Not yet. Insomnia enfolded me in cold arms, the most faithful lover I'd ever had. As the hours wore on, I stared unblinking into the darkness, and the night passed silent as stone.



After breakfasting alone on cold toast and black tea, I joined her in the garden behind the house. The lawn swept far back and away to a fieldstone wall, the grass wilted yellow under my boots. Rain-swollen earth mouthed the statues' feet. As she shuffled to the first statue of the first row, I withdrew my notebook and

pencil. She stared for a long time at the stone face. It was worn smooth, nose and lips mere suggestions, the eyes reduced to sunken hollows.

"This is Philon," she said, speaking abruptly, as though she loathed the taste of his name. "He stole upon me as I slept, when I lived on the island of Sarpedon. He wielded a sickle of iron to take off my head. But he stumbled in the darkness. I heard. I woke. I looked."

My shorthand flitted over the page, her words transformed and captured as soon as they broke her lips. Without waiting, she lurched to the next statue.

"Demenikos, whom I trusted once long ago. He left fruit at the mouth of my cave, hyacinths to brighten the darkness. But one morning, the grapes turned to ash on my tongue and I knew them for poison...I waited for him, secure in my hiding, and surprised him as he came...."

Only the scratch of my pencil answered. Later, in my lonely bed, as the night lengthened over the poor stones, the horror would find me. But that morning, as she led me onward through the silent crowd, I heard without listening: a recording instrument, nothing more.

"Agathe. I did not mean it. I wore a shroud then, a funeral shroud, embroidered to hide my face. She stroked me, I told her to stop—then I begged her to finish—and as my hips rose and bucked, the shroud slipped free...."

Over and over it repeated: her stumbling reel to the next statue, her flat rasp hanging dead in the cold air. A thick hood covered her head. From behind, she appeared as a monk, she seemed Death—but not once did I hear the snakes. Chilled to sleeping, I thought, languishing in the weak, bitter sunlight.



She moved on, and I called, "Wait!" It was the first word I'd spoken that morning. "You missed one."

A young woman with clenched fists, a sneer of defiance frozen on her lips. Medusa did not falter, though her head drooped ever lower to her chest. "Later."

The morning withered to afternoon. A low bank of clouds rolled in to deepen the gloom. My stomach pinched; my reddened fingers stiffened in the cold. Yet I dared not ask her to stop, for no matter how hurriedly she spoke, more statues awaited us, the unending lines spread across the lawn. Already, I despaired of recording them all, and in the recesses of my skull, I heard again her words, so calm and cool, "*You will succeed in your task, or you will petrify...*"



Though I would have preferred transcribing my notes in the privacy of my room, she bade me work in the drawing room. Seated rigid in her chair, she gazed wordlessly upon the hearth, the flames' light splashing orange across her mask. Withdrawn to a corner, I squirmed on a hard wooden chair. She had not wired the house for electricity; I worked by the uncertain guttering of a candle. Whenever the clacking of keys slowed or stopped, she glanced towards me, fingering the straps of her mask. Bending over the keys, I typed furiously until she settled again.

At length, I pushed the typewriter back, rubbing my eyes. "I've finished. What we got today, anyway."

Her gnarled hand shot forth. "I will review your work."

Try though I might to avoid it, her fingers brushed mine as I handed the papers over. They were cool, the skin scabrous and thinned by the passing of ages. Hands clasped behind my back, I stared at the carpet while she flicked through my pages.

"It is satisfactory," she pronounced.

"May I ask a question?" I said, my eyes still locked upon the floor.

"Yes."

"Why have you brought them all with you? Most of them tried to kill you. Nearly all of them betrayed you. Why not leave them behind?" Daring to lift my gaze ever so slightly, I gestured to the sheaf in her lap. "Why not let them pass into oblivion?"

"Because," she said, harsh and clipped, "I do not wish the world to forget how I hurt."

"But why—"

"Do you think I would rest if you remembered them as heroes?" She laughed, but it sheared the space between us like a sob. "They possessed no golden souls, these wretches. They were petty, they were callous, they were cruel. Or they were foolish, unutterably damned before they ever darkened my door. If I must die, I will reveal all their tarnish before I go."

"It seems a biased history."

She raised her chin, the mask blank beyond reckoning. "Inevitably. But it is the tale of my truest heart, even so."



The days merged into a morass of damp grey weather and damp grey faces. The mornings grew colder as I trudged in her wake, the earth's chill leaching through my boots, my hands roughening under the wind's teeth.

Sometimes I recoiled from the enormity of the task at hand. Nearly two weeks had passed and we had not completed the garden; there remained yet the statues in the house.

I wrote until my fingers bent like hers and my wrist cramped. At night, I typed beneath her unperturbable, glass-shielded supervision. Even then, little rhyme or reason suggested itself to me. She had not arranged the statues by date, by provenance, by loathing, but by some inner reckoning she would not share. Some yielded no more than an epithet for recording; others she described until I swayed where I stood, my grip on the pencil tight with pain.

She staggered always past the statue of the sneering woman. No second glance, no explanation beyond, "Later."

I lay awake, as I had every night. Nocturnal solitude was strange to me, even then. From a youth in which I swore I would never share my bed, I now found myself sleepless without another's warmth beside me.

Unable to stare at the mould-plagued ceiling any longer, I fetched my coat and slipped from the house. The night smelled of wet leaves and something older, deeper: the dankness of graveyards. But then, I suppose this was a graveyard, this stone garden she had transplanted across the years and oceans, and I was its epitaphist.

Their names came to my lips as I slouched through the rows, my hands thrust into my pockets. Their histories spoke to me from the cut of their stone clothes, the expressions wrought on their immobile faces.

I turned another row and froze. There in the moonlight, she stood before the statue of the sneering woman. Her head was bowed, and her black cloak spilled like oil upon the stiffening earth. Though I tried to creep away, her rasp carried through the night. "What are you doing out here?"

"I couldn't sleep," I called, truthfully.

"Come closer."

Step by leaden step, I trained my face on the dead lawn. She wore no hood, no scarves. The snakes coiled calm about her skull, their scales dulled in the moonlight. Before she turned, I saw the strap of her mask, and I exhaled my relief.

The cloak seemed to swamp her; her head looked too small without its customary wrappings. Hunched shoulders, drooping chin, she might have been an old woman—an old human woman, paying her respects at the cold, cold grave. The snakes raised a perfunctory hiss at my approach, their eyes filmed over, clouded blue.

"I am tired," she said. "So very, very tired."

"Then why aren't you in bed?"

The mask betrayed nothing, but I felt her rare smile. "I couldn't sleep."

"Who was she?" I blurted suddenly, before I could stop myself. "This woman, here?"

She withdrew, smaller, sadder, older yet. The snakes' hissing extinguished to nothingness, the ache of a candle blown out. "Later."

"We don't have much later left."

"I am not certain that I wish her remembered."



With only a few days left, we came to the end of the garden statues—save one. Gratefully, I trailed Medusa through the crypt-like corridors of the house. Though my fingers cramped worse than ever with fatigue, it was warmer inside, especially in those wings with working fireplaces.

Yet her pace slowed; she leaned often against the walls. More and more, she left the snakes unbound to trail listless down her back. By mid-morning, her breath came short and laboured, her footsteps uncertain in the dimness.

As she pushed open a door, revealing another parlour full of statues, she staggered. Without thinking, I caught her elbow. Under my touch, she stiffened, swinging around to face me. The white mask shone bright as ever, its black glass eyes like pockets of night.

"I'm sorry," I said, releasing her. "Would you like a chair?"

She sank into it until it seemed to swallow her. But her shielded gaze stayed locked on me. For once, she paid no attention to the statues. "I did not expect that," she said.

I shrugged.

Tilting her head to one side, she studied me. "Nettie Parrish stands nearest the window," she said, her tone offering nothing. "She was a scullery maid, back in... in..." The sentence hitched, caught, her hands knotted on her skirts. "In 1837," she gasped, at last. "She told me that she wanted to be friends, that she didn't mind my ugliness..."



That night, I retreated to my customary corner, the steady clacking of my typewriter a welcome respite from my own thoughts. Increasingly, when the silence lay unfilled by distraction, memories welled up which I had no wish to entertain. For the first time in weeks, a sharp ache seized my chest. Shoving all that aside, I typed harder, faster. Secretly, I dreaded the day we completed our work. Perhaps it would be better to peek behind her mask and stand beyond the emptiness forever.

"When did your heart go to stone?"

I startled. She had not moved or spoken for some hours; I had thought her drowning before the fire. Her words were slurred, thickened, and I did not answer, my fingers poised above the keys.

"What caused it?" she repeated, more insistently, her head lolling to one side.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I felt it from the moment you walked in."

My hands fell to my lap. Against my ribs, my heart beat smooth and dark as hardened magma. It had cooled with a dulled anger that kept rhythm with my breath.

The white mask transfixed me. Firelight sparkled across the blackened glass at her eyes. She shifted in her chair, her bones creaking and popping. "What happened?"

I could have averted my gaze from my own ugly heart. I could have fled to my bedchambers; she wouldn't have followed, not then. I could have flung off a glittering lie, distracting and fatal to contemplate as a golden shield



raised before her. But instead, I turned my seat to face her. "I had a lover."

She grunted. "As many do."

"There was..." I swallowed. "A *friend* she met for walks in the dells..."

"And?"

"She left me." The truth of it ground like granite.

Though I expected an answer, she slid lower in her seat. We might have been a tableau of statues ourselves, seated at our opposite ends of the drawing room. For a long, long time, nothing moved but the flames. When they smouldered to ashes, I gathered my notes and left her to the night.



She did not rise from her bed the next morning. Weak light filtered through a gap in the curtains and pooled upon the mask. The snakes fanned about the pillow, an aureole of dulled scales and loose coils. They did not lift their heads as I entered, their eyes fixed and unseeing.

She propped herself upright as best she could, wheezing. Through her thin cotton nightgown, I glimpsed for the first time the knobs of bone that jutted from her skin, the sharp ridges along her arms. Her liver-spotted hands wandered across the coverlet, restless.

"Chair," she gasped. "In the corner."

I retrieved it and settled at her bedside, my notebook balanced on my knee. She turned her head towards me. Sweat beaded the sliver of skin between the top of the mask and her hairline.

"The...the statue in the third floor alcove. On the north side. The boy." She sucked a long, shuddery breath. "His name...his name was Elfric...he came on a dare..."

I wrote.

"In the blue sitting room. Her name...Lucrezia Bassi. She crept in with her husband when I lived in Tuscany. Seeking gold..."

No tears pricked my eyes, but my grip tightened on the pencil.

"He's...in the hall outside. Giorgio."

Her voice grew ever more ragged; I had to bend so close to hear that her chill brushed my cheek. Beneath the mask, I was certain her eyes had fluttered shut. Her chest heaved with effort, the gaps between words lengthening.

As the afternoon light began to fail, she fell silent. I waited, pencil poised. Cold, slick dread crept up my throat. The snakes were motionless. She didn't breathe.

But then she gasped. "That's all. All of them. Done."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I leaned back in my seat. I didn't want to ask, but the question pushed up and over my tongue. "What about the girl in the garden?"

The silence held.

"Medusa?"

"Do you know why..." She clawed feebly at her collar, as though the nightgown choked her. I hurried to unfasten the top button. "Do you know why...my face turns them to stone?"

"Athena cursed you, after Poseidon—"

"No, no." Her head rolled from side to side, the snakes limp. "She gave me snakes for hair, remade my bones... but they don't petrify because of *that*." As she spoke, her talons sank into my arm, tugged me forward; she smelled like a mausoleum left to the ages. "I was so very, very angry. Angry then, and angry to my grave."

My heart thumped, once, twice.

"They cannot look my fury in the eye. That's the secret." The mask fixed on me. "Not ugliness. Rage."

Rage. My belly burned with it. "Tell me about her."

"After Athena, I thought I would not love again. But then..." Beckoning me forward, she whispered a name straight into my ear. "We could not wed, of course. She...needed a lover she could look at." A rattling gasp shook her. "And so, she took one. Another woman. Only because I wasn't—sufficient, you see. As I am. With my—circumstances. But she promised that she *loved* me, deep and true. She needed *more*, she said. That was all."

Tears trickled from under the mask. With my thumb, I brushed them away.

"She didn't need *more*. She simply didn't need me."

I knew. I knew exactly that wrath. Bending over her, I stroked the cool porcelain as though soothing a child. And then I eased the straps free. Removing the mask, I gazed well and long upon the face of Medusa.

She was beautiful. Clear, bright eyes, undiminished by age, a proud lift to her chin. The lines of her face cut clean, honed by heartache and centuries and too many lands passing before her.

But unimaginable fury shone from her face like the brilliance of dying stars. Unstoppable, unmitigated after so many years. I bathed in it, my own anger singing in harmony. I saw her rage, I *knew* it. It recognized me in kind; it could not turn me to stone.

A whimper caught in her throat. Forehead to forehead, I cradled her. Our tears mingled on our cheeks, our hurt and stony hearts beating as one. Into my shoulder, she murmured, "Your payment is in the study."

"But..."

"Take your manuscript, take everything."

"I—"

"This is your *job*." Her eyes blazed. "I turned them to stone. You turn them to stories. Let your pages be their plinths."

I nodded.

"Do not let the world forget how we hurt." She fell back, snarling and furious and lovelier than art can tell. "Let them look, full in the face."

I kissed her cheek. It was papery, the skin so delicate I feared it must split beneath my lips. But she only smiled and went still.

A sudden writhing erupted on the pillow. All at once, the snakes pushed forth, shedding their skins like ghosts, dropping from her head and surging out the door. I followed them forth from Medusa's death chamber. As they hissed about my feet, I gathered my papers and my typewriter and my fortune.

With a last glance up the stairs, I closed the door. I walked away forever from the house upon the hill, the record of our wrath tucked inside my jacket. These words conclude its prologue. It is complete; it is waiting.

I hope you gaze into its pages like a mirror.  
 I hope you quail before the furious heat of our eyes.  
 I hope you petrify—and despair.



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## You Do What You're Told

by J.A.W. McCarthy

**T**he woman who comes to Diana's window is an improvement, or at least a bit more accurate this time around: light brown eyes, wide forehead, even the little patches of flaky skin where her earlobes meet her jaw. The woman stares through the glass, searching for Diana on the other side of her own reflection. She knows she doesn't have to knock.

Diana slides out of bed and stands at the window, unmoving, for a full minute. Tomorrow night it will be two minutes, then the next night three, then four or more; though the women come at five till midnight every time, Diana finds satisfaction in their bewildered expressions as they wait. Outside, nothing blinks or stirs, shrubs and trees and fence posts and all that's out there twinned on glass, bloated and waiting. The woman stares up at her, but Diana can't tell if the woman is really seeing her or just tracking her subtle twitches the way animals do.

"So this is what I look like," Diana says once she's finally opened the window. The screen is gone, cut away from its frame when the woman from two weeks ago came armed with scissors. Tonight's woman

blinks in response, but she makes no other movement. Thankfully, she's not as aggressive as the others.

Crouched so that she is nose-to-nose with this new twin, Diana reaches into the cold dark and pushes her fingers through the woman's hair, lifting a section in a drooping ribbon, root to tip. Under the moonlight it glows a perfect, undistinguished golden brown.

"Well, what he *thinks* I look like."

She lifts a small section of her own hair from the crown of her head and yanks hard, wincing as the roots of twenty or so strands tear from her scalp. It hurts more than she thought it would, though not as much as her fingers did when the second and third women ripped the nails from her pinkies, back when they were wild and greedy and burst through glass and wood to take what they wanted when they wanted.

Diana loops the length of hair several times around her index and middle fingers until it's a thick bracelet of black and coffee brown and ruddy gold. The woman holds out her hand and Diana places the coil of hair into her palm, making sure the grey roots are on the outside.

"Make sure he sees that," she says, pointing to the lengths of grey throughout. They both watch the hair as it uncurls in the woman's open palm, sliding over familiar skin and toward the damp grass below. "Careful—don't lose it," Diana warns.

The woman nods and closes her fingers around the ribbon of hair, but she doesn't say anything. It's been twenty-two nights and twenty-two women, but not one of them has spoken yet. Diana knows they can't speak.



The man who sends the women used to drive up and down Diana's street once or twice a week. An

older beige sedan, clunky and nondescript like an Oldsmobile—something an elderly person would drive, though she's never gotten close enough to see the person inside or the license plate. At first the car moved with purpose, edging the speed limit, no different from the other cars that travelled through her semi-suburban neighborhood every day. Then, the times the man saw her at her window, he would cruise by slowly like a come-hither. Almost a dare, as if he knew there was nothing she could do. Sometimes Diana would find the same car parked on the street outside the coffee shop she frequented, her office, her favorite bar. What she, at first, dismissed as coincidence developed into a clockwork fact, just like the women who began to visit at five till midnight.

Even then, she never called the police; she could imagine what they would ask her, if they responded at all. A part of her didn't—still doesn't—want to know who the man is.

But he can't be some random stranger, can he? Diana considers a long-faded fling, then a handful of failed first dates. Perhaps he is someone she passes every morning in the lobby of her office building, or maybe he sat in the back row of that night class she took last year, or he could be an old neighbor from her college days. Whoever he is, she's never dared to get as close to him as he's gotten to her.

Even though she knows better, Diana sometimes wonders if she were to track the man down and tell him she's sorry for whatever slight he perceives, would he stop sending the women? She would tell him she knows what it's like to be lonely. Would a moment of her undivided attention and a simple apology be enough to end this?



She told her friends, felt safe in the relief their ready validation and indignation brought. When their worry got too exhausting, she stopped talking about him. She told her friends he had stopped following her. She said she was sure. They ordered another round of drinks and laughed an uneasy, too-high laugh about how awful some men could be.

She never told anyone about the women. She never said a word about what they demand from her.



Despite the hair Diana provided, the woman who comes at five till midnight the next night has dark roots, not a speck of grey dusted throughout hair that is now threaded with more gold than brown. Her eyes are the same as last night, though the lashes are longer than Diana's ever were. She finds it funny that the man got the dry skin right—How close had he come to her that he would see that, *notice* that?—but he can't accept the moles on her chin and next to her eye, or the prominent scar that zig-zags along her hairline. Tonight's woman is still defined by the pleasing fat of youth. The skin under her eyes remains smooth and light, not a hint of the dark circles hard-earned from years of sleepless nights spent studying, then working, then worrying.

A rush of cheap vanilla fills Diana's nostrils when she opens her bedroom window. Under that, as the night air settles and tonight's woman leans inward, Diana catches a familiar sourness, the kind that gathers in the creases of skin. A feral tang pushes against her tongue, the scent of someone else's sweat on top of her own.

Holding her breath, Diana cups the side of the woman's face, thumb cradling a sharp jawline. Her skin is so soft—he got that right—but the color is wrong. Too light. But she knew it would be.

Diana grabs the little scalloped dish from her nightstand and brings it to the window. Because she knew, she was ready earlier this evening: three shots of tequila, a lighter, the six-inch hunting knife her father gave her when she was twelve. She thinks of her father often, frail and serious in his little house in the woods three counties east. What would he advise her to do now? From the moment she learned to talk, he told her that she doesn't have to keep her eyes down and accept blood in her mouth. He was the one who taught her that a knife can feed her just as well as it can defend her.

The woman outside considers the offering, then plucks the little scrap of pinkish-bronze skin from the dish, leaving a thin smear of red across the edge of the porcelain. It's shriveled to curled leather now, but it was plump and supple when Diana cut it from her forearm just hours ago.

"You do what you're told, right?"

The woman nods. She encloses the scrap of flesh in her fist and squeezes as if she is trying to absorb it into her own.

"Okay, you can go," Diana says. "Make sure he gets it right this time."

She watches the woman turn from the window and retreat around the side of the house. Her hips are slim, no ridge under her flimsy dress where her underwear bites into the little roll of fat that should be—but isn't—below her bellybutton. Diana is glad she's only seen the front of these twenty-three women from the neck up.

"We're not the same, you know," Diana calls after tonight's woman, not worried that the neighbors might hear. "You're not me. You're never going to be me."



The beige sedan stopped following Diana when she started giving the women what the man wants. She fought them at first, of course, but after the blood and the tears, it became easier to anticipate their desires and give them—*him*—what they came for. It's only a little piece of herself, and the bit of control she gets from choosing that precise piece is enough to keep her from folding in on herself over and over again until she becomes nothing more than ragged edges about to split. And it keeps the man away. It keeps him from getting any closer.

No matter how hard she tries to keep it out of her mind, the thought of what the man does with the women prickles the back of Diana's head as she lies in bed at night. She watches each woman walk away from her window, waiting for their steps to betray the slightest hesitancy. She studies their eyes beyond searching for her own resemblance, trying to spot a cloudiness in the irises, proof that a part of them has died inside. She's thought about following one of the women, but she knows now that that isn't necessary.

Diana can't be sure it's a different woman who comes to her window every night. She imagines one body can't survive so many adjustments. One mind wouldn't allow its body to repeat this arduous cycle. Is it worse that the man does this to a different woman every day, or the same woman over and over?

One woman or many women, they are growing to trust Diana. Especially tonight's woman—she smiles when Diana comes to the window, and she almost preens when Diana caresses her jaw and pulls her close. The skin is a better match this time, but the hair is still wrong, and Diana doesn't make a habit of smiling that

big, that eagerly. Hungry eyes dilate as they seek her approval.

Diana takes the woman's face in both hands and smooths her hair back from her temples, stroking her like one would a cat or dog. She is beginning to see these women as pets—hers, not his.



There isn't much left to give when the twenty-fifth woman arrives.

She stands at the window, no worse or better than the woman before her, and stares expectantly through the glass at Diana as if she's a cat called home for dinner. Behind her, the grass and the patio and neighboring roofs are blue-black, flattened against her pallid sheen. Diana is afraid the whole world will see this woman now—how could one not notice her alone in the dark, underdressed in the cold, as she makes the dogged march back to the man who made her?—but at five till midnight, only the possums lurk to acknowledge her.

Before Diana can get the window all the way open, the woman's fingers creep over the track and onto the sill inside. She reaches towards Diana's face, then turns her hand palm-up. If this is what perfection looks like—as much of Diana as the man ever acknowledged—what could she want now? If this is the last woman, what will become of Diana? A part of her is afraid of what will happen when she no longer needs to exist in his eyes.

“Tell me what he wants.”

The woman blinks, but keeps her dark eyes locked on Diana's. There's something hard in her gaze, and it doesn't take Diana long to recognize a white-hot resolve behind those mirrors, a kernel of assuredness

that wasn't apparent in the twenty-fourth woman or the ones before her.

"If you're supposed to be me..." Diana begins, casting her eyes down for just a moment. "Tell him you don't need him."

The woman closes her fingers into her palm then slowly releases them. Her hand vibrates against the window sill, tense and eager. Undaunted.

When Diana meets the woman's eyes again, they are clear and bright, no clouds, nothing but seething and beating and blazing inside.

"You do what you're told, right?"

Something like a nod tilts the woman's chin, but then she stops herself. She opens her mouth, and in that moment Diana suddenly hears leaves rustling on the wind, car tires scraping the arterial two blocks away, the creak-groan of her own house settling. The woman closes her mouth, then opens it again. Tremors race through her hand still propped palm-up on the window sill. Both women are suspended in the held-breath of words struggling to form against the back of the twenty-fifth woman's teeth.

The one thing Diana has not given is her tongue.

As the woman watches, Diana goes back to the bed and reaches under her pillow, fingers immediately finding her hunting knife. What little moonlight filters inside catches on the shiny spots on the handle where her grip has bitten away the wood, the oils from her skin burnishing the slightest indentations that fit her and only her. In her grip, the knife vibrates as she pulls it free from its leather sheath and runs her thumb gingerly along the gently curved blade. There's still a spot of blood crusted on the tip from the other night

when Diana sliced into her forearm. On the other side of the window, tonight's woman opens her mouth, her tongue slowly sliding over her teeth then lips, tasting the night air. Diana does the same.

Crouching at the open window, Diana holds the knife aloft and brings the blade straight down several times, the tip sticking in the wood of the windowsill just inches from the woman's open hand. The woman watches as Diana points the blade towards herself and draws it across the air in front of her throat. She turns the blade towards the woman and mimics several swift stabs at her jugular.

"You do what you're told," Diana says.

She sheaths the hunting knife and places the wooden handle in the woman's palm, watching as fingers exactly like her own curl around it, settling immediately into each smooth indentation. The woman weighs the knife in her grip, rotating her wrist until she finds a comfortable angle. Blade down, out, forward and reaching back, every scenario considered in that moment. Diana remembers the times she stood at her living room window and on street corners, fingernails cutting into her palm as she watched the beige sedan make its leisurely glide, comforted only by the phantom weight of the hunting knife in her hand.

The woman turns from the window and heads around the side of the house. Like the twenty-four women before her, she moves with purpose, arms at her sides, the hunting knife's handle swallowed in her fist, the leather sheath blending into the folds of her ruddy cotton dress in the dark.



At five till midnight the next night, Diana stands at her window, unmoving. One minute. Two minutes. She counts four minutes in her head. She guesses ten minutes, but when she looks at the clock, it's only been seven. Two minutes after midnight. She makes a fist, wiggling her fingers into place. On the other side of the glass, Diana sees only the shrubs and trees and fence posts hunched the same as any other night, bloated and waiting.



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## My Internal Advisor

by Gabrielle Galchen

when i was little  
there was a tiny red jelly bean inside me  
i'm not not about to divulge  
where he lived or why

like an aged king  
he wore a robe of crushed tomatoes;  
his crown winked at me knowingly  
as i threw his gold coins over rainbows

he said to stop the orders of my doubts  
i must look less into clocks  
like they read songs of bible  
and more into rivers,  
listen to their wispy lullaby  
so i could dream of smile-lines

drunken siren, my reflection  
sang in poisoned honey:  
*Don't you know? You are the muddled  
blurriness that you see*



he said my eyes were pathological liars  
 but even at eight i was a  
 devout follower of fantasy,  
 at least to creature-myself:  
*i am a human, i tried to explain,  
 i was never created to settle;  
 my nightmares tell of broken rings and wrinkles.  
 Like all unconscious nothings,  
 you will idly spend your life satisfied being  
 a small red jelly bean.*

i couldn't see him but i knew he shook his head:  
*one day you will realize  
 delaying living until tomorrow is  
 like unloving heartbreak,  
 a wishful jester's lie*

i continued to mock him and complain:  
 i was not a mind for philosophy  
 but when i finally stopped planning myself  
 he got up and left

I lie: *i don't miss you*



**Gabrielle** is a senior at the High School of American Studies. She is an avid writer who mentees at Girls Write Now and performs spoken-word poetry as part of Girl Be Heard and Climate Speaks. She most often writes poetry about her own experiences and about social justice issues.

## Sunrise, Sunrise, Sunrise

by Lauren Ring

221/0

**E**very day, it goes like this: I wake to golden light, with the surface of a star just beyond my wide viewport window. As the hours pass, a supernova forms, enveloping my little research vessel. I check my monitoring equipment, I eat my favorite meals, and then in the evening, I die.

I'm quite content with this looped life. I have learned to sunbathe in the late afternoon rays of the supernova, stretching out my belly like a cat. The shifting plasma and dancing flares outside can mesmerize me for hours. When the end comes, there is no pain, just the sensation of bright acuity that comes before the burn. At times, I idly wonder if this is my heaven.

I know my days well, so I am caught by surprise when an astronaut falls past my window. Seeing that dark figure against the warm dawn-like glow of the dying star jolts me out of my sleepy reverie. This is new. This is wrong.

I watch, curious, as the astronaut reaches toward my ship. At the closest point of her trajectory, I can see inside her helmet. Her eyes are wide and desperate. Her mouth moves, speaking words I cannot hear.

I wonder how I must look to her. It's been a long time since I have thought of myself through the eyes of another.

Trapped on course by inertia, the astronaut soars past and is incinerated in the molten sun. Her death is barely a blip on my solar data readout. It's a shame, and fascinating, but by the next today, it will be as if she had never existed.

222/0

I burn, and wake, with no time at all in between. The one thing I miss is my dreams. I can't have them anymore, no matter how long I nap on the warm metal that lines the single room of my ship. Seeing that astronaut felt like a dream. My memory of her will be trapped in this loop with me for all eternity. Another immortal death.

Although I try to go about my day as normal, I can't help but watch the clock. The last pack of dehydrated ice cream, which I have enjoyed every day, tastes like sour ash this time.

Seven hours into the loop, the astronaut falls past my window again. I press my palm to the thick glass, appreciating the power of my ship's heat shielding. My window is cool and impenetrable. The astronaut reaches for me. The astronaut burns.

233/0

It's been a dozen loops now, and I can safely conclude that the astronaut has been trapped in my little temporal bubble, sucked in like a moth to a flame. I watch her fall from the safety of my starship home and wonder if she remembers as I do. Each day, her mouth moves in the same way.

She falls again. Dark sweat-slick hair sticks to her forehead and globules of tears float freely in her helmet. This time, I'm ready with a camera, recording her last words.

She burns.

I play back the video, acutely aware of my role in this dance. If I were a better person, I wouldn't need to know what the astronaut was saying in order to rescue her. If I were a worse person, it wouldn't matter either. There's no better or worse person here, though, just me, and I want to know.

The video of the astronaut plays on all my monitors as the star begins to swell behind me. I watch myself mirrored in the webcam display and try out different sounds.

"Help" is easy enough to figure out. "Help me," she's saying, over and over again. It's the last word that catches my attention and spurs me into action.

"Help me, Amaranthe."

How does she know my name?

234/0

The astronaut falls again, and this time I catch her. The mechanical arm on the side of the ship was meant for sample collection, but I know the astronaut's exact

trajectory and speed, so it's easy enough to nudge her close enough to grab onto my ship.

Hand over hand, she approaches the airlock. I can feel my heart racing as the doors hiss open, but I keep to procedure, and wait for everything to stabilize. My hand trembles on the unlock button. It blinks green, and I press it.

The astronaut steps inside and removes her helmet. Her eyes are clear and golden as a nebula, her hair is as black as space. Little burn marks mar her cheeks where her own tears boiled against her.

"Amaranthe, thank God," she says, breaking two hundred days of silence. "I've been trying to rescue you."

"Rescue me?" My eyes narrow. If this stranger disrupts my peaceful loop, I'll never forgive her. Maybe I should have left her falling outside. "What do you mean? Who are you?"

"My name is Jet," she says as she strips off her gloves. "Just Jet. I'm part of the crew on a long-haul ship, just happened to be passing through this system. Not a scientist or anything. Your looping nova here is a bit of a tourist destination now."

"A tourist destination?" I repeat, feeling suddenly exposed. This isn't heaven, then: peace does not have an audience.

"Yeah, but no one's gotten close enough before to realize there was someone still alive on this ship. I got curious, tracked down the crew manifest." Jet sat down to tug off her boots. "So here I am. Miscalculated a little, though. Like I said, not a scientist. Thanks for grabbing me, else I'd have burned right up."

*She doesn't remember.* Clearly there are rules to this game of time, but no one gave me the handbook. I am a little grateful, though. Her deaths were not at all like mine. I doubt her mind would have survived such a fate. I try to choose my words carefully.

"What does it look like from the outside?" I cross the ship and place a hand against my window. The star's roiling surface is just beginning to flare out of control.

"A bubble, pretty much. Blinks fast as hell. Something's weird with time and space in here. Can't get signals in, can't get signals out. Not even that nova can escape."

"But you're here." I turn to face her, backlit by the dying star. Wispy curls frame the angles of my face. I was beyond age, beyond beauty, beyond change. I've enjoyed becoming essence itself. Now I can feel the thoughts I left, creeping back into my psyche.

"I thought, if you made it in, maybe I could too." She shrugs. "It was worth a shot. What happens when you try to fly out?"

"I haven't tried," I admit.

"Oh." Jet falls silent. She rakes a hand through her short hair and stares at the budding supernova. I don't blame her for her disappointment. There's a reason I'm better off alone.

"I'm sorry you went to all that trouble for me. I'll figure out how to get you back to your ship."

"Okay." Jet sighs and stops unbuckling her spacesuit. "I guess it's none of my business."

"It's not," I agree.

She sits on the floor and contemplates this while I go about my day. I eat the last packet of dehydrated ice cream, check my instruments, and do a little yoga by the light of the solar flares. For a while, I forget that I am not alone.

“What is it like?” Jet asks. I flinch. Nothing unexpected has happened for almost a year of todays, and I’m not used to newness anymore.

“What is what like?” I move into the next yoga pose, arching my spine and straightening my arms into a perfect warrior stance. I’ve had plenty of practice, after all.

“Dying,” says Jet. Her bravado cracks, just a little. “The loop. All of it. I have a crew, a family--when the star goes nova, will I just disappear?”

“You won’t feel a thing,” I say. It’s answer enough for all her questions.

That night, we burn together.

235/0

Jet is still there when I wake up. I think I’m dreaming before I remember that I can’t. She wakes a moment after I do, blinking hard and staring at her hands. She’s back in her spacesuit. The burn marks on her face are the same as before, and I feel a stab of guilt when I realize they will never fade. Maybe there’s some salve in the med kit.

“Did you feel the supernova?” I ask, stretching languidly. The star is at its dimmest, and the ship has a pleasant chill.

“No, you were right.” Jet takes off her helmet and presses her cheek against the window, peering up and away. “It’s like it never happened.”

“You’d better get used to that. I don’t have to worry about food, though, or air, or fuel. It’s a nice little life.”

Well, it was, until Jet showed up. Now everything is wrong. I hope that if I’m polite and help her leave, things can go back to normal. The stability of the last cycle is a good sign. If the loop is localized to my ship, it should stay when Jet departs.

Jet rummages through my rations and pulls out the last packet of ice cream.

“Mind if I have this?” she asks.

“I mind.” I cross the room and take it from her hands. “Listen, Jet, I’ve got a routine. I don’t mind if you stay here for a few loops, but please stay out of my way.”

“Right. Sorry.” Jet’s frown is a little crooked. It’s kind of endearing, but not enough to make me give her my food.

Instead, I start going through my files, looking for a way to send her home. It’s a nice challenge, actually. I haven’t done any good, hard calculating since the looping started. Jet tucks herself respectfully into a corner and watches the star seethe as I work.

I can’t find a solution before the nova swallows my ship, but that’s okay. I’ve got no shortage of second chances.

238/0

“You died.”

“Hm?” Jet rolls over on her blanket, propping her head up with one arm to face me. It’s been a few loops now, and I hate to admit it, but this strange freighter woman is growing on me. I want her to know the truth, at least, so she doesn’t make the mistake of getting attached to me in return.



"In the sun. Not like we die together, but before, when you were falling. You died a dozen times before I caught you."

"That's alright. I'm sure you tried your best, and I don't remember it anyway."

"I didn't try. I let you fall."

I catch the hint of a crooked frown on Jet's face as she turns away. She runs her hand over her scarred face, over the bright red skin of brand new burns. When she turns back, she's smiling.

"Well, hey," she says, "I guess I can't fault you for that. No one tried to rescue you either, did they?"

"I let you die," I stammer. "Over and over again. You're not upset by that?"

"A little, sure, but it makes sense. Besides, I'm here now. Some rescuer I turned out to be."

Her compassion turns my stomach. I wish that instead of me, mission control had sent a saint. Maybe then Jet would have a worthy match.

I don't reply, but I get up and set about my calculations. I work twice as hard today, calculating fuel reserves and flight trajectories sufficient for one suited woman to leave the gravitational pull of the star. Jet deserves to go back to her freighter crew. They must miss her. Anyone with half a heart would miss someone like her.

This time, I can sense that I've almost got it right. I face my fiery death chanting equations, burning them into my memory so that they at least will survive the transition back to morning.

246/0

As soon as I wake, I rush to my console and type out everything I remember. The adrenaline pumping through my system makes everything feel fresh, electric. I'm excited, I realize. I want to solve this puzzle and save the day. It's the first goal I've had in a long time.

"Did you figure it out?" Jet hovers over my shoulder, peering at my monitor and tugging at the buckles on her spacesuit.

"Not yet." I hunch my shoulders and type faster. "Trying to remember what I did before."

Jet retreats. When I finish recording the last number, I turn in my chair to find her slumped against the viewport window. Silent tears stream down her cheeks, following the tracks of her burns.

"What's wrong?" I stay in my seat, keeping as much distance as I can from her in this severely restricted corner of spacetime.

"I'm sorry." Jet swipes her sleeve over her face. "Did I disturb you?"

"I finished what I remembered. You can talk to me, all right? I may not be the best company, but I won't bite."

"I'm scared, Amaranthe," Jet admitted. "I don't want to get trapped here. My crew must be wondering what happened to me."

"I'm sure they are." I want to turn back to my monitors, but Jet is still looking at me. I don't know what else she expects me to say, so I speak my mind, as usual. "Why did you leave them for me?"

"Not for you, exactly." Jet's cheeks flush. "I just wanted to do something heroic, for once. I thought this was my chance. Swoop in, save a damsel in distress,

come home victorious. Guess I didn't really think too hard about the details."

"I see." So Jet isn't a saint, after all. She's a martyr, and a martyr in vain, because I don't need to be rescued. Her foolhardy decision makes me like her more than her selflessness does. Her unhealed tear-burns tug at what few heartstrings I have left. "I'll get you back to your ship. Just give me a little more time."

She nods and wraps her arms around her knees.

I finish my calculations around the time Jet usually falls past my window. If she suits up with a gas tank, and aims its nozzle just so, Jet will head in the direction of where she told me her ship was docked. If I get my research vessel up to speed, and give her a boost, she might just break out of the bubble. From there, she can hail her crew.

When I relay this plan to Jet, she cries again. A lump forms in my throat as I hand her the canister. I swallow hard and start up the thrusters.

"You could come with me," Jet says. "Leave the ship behind, leave this tourist trap to its loops. You'd be welcome on my crew."

"No thank you." I smile. "I'm happy here."

For the first time since Jet's arrival, I wonder if I really am.

Jet nods and steps into the airlock. We reach the calculated velocity. I open the outer doors, and for a moment Jet falls across the starry void, just like the first time I saw her. Then she opens the nozzle on her gas tank and flies with purpose, out of sight.

I die alone again.

247/0

Jet isn't there when I wake up. My plan worked perfectly. The gas canister she took isn't with the others, proof positive that escape is possible. I could leave this loop at any time. It's just that no one would want me to.

The supernova monitoring mission wasn't intended to be solo, but no one signed up to join me. I get it. I'm the only person I get along with, no matter how hard I try. After I mistimed my return course and woke up unburnt behind cool glass, it was easier to stop trying.

I pull my ice cream out of my rations and sit in front of the window, waiting to see if Jet will fall past again, even though I know she will not. The hours come and go. I try to do my yoga, but I keep seeing her out of the corner of my vision, with her burnt tears and her golden eyes.

Jet doesn't fall. The star is as lively as ever, and galaxies spiral away in the empty distance. The false sunrise of the nova is unmarred. Everything is normal. This is exactly what I wanted.

In the afternoon, I reach for the last packet of ice cream, but it's gone. I ate it already. Everything is normal, but I've been set askew, knocked off course by Jet's brief visit. Tears prick my eyes like sunspots on the star. I can't figure out why I'm crying, and I hate it.

Later, when I am calm, I reevaluate the situation. I just need a little more time, that's all. I was unsettled when the loop first started, too. It's normal for change to disrupt a routine, but my life will go on in the way that it always has. There's nothing left to worry about.

With a sigh, I take my pillow and curl up in the largest shaft of solar light. I sleep my dreamless sleep and do not wake even when I die.

280/0

I miss her. I've spent loops and loops trying to deny it, but I've never been good at lying. I haven't had a friend in years, even before I entered this alternate temporality. There's no one out there who misses me. Even mission control never really cared if I lived or died, so long as I brought them their data.

Jet had seen me, just a name on a manifest, and she had given her life for me. I don't believe she really cared who I was at first, but after, in the ship--

She saw me. She saw my coldness and my rigidity, my routines and my logic; she heard me say *I had let her die*, and still she offered me a place on her crew.

So yes, I miss Jet. I miss how she made me feel, and I wish I had recognized it earlier. I've spent days running the numbers on my situation, on this little bubble universe, and I believe that it will collapse if I leave it behind. The supernova will escape to rage unchecked through the system.

All these second chances, and I won't get one with her.

471/1

One morning before the star dies, hundreds of mornings later, an astronaut falls past my window. I recognize the freight insignia on her suit. My heart skips a beat as I rush to move my ship's collection arm toward her reaching hand.

"Amaranthe, thank God," Jet says when the airlock doors finally open.

"Jet," I cry, rushing forward. *She's come back for me.*

"I've been trying to--" She freezes as I wrap my arms around her. "How did you know my name?"

I pull back. Awful realization floods my mind like searing light. Without another word to Jet, I sprint to my storage cabinet and fling open its doors.

All of my gas canisters are still there.

"What's going on?" Jet asks. She kneels down to unstrap her boots, but watches me with those wide golden eyes. There are fresh burn marks on her cheeks.

"This has already happened," I say, shutting the cabinet door and slumping back against it. Jet bites her lip and rubs her temples with one gloved hand.

"Well, yes," she says after a moment. "I don't know how to say this any better, but you're stuck in a sort of time loop."

"I know *that*," I say, barking out a laugh. Jet looks taken aback. "Thing is, we both are."

"What are you talking about? I came here to rescue you."

"I know you did. From your long-haul ship, right? Just happened to be in this system?"

Jet's face falls.

"If that's true, then how many times has this happened?" Her voice is soft, fragile like an ungloved hand. "Why can't I remember anything?"

"I don't know. I remember you showing up in my loop once before, and I remember five hundred times when you didn't, but clearly there are things going on here beyond my comprehension." I cross the room and pull the last pack of dehydrated ice cream from my rations. "Here. You must be hungry."

Jet sits against the window and eats in silence. When she looks a little less rattled, I explain everything I can remember. I explain how we are both trapped, in different ways, and when she leaves, it isn't for long. I explain the difference between my deaths and hers, and what happens if I miss her on her way past my ship. I explain why, logically, she might as well stay in here with me.

Jet doesn't take it well. It's too much, too quickly, for even her boundless optimism to handle.

"I want to go home," she mumbles through tears.

"Jet, you can't go," I plead, gesturing at the sunstruck abyss outside. "You'll forget everything. It will hurt. And you'll just come back anyway."

"This isn't what I wanted." Jet is sobbing now, far from the brave, cheerful rescuer I saw that first time. "I didn't think it would be like this. I miss my crew. I want to go back, Amaranthe."

I have her with me for less than a day this time. We stay silent as she suits up, although I wish I could say something that would make her want to stay. When the time comes, I boost her out of my loop, and into her own.

Jet saw me, and I saw her. She masks her fear with bravado the same way I mask mine with logic and calculations. I can't blame her for wanting to return to her own normalcy, even at the cost of her memory. I can't blame her for her tears. I can't blame her for wanting to leave me.

702/2

The next time I catch Jet, I don't explain as much. I gloss over the details and say I will tell her about the loops later. I accept her offer of rescue and the place on her crew.

I don't tell her that I already know how to send her back--I've had plenty of time to practice this little lie--and so we spend a few pleasant days together before her mood turns sad and desperate. Her crooked frown is all I can see when I shut my eyes. I pretend to finish my calculations and set her free.

When Jet leaves me for the third time, I do try to follow her. My acceptance of her offer was no lie. I boost her out of the bubble and then suit up, leaving my ship behind.

By the time I approach the edge of the temporal field, the star has begun its supernova again. The heat at my back is agonizing. I cry tears that boil. How could Jet stand it, all those times I let her die?

As I soar toward the space beyond my space, flames surround me. I look into the slow world outside the bubble and see the star's superheated tendrils escape to consume an errant asteroid.

It's just as I feared. If I leave like this, it's all over. Me, the star, the ship, the loop. Everything in this system. And Jet. Jet, who is reentering her own loop, and may have already forgotten that I exist. I cannot sentence her and her crew to a fiery death.

I aim the nozzle of my gas canister at freedom and press down on its trigger, using the recoil to send myself flying back into the hungry mouth of the supernova. As I close my eyes, ready to wake again on the cold spaceship floor, I think that Jet would be proud of me.

1377/5

"Amaranthe, thank God." Jet tucks her helmet under her arm. "I've been trying to rescue you."



I treasure these few days when our time loops intersect. Our orbits may be different, but we are bound to this star, and now, to each other.

I'm honest with Jet now, in a way soft enough not to hurt her. I tell her that I know how to get her back to her ship, but I'd like it if she stayed with me for a little while first. It gets lonely sometimes, dying all by myself every night.

"Do you mind if I eat this?" Jet holds up my ice cream. I look over from my yoga pose and nod, careful not to disrupt my balance.

"Take whatever you like. It'll be back tomorrow."

"Oh, right." Jet tears open the packet with her teeth and takes a bite of vanilla. "You know, I'm kind of glad I don't remember anything. It's nice meeting you, and I get to do it over and over again."

"I'll never understand your optimism." I have to turn back to the supernova, so that its gentle, shielded heat will dry my fresh tears.

"It's easier for me." Jet shrugs. "I don't have to remember any times where this didn't work out. I just have this time, and your ice cream."

She takes another bite as the solar flares grow stronger. It's my last evening with her for this loop. It feels nice, almost domestic. I understand where Jet is coming from, but I'm glad that I will remember this, for as long as this star shall die.

1849/7

Every day, it goes like this: I wake to golden light, and I do my best to escape it. I rush to my keyboard and record everything I remember from the day before, then keep crunching numbers until I'm out of ideas on

how to safely leave. Whenever I get tired, or sad, or just want to give up and relax in the star-warmth, I think of my astronaut, with earnest gold eyes and tears burnt onto her cheeks. I think of Jet.

Someday, Jet and I will meet for the last first time. I will finally break out of this eternal day and leave this ship behind to step onto hers.

Until then, I work. I die.

I wake.



**Lauren Ring** (she/her) is a perpetually tired Jewish lesbian who writes about possible futures, for better or for worse. Her short fiction can be found in *Pseudopod*, *Recognize Fascism*, and *Glitter + Ashes*. When she isn't writing speculative fiction, she is pursuing her career in UX design or attending to the many needs of her cat Moomin.

## Artist Interview

with Karina Serdyuk

**A**gency is integral to obtaining satisfaction. For some, satisfaction can only be achieved through the joy, relief, and adrenaline of taking control and discovering that seldom-found quiet place in your mind. For issue 12, we wanted bright colours. A sunny sky, clear of clouds and the rich yellow hues inspired by Seville's Plaza de toros de la Real Maestranza de Caballería. Instead of a bullring, we imagined a gladiator pit – a warrior calling on their opponents, striking fear with their authority and confidence.

We sought out Karina Serdyuk, a Russian artist whose work often features women, looking with confidence into the audience. Flipping through her Artstation profile, it's clear that Karina excels in drawing musculature, her characters are often posed or in mid-movement. Instead of a lithe, honed figure, we asked Karina to take on drawing a different body type than what she displays in her portfolio.

Our fighter had to be strong. Someone that could take you and your family in a fight. For inspiration we researched female weightlifters and came across photos of Sarah Robles, a competitive weightlifter who was the first US athlete to win a medal in Olympic weightlifting

in 16 years. In the photos we found, Sarah's joy was unrestrained. She was proud, happy and strong. Better yet, she knew it.

During our initial conversation, Karina asked for a concrete idea of the illustration. We always love seeing what writer's bring to the table, so we spelled out our gladiator idea but only said that we wanted a fantasy cover.

During the first sketches of the design, there was only the body form. We saw hints of an outfit and the pose, but none of the details. The final image held the full details of our warrior's vambraces, armour, and extended elf ears. This might be the first time we've seen a fat elf, and we loved it.

Seeing the initial illustrations of the sketch also put to bed one of our lingering fears. This was our first time purposefully commissioning a cover with a fat character, and we worried that the end result would be more curvy than expressly fat. Throughout the process, Karina embraced drawing the body style and created a fierce warrior. We asked Karina if the drawing process differed from the more svelte characters that are often commissioned:

I'd say painting the body was easier since the shapes are softer and the muscles aren't as visible. The face was a challenge though, mostly because of the angle.

Working with Karina was a fantastic process, she was quick to respond and even finished the piece months ahead of the deadline. It was easily an eight month wait from her completing the artwork and its launch on Apparition Lit's website.

The whole world changed in between. Even during some of the darker periods of the last few months, there remained a thrill in looking in our folders and seeing our warrior facing down their nemesis. Let's face our demons head on, with a sparkle in our eyes and a weapon in hand.



Interviewed by Rebecca Bennett

Find the full-length interview with Karina Serdyuk on our website

## Meandering Through Definitions of Satisfaction

by Aline-Mwezi Niyonsenga

**1. Noun:** fulfilment of one's wishes, expectations, or needs, or the pleasure derived from this (Oxford Languages)

In psychology, satisfaction is the strange cousin to happiness. While the tenets of positive psychology claim happiness is a fleeting emotion one has no control over, satisfaction is a sustained state that only arises from the result of one's actions. According to psychiatrist Gregory Berns in *Satisfaction*, "satisfaction can arise only by the conscious decision to do something." I am satisfied when I finish writing a short story, when I return a book to the library on the way home, when I submit a job application.

Seeking satisfaction over happiness is a theme in positive psychology, a movement garnering great success and cutting criticism. Its roots are traced to Martin Seligman's inaugural address in 1998 where, as the new president of the American Psychological Association, he called for a reorientation of the study of psychology from treating mental illness to helping individuals flourish. Since then, a lucrative industry

of bestselling books and sought-after counselling services bloomed and continued to thrive.

By offering ways and methods to achieve satisfaction, positive psychology is increasingly being compared to a religion. In the Vox article ‘Is Positive Psychology All It’s Cracked Up to Be?’ Joseph Smith observes that,

...for a science, positive psychology can often sound a lot like religion. Consider its trappings: It has a charismatic leader and legions of rapturous followers. It has a year zero and a creation myth that begins with an epiphany.

Often, religion is distinguished as the belief in a supernatural ruling power, but other definitions reveal that it can just as easily be a set of beliefs or practices without this element, or simply an “interest followed with great devotion” (Oxford Languages).

Speculative fiction has explored implications for science intersecting with religion. This is best demonstrated in works such as Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* where Lauren Olamina’s religion, Earthseed, relies on scientific principles such as the second law of thermodynamics. The ultimate goal of Earthseed is also achievable by science: to take root among the stars, colonising space to ensure humanity’s survival. According to Kimberly J. Ruffin in her article ‘Parable of a 21st Century Religion: Octavia Butler’s Afrofuturistic Bridge between Science and Religion,’ “Butler urges her readers to consider the possibility that religion can be compatible with scientific advancements that may help secure the continuation of the human species.” This suggests that the pursuit of religion and science can have similar goals.

In *Parable of the Sower*, ensuring human survival is compatible with ensuring human satisfaction. Earthseed promises that ultimate satisfaction lies in striving for the goal of space travel to find more land for humans to live on. That goal alone seems unlikely to solve humanity’s problems. I think that speculative fiction still has plenty of room to examine other futures where satisfaction is sought in alternative ways.



## 2b. the quality or state of being satisfied (Merriam-Webster)

In *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, critics of positive psychology suggest the field ignores that achieving wellbeing or satisfaction through one’s own efforts is not possible if systems exist to keep people in poverty and oppression.

If satisfaction is achieved through reaching goals, then proponents of the Black Lives Matter movement won’t be satisfied until systems that enable the deaths of black people are dismantled and recreated, reformed and defunded.

Often the rallying cry is for equality but, as Mona Eltahawy pointed out in a talk held by the ANU BIPOC Department, equality is often on the terms of an existing system. Freedom from the system should be the rallying cry, and those of us calling for freedom will not be satisfied until we are free.

I wonder if it’s too early to consider what comes next after achieving freedom from the system. What comes next after defunding the police, after healing from generations of trauma, after land rights are recognised? Will we be satisfied? If so, for how long?

Is satisfaction a brief state before the next crisis?





## 2. Law: the payment of a debt or fulfilment of an obligation or claim (Oxford Languages)

There is grim satisfaction after a compromise, after receiving compensation. You can receive what you want without the feeling of having won.

A dental surgeon once threatened to ban me from the medical practice he worked at after I sent a complaint about his rude and dismissive behaviour. The practice assured me that his threat was empty but suggested that I shouldn't seek his treatment in the future. I never received a letter of apology. I wouldn't necessarily feel elated if the letter of apology came, but I would breathe out a long-held breath. Maybe I would be at peace. Maybe by the time such a letter came, it would not mean anything anymore.

I would be satisfied with an apology. If that dental surgeon sent me an apology letter with admissions of wrongdoing, a promise to reflect and a recognition that they have racial prejudices that they need to unravel, would I find it sincere? A common complaint is that an apology is not sincere. What will satisfy the wounded then, if not the satisfaction of an apology? What compensation is there for emotional and psychological trauma?



## 1. pleased or content with what has been experienced or received (Merriam-Webster)

When I want something, I tend to dream about it—the acceptance letter in my inbox, the crush who reciprocates—only to find that when the moment comes to fruition, anxiety quickly follows the brief high. Is it really satisfaction when anxiety quickly follows?

Some people live through dreams. I am one of them. Whether I imagine a new world or an ideal scenario where I am laughing and elated, I take pleasure in playing with what has not happened in this world. Sometimes I wonder if I am satisfied with only dreaming if dreaming itself is a conscious action that I can be satisfied with.

Then I remember that there are dreams I want to fulfill, dreams of liberation and healing beyond this paradigm. I write them down, a conscious decision to actualize them.



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