

APPARITION

Literary Magazine

The cover features a woman with short grey hair, wearing a red space suit with a white harness. She is holding a large, reflective globe in her left hand and a glass filled with red liquid in her right hand. The background is a dark space with a bright, hazy celestial body on the left and a rainbow-like light streak. The woman is sitting on a piece of futuristic machinery.

ISSUE 13:
JUSTICE

Tehnuka
Zebib K. A.
Jay Harper
Ashland East
Marika Bailey
Caroline Diorio
Jennifer Hudak
Sameem Siddiqui
Brian Hugenbruch
Sarah Ramdawat
Elizabeth A. McClellan
Guest Editor - Laura Barker

COVER ARTWORK
ERION MAKUO

Apparition Lit

Issue 13, January 2021

Ashland East, Brian Hugenbruch, Caroline Diorio,
Elizabeth R. McClellan, Jay Harper,
Jennifer Hudak, Marika Bailey, Sarah
Ramdawar, Tehnuka, Zebib K. A.,
and Sameem Siddiqui
Guest Editor: Laura Barker

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End Stuff

Thank You to Our Sponsors and Patrons

Past Issues

Prelude

by Apparition Lit

Our search for justice brought us to the sea, across the desert, and back to ancient Greece. When we first created the Table of Contents we were pleased but unsettled. It was impossible to ignore the lack of BIPOC voices in our issue. Justice cannot be so narrowly viewed. Our Guest Editor, Laura Barker, spoke to us privately about her own discomfort and asked about reopening for additional submissions.

Our second, BIPOC-only call brought more stories, more poems. Our Table of Contents swelled with gorgeous new words and writers. We can't erase our lapses, but we can always work toward equity and justice.

Justice is tenuous and changeable in each of our works. It can be a resolution: in *Shark Girls*, justice is uncovering your mother's promises and finding your place; in *Redlands* it's a literal end to a search; *Never Just A Necklace* is solving a mystery. It can be about control: *Honey and Mneme* is regaining a life; *With the Nectar* is society and women's ageing; *Commodities* is searching for freedom. For our poets, justice takes the form of Greek Furies, families of feathered predators, and women rising to survival on their own terms.

The last few years for Apparition Lit have been marked by death. There have been some hard moments, but publishing new stories and new voices can be an act of life. It balances the scales and tips us further into the light.

Our issue is dedicated to everyone we've lost in 2020.

SHORT FICTION

Shark Girls by Caroline Diorio — 3000 words, 12 minutes reading time

Redlands by Jay Harper — 2000 words, 8 minutes reading time

It's Never Just a Necklace by Ashland East — 4400 words, 18 minutes reading time

With the Nectar by Jennifer Hudak — 1800 words, 7 minutes reading time

Commodities by Zebib K. A. — 3300 words, 13 minutes reading time

Honey and Mneme by Marika Bailey — 5000 words, 20 minutes reading time

POETRY

On brutal wing by Brian Hugenbruch — 48 lines

Alecto Chats on Her Smoke Break by Elizabeth R. McClellan — 41 lines

A Body and Its Hunger by Sarah Ramdawar — 26 lines

Mothers of the Disappeared by Tehnuka — 37 lines

We are endlessly grateful for the following beautiful essay editorial from our Justice Guest Editor, Laura Barker

Thank you,

Rebecca Bennett, Amy Henry Robinson,
Tacoma Tomilson, and Clarke Doty

Dear Susan

by Laura Barker

Dear Susan. I miss you everyday. I planted a cherry tree for you and I am waiting patiently for it to blossom. I also planted a magnolia tree called Susan. Apparently you can eat the blossoms. The cherry blossoms, and the magnolia blossoms. When I eat them, it's going to be a holy communion.

Dear Susan. I shaved my head again. I remember during first lockdown when I shaved it and you got me to turn my head on my WhatsApp camera so you could see it. You said it looked good. Your hair looked good. So glossy and black. I want you to look at me again. I want to feel your eyes on me. I want to look at you.

Dear Susan. This is my first time guest editing something. I want to tell you about it, and I want you to be proud of me and tell me well done. You were always so encouraging of other people's achievements. I didn't know that much about yours. Natasha was telling me the other day how you were such a big shot in the human rights field. Your workplace held an online call for everyone to gather together and share their memories of you. You were so loved. You are so loved. You made everyone feel special. I found out that when your kids were small you were a fan of the two-second

rule for food on the floor. I found out that you entered a paella competition that you definitely thought you won. I found out that you were so open with so many people about having cancer.

Dear Susan. This issue is called Justice. You and I were working on a restorative justice project together that I can't ever imagine doing without you. I loved our WhatsApp calls and the frown face you made every time you waited for the technology to work. That first call, we talked about the prison industrial complex and harm prevention and the masturbation episode of that Gwyneth Paltrow TV show The Goop and mentorship. I was so flattered and thrilled when you offered to mentor me. When you said this was something you wanted to do with the time that you had left. It was so precious having this year with you.

Dear Susan. It was such a shock when you passed away, even though of course I knew it was going to happen. But I let myself believe it wasn't going to happen.

Dear Susan. My therapist told me she noticed that I cry a lot. You always welcomed my tears so fully. It feels strange to cry without you holding me. You sat with me for so long when George Floyd was murdered and you said you wanted to give me a big hug. I thought somehow that we would get to hug in real life, after Covid-19, before you passed away. I made it happen in my head.

Dear Susan. It is going to be springtime soon and your cherry tree and your magnolia tree are going to blossom. I'm also planting lettuce named after you, and black-eyed Susans. They are like little sunflowers. Everyone at our meditation group says they remind us of your smile. There is a lily too. I want to plant everything named after you. I want to name everything after you. Saying your name hurts.

Dear Susan. I miss you every day.



Laura Barker is a writer, artist, and facilitator. She runs a queer black writing group in London, UK. Her work has appeared in The Guardian and her YA novel *Picnics* was shortlisted for the Faber Andlyn BAME (FAB) Prize. She is an Aries Taurus cusp.

Commodities

by Zebib K.A.

It was after midnight when Miriam heard the quick crunch of feet over the gravel outside her shed. A regular person might have thought the noise outside was an animal, snuffling around for scraps, but her hearing was too good. She could not mistake it for anything other than a human foot; heel to ball, heel to ball. Good enough to be quiet, not good enough to be silent. A small, light body.

The power buzzed when she accessed it. Senses aflame, she could hear for a mile, see the distinct shape of things in total darkness. Her chest vibrated with the smallest shifts on the surfaces around her and ground below her.

She grabbed her baseball bat off her chair and crept across the cracked floor. This abandoned shed had been part of a flourishing vineyard before it was destroyed. Not designed for living, its floor was made of rough planks. A splinter pierced her bare foot. She winced, careful not to breathe in too sharply. The steps came closer.

Waiting a beat, she clenched her hands around the bat and burst through the door. Sprinting around the corner, a cobweb caught in her face, its threads sticky and soft. Sweeping away the lines across her vision, she ran toward the intruder in her garden.

“Back off!” She held the bat out, the muscles in her arms tense, ready to swing. It took a moment to realize the smaller body over her carrots was not a short adult, but a tall child. Miriam hesitated, shifting, as her bare feet dug into the earth. The moon, bright orange due to year-round wildfires, burned in her eye line. She squinted, tuning her vision like an instrument. The burning halo from the moon lessened, and the figure in shadow became clear.

A young boy looked at her, back bent over, arm through a pried-open hole in the wiring blanket she’d constructed over her garden. His eyes were wide, his skin as dark as hers; dark brown tinted red under the moonlight. The vibrations of his rubber shoes shifting into the earth rose through her own feet and up her body.

“Those are mine.”

He rose quickly, his body trembling. Yanking his arm out of the mesh, he cut himself, sending out a high-pitched *ah* into the night. Blood dripped, then oozed down his arm. Miriam breathed hard out her nose and lowered her bat. What was he, twelve? She wondered if she had a maternal bone in her body. Her mother always said she should have a baby before it was too late. Mom had stopped saying that in those last few years, before everything turned for the worse, before Miriam had to run. She kept her bat up. Kids were a liability. Even dangerous. In the beginning she’d lived in the refugee tenements, any maternal instinct curdled by watching desperate kids in knife fights over daily supplies. It’s

how it went now. The more desperate people were, the more they were capable of. Her breath came fast and hot, the smell of basil and iron in the air. She stepped forward and the boy flinched.

“Why are you out here? Where are you supposed to be?”

He raised a shaky, bleeding arm, and pointed towards the trees. The patrols didn’t come out here much, despite the large area of land where immigrants could hide. They had the wall to keep trouble out. The land in this part of California was dry, brown and grey rocks covered in small brush, cactus, and leaning pines. In this shed near Lake Tahoe, Miriam could see each sparkling undulation in the water a mile in the distance. She could make out the wall, separating California and Nevada, or what had once been Nevada before it and all other states had fallen to the dark new order. The land was too arid, too close to the border; everyone, except for lone settlers like her, avoided it.

“You came from the woods?”

The kid nodded.

“Pretty far from the tenements.”

His eyes narrowed, then flicked back into the darkness around them.

“There isn’t anything out here. Just the wall a few miles east.”

He had a small afro, twigs and grass caught in his curls. He was thin but not malnourished. If he’d been on the run, it had only been for a short time. The rocky hills, sharp firs, remaining wild animals, would roughen one up.

“I...I...need to get back to Mom and, and the rest—” The boy tried to make his voice strong but a quiver traced through it. His eyes flicked back out towards the dark spaces between the trees.

Miriam raised her bat again. “Are there others? Out here? Are they trying to ambush me? I can get patrols out here—”

“I don’t...I don’t...”

His mouth opened and closed. She watched his every movement, and watched for any movement farther out into the night in her peripheral vision. She was careful not to show what she was doing. Being careful had worked for her this far. Knew not to trust kids, strangers, friends. Perked up her ears to every sound for a mile around. A mouse or small creature burrowed under fine stones a hundred yards away. An owl’s wings flurried, a hurried stop as it landed with sharp talons on the dry, aching branch of a very old, tall tree. The vibrations, aches and scratches for a mile around traveled over air and were pulled into her ear canals, enhanced and multiplied a thousand fold.

No patrols, no one else nearby.

“What are you doing here kid?”

“I just want to find my mom.”

A twinge went through her. She felt the same way and she was easily thirty years older than him. A cold breeze passed over them and she lowered her bat, still gripping its handle tight. It was darker, a cloud passing over the moon, but the kid’s watery eyes still sparkled through the darkness. She stared at him so long he shifted on his feet. His lips were dry, each crack visible to her sharp vision.

“We came on a train!” After this outburst, he shut his mouth tight, trying to compose himself. For a moment she imagined herself from the outside, a bat-brandishing stranger scaring a lost kid.

“There are no trains—” Miriam began. She stopped, turning her head to the side. Several branches snapped at the far edge of her hearing. Listening harder, she heard feet, treading the same way the boy had, soft steps into dirt, probably a mile in the distance. She turned back and saw the boy was turned towards the trees. He listened for a moment longer and then saw her watching him. He had heard the distant sound, a sound so far away only the power could register it. They had revealed themselves. Miriam opened her mouth but didn’t know what to say.

There was a scrape stone against jeans.

The rush of air as an arm swung. The whistle of a flying projectile.

The jagged edge of a rock smacked into her eyebrow.

Right eye clamped shut, her vision adjusting, a sharp pain running through her forehead, Miriam swung her bat around. The boy ran into the woods. He was already far off. Cursing under her breath, she brought her free hand to her eyebrow. A lot of blood, but a shallow cut. He shrunk into the distance. He wouldn’t make it in those woods alone.

Back inside her shack, Miriam paced the ten feet across. Back and forth. Drank water, tried to lay down to sleep. He was running away but she still couldn’t relax.

People couldn’t get across that wall anymore, no matter what that kid said. Just delirious. She’d barely made it out before they put up the wall, a dull metal structure reinforced by concrete beams, eleven meters

high. All refugees knew the wall's height, its layers of additional walls beyond the first, the trenches and spikes, armed guards and barbed wire. This new America made sure no more deviants could escape, or come back in to save those still trapped within its borders. Those who were the *problem*; queer people, disabled people, those who preached the falsehood of climate change, those who opposed security and national pride, and most definitely those born with the power, a phenomenon that had emerged in the last 50 years and scared all the normal, God-fearing citizens of the nation. They wanted their own country, safe from deviancy.

Miriam still heard the boy, breaking dry twigs as he ran, heading into the abyss. Five miles and he'd be at the end zone. Wandering into those woods looking for that boy would be a mistake. It was too bad the kid was separated from his mom. She'd want to know where he was. The last moments with her own parents flashed in her mind, their strained faces as she rushed onto a crowded bus to an even more crowded train station. They were supposed to follow her the next week, when more tickets were available. The trains stopped the next day. Only she would make it to California, now a separate nation after the civil war secured its freedom. She recalled the details of their faces everyday, keeping them solid. Were they even alive?

They wouldn't want her risking her life right now. . Patrols might be out there; they shot curfew breakers on sight. She was doing the best she could to survive, and a fine job at that. Made a home on this remote hill, away from the tenements. Watched sunsets and sunrises through smog, enjoyed those moments even when she heard the roll of machinery and patter of guns in the distance, tasted gunpowder in the air. Even as the

bombs and fighting of the last few years continued, the pollution and deforestation of the war accelerating climate change and increasing wild fires. Being away from the other refugees, on the edge of the world, was supposed to help her feel safe. But her body was always strained, tense, listening and looking for danger, even in this quiet place. There was no hope. Just a crushing wave that drowned you or pushed you out, out, out.

She couldn't sleep. The sound of the boy's frantic steps started to diminish, but remained in her hearing. Her fingers, calloused from hard labor, pulled the scratchy threads of her woollen blanket over her shoulders. Trying to settle down, she breathed deeply. The air inside her shed smelled like decaying flowers. Even though she knew better, even though she'd made it this far, she couldn't sleep thinking about him. The thought of his terror out there was getting to her. Like the terror she'd felt in those dark compartments in secret vehicles, the cold metal burning under her skin.

She'd have to stop him. Bring him back, return him to the tenements in the morning, just to get some sleep. He wasn't dangerous, not really, she could already tell that. Grabbing her bat and slinging a sack of water over her shoulder, she dragged herself out into the night. She'd see or hear anyone coming a mile off. From the quality of the darkness and the height of the moon, she knew it was a few hours from morning.



When Miriam found him, he was asleep, so tired even her footsteps hadn't woken him up. She nudged him with the bat. His eyes flew open, bright white in the muted auburn heaviness of the late hour. Other people's eyes wouldn't be able to make out the details of a face in this darkness, but she could see the red vessels in the

corners of his eyes, the droplets of sweat falling down his temples. The extra rods in their retinas set their faces aglow in the heavy shadows of the woods. “Are you a ... where’d you come from?” Her voice was hushed, as if she was speaking to herself. Did he really cross the wall, concrete a thousand miles wide? “Did you get across the wall?”

A few dry croaks popped out of his mouth. Miriam scrambled for her water and held the bottle to his mouth. After drinking the whole container, he stopped, panting. “I rode a train.”

“A train?” She hissed. The dark scared her, but she needed to know. “Where is...this train?”

The boy’s eyes widened and he pointed down, pushing a shaky finger through the moulted leaves and into the earth.

Miriam remained still for some time. At first, she had no idea what he was getting at, if he was too frightened to make any sense. Then she understood. He meant to say there was a train *under* the ground. It was impossible. He was lying or had lost touch with reality. She nudged him with the end of her bat. Unnecessary, sure, but she’d never been good with kids, or people. He rose and they made their way back to her shed. He could sleep the night and find whoever had lost him in the morning. He wouldn’t die and she’d get answers.



She woke up to a series of knocks on her door, someone’s knuckles like small, rapid battering rams. The planks of her den, and the heightened cochlea in her ear, shook with the sound. Goddamn patrols. The sunrise was a faint violet through her small window. Somehow, she’d managed to sleep a few hours, dreaming

of her mother waving her hands over the radioactive wasteland of Minnesota, turning the blackened earth into a field of flowers. The boy lay curled up in the corner under her one woolen blanket, his eyes open now. The hammering had woken him up. Finger to her lips, she nodded at him and stepped gently towards the door.

She hadn’t interacted with a patrol for months. Miriam showed up to her mandated government appointments; even though she knew the answer, she’d always ask about her parents. The officials would smile, nod, type things into broken computers. Nope, nobody, not a body, had escaped in the last year. Motioning with her hands, the boy followed her directions and covered himself with the blanket. Against the wall, near a few bags, he blended in.

Miriam strode to the door and opened it. Put on a bright, relaxed expression. A look of gratitude all the refugees like her were supposed to carry, in the face of the countrymen who had let them in.

“Hello, officers.” Sweet and sailing. A bright spike of light through the morning dust and clouds burned her eyes but she kept them open.

“ID.” The first of two guards spoke. Pale worms with black helmets stuck on their heads. They scanned her ID. “You seen a kid around here? Surveillance a few miles back shows him running near these parts. Part of a pack of intruders.”

She opened her eyes in surprise at the word *intruders*. “No! Intruders?”

Silence followed as they stood, expressionless.

“Through the wall?” She waited, eyebrows raised, to see their response.

“We can’t say more.” The first guard who had spoken to her glanced at the other, both of them fidgeting.

“This state is packed to the brim! We just can’t afford more people.” This place groaned with their presence, those shell-shocked refugees, *people*, who reminded them so blatantly of the state of the world. “I got here legally. So glad this state accepted me. God, we just can’t let others sneak in here though, can we?” She was laying it on as thick as icing.

“We’re cracking down.”

As the guards glanced into her shed, Miriam heard the sounds. Feet, at first a few pairs, then more, two dozen pairs of feet, stepping quickly through the forest a half a mile west. She knew the kid could hear them too, but he didn’t shift, didn’t move under that blanket. The patrols couldn’t hear. Her chest tightened and her face felt strained as she kept her gaze steady.

“You sure you haven’t seen anything?”

“It’s great you’re cracking down. I support it. But no, sorry.”

The second guard nodded. “We can’t let it be chaos. Law and order. *We’re* the good guys. We want actual law and order, peace and ...all that.”

“Sure thing, sir.”

They stepped back and glanced around her small perimeter, spotting her garden. Their bodies leaned forward, staring underneath heavy helmets. “How’d you manage that?” One of them barked. “Haven’t seen growth like that in years.”

“My...mother taught me.”

That was true. But the patrols were only half-listening, staring at the bright colors of life. They lazily circled the shed, feet kicking up dirt onto their black trousers, eventually wandering away with a wave to Miriam. She smiled back, waving until they disappeared over the top of a hill. The rustle of the boy throwing off his blanket rose up behind her.

She leaned out the door and kept listening. He joined her, his mouth half open as he listened. A big group of them were snaking through the woods. Miriam’s thoughts flashed; these strangers’ approach, the patrols still within reach. Gripping the boy’s thin wrist, she felt the looseness of his dehydrated skin for the first time, and his frail warmth. She led him out the shed and into the woods, her feet carrying her before she could figure out what she would do when they met. She’d left behind hostile native citizens, other refugees, all the others left behind that wall, to survive. Suddenly, there were lost boys showing up outside her house, refugees crossing an impossible wall, underground trains that just might be real, all invading her isolated life.

The boy ran and she followed. The familiar scent of charcoal, the crunch of leaves underfoot. A sturdy figure was visible amongst the trees, soon surrounded by others. The boy burst into a sprint. Miriam’s breath sharpened in her throat as she tried to keep up. The figure had the same dark brown face as the boy, softened by age. She slowed down, able now to make out the greying baby hairs haloing the woman’s head. Yards away, the collective rustling of the people was audible; the smell of charcoal now overpowered by the scent of musty bodies. She was surprised to see how clean their clothes looked, compared to her own – some were only partially torn and dirtied. Her own were so worn and browned that no one would ever doubt her status as a

refugee. A large group of people, many of them black and brown, stood before them.

The boy flung himself into his mother's arms. Miriam straightened her shoulders, holding her hands behind her back to stretch out, and caught her breath.

"He wandered into my home. You must have been worried sick."

"Thank you. Thank you so much. I didn't think I'd..." The woman's face tightened and she clutched the boy close to her chest.

He grinned; it was the first time Miriam had seen him smile, and it changed his whole face.

"They're looking for you."

"Of course they are." The woman raised her eyebrow, and those behind her shifted, muttering among themselves, ready to move at a moment's notice.

"Your son told me you came in on a train." She had to know the truth.

The woman looked Miriam up and down as the crowd fell silent. Her gaze was intense. Miriam held it until she couldn't bear to any longer, glancing away and towards those around them.

"If you did, I'd think that was... amazing."

"That would be, wouldn't it?" The woman smiled. She must be the leader of the group. "We didn't think anyone would catch us out here."

Miriam stared at her. "No one here thinks it's possible. And if this is possible a whole lot else might be."

"We'll have to go." Someone spoke up from behind.

The woman turned back and nodded. "We have to keep going to ...where we are going."

"Where's that?"

The woman had turned but looked back. The rest of her people had started to walk again, their light steps tracing a soft path through the woods ahead. "You have the abilities, don't you?"

Miriam nodded. Something about the woman's gaze, her arm around her son, reminded Miriam of her own mother.

"We'll need people like you. If you want to join. You saved my boy. Brought him back to me."

"It was nothing—"

"No. It was something. It was everything. In this world."

"Where are you all going?"

"To where righteousness still lives."

"What?" A dry laugh escaped Miriam's mouth.

The woman ran a hand over her face, brushing away the fine dust that collected on the skin here. Floating ash.

"Nothing is certain yet. But we've made it this far. We've built a movement that can't be stopped now. California can't hold us. They are barely surviving, a new nation after a long war. Refugees can't live here. And more of us are coming."

"So does that mean you have a secret place you're going?"

"North."

Miriam watched her for a moment. The woman wouldn't tell her more yet, which made sense. For a moment she considered it. Finally being amongst others, maybe even people she could trust. The North

was greener. Maybe Oregon was headed for civil war. It had always been suspected new America had a weak hold on it. But as soon as she contemplated it, she knew she couldn't leave. This lonely, rocky terrain was her own. At least for now. And she still hoped to find them one day. She wanted to stay as close to her parents as possible. She owed them everything, and she owed them this last bit of hope curled tight in her chest.

"I can't leave."

The woman nodded. "I understand." She raised her head to look over the pines, the distant mountains.

Miriam thought about her parents. Even as they had aged, they resisted the tide of things. After so long, she had nearly forgotten what she had once believed. She decided then. "But I want to help. If all of this is true, you'll need someone here. To ... watch the border. They think they know where everyone like us is. They don't know. Maybe...help those along this little trail you're creating."

"Are you up for that? Might draw some heat."

"I've been here a while. I know these patrols."

The woman, who had been holding her son tight, kissed the top of his head, then reached forward to shake Miriam's hand. "An agreement, then?"

Miriam took her hand.



Zebib K. A. (she/her) is a writer and psychiatrist recently moved from NYC to Edinburgh Scotland to do a masters in creative writing. She is black, queer, and from an immigrant background, and explores these identities in her writing. She has been published in *The Rumpus*, *CounterClock*, *The Selkie*, and other anthologies and journals. She can be found at medium.com/@pegasusunder, twitter [@pegasusunder1](https://twitter.com/pegasusunder1) and instagram [@pegasusunder](https://www.instagram.com/pegasusunder).

Alecto Chats on Her Smoke Break

by Elizabeth R. McClellan

For C.S.E. Cooney

Some days I feel bad about the job,
some days we all do—

we sisters have endless work to do.
Justice came later than us,

Aphrodite's sisters twisted
to a different purpose, spawned
in patricide to punish it.

We came bleeding from our eyes,
tripartite machine of terrible purpose.

They call us Kindly Ones,
in hope that if they die having broken oaths,

greeted a guest in less than kindness,
snapped at their elderly aunt,

that we who were never human
will indulge their human frailties.

They waste their lives with such worry.
A true Oedipus, even a Dante, comes around

so rarely. The lesser list of grievances—
legion of legions, even before the
population explosions—

if written out would gird Hades
a million times around.
By the time they are called to give their evidence,

most of our supplicants have forgotten the slight,
eager to return to the fields of
the blessed, but not all.

We have torn the throats from
a hundred generations
of fathers who took their children's
bodies for their pleasure,

of neglectful sons who left mothers
to die in bedsores and filth,
we keep a balance. Our kindness
is our promise to the living

that some things may not go unpunished,
that some unseen things
are witnessed, remembered, dealt with someday

by we who cannot be entreated, cannot be bribed,
who are the true justice of talon and
claw. We will never be honored guests.

The mortician, the midwife, the hangman
have some understanding of our circumstances.

The already damned watch for us.
The unsure are mostly safe.
Our beaks hardly ever drip with blood,

we only descend in feathered fury
when the equilibrium of the world demands it.

Do not fear us when you cross the Styx
unless your father's unmarked grave

lies hidden under the coins on your eyes,
the metal on your lifeless tongue.



Elizabeth R. McClellan is a domestic and sexual violence attorney by day and a poet in the margins. Their work has appeared in *The Wondrous Real*, *Illumen Magazine*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, *Rejection Letters*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Strange Horizons* and many more. They are a disabled gender/queer demisexual poet writing on unceded Quapaw and Chikashsha Yaki land. They can be found on Twitter at @popelizbet and on Patreon at patreon.com/ermccllellan.

With the Nectar

by Jennifer Hudak

I wasn't always like this. Prickly. Pained. Borders unfixed and shifting, amorphous. Women start out so simple. We start out such sweet things. Plump and rosy, smelling like vanilla straight out of the shower. We beckon with our bright colors and our heady perfume. Crowds gather, and we can't shake them. It's fun until it's a nuisance, and it's a nuisance until it's scary: eyes everywhere, a swarm of eyes, barbed gazes.

Later, when our skin slackens and loses its apple flush, when our hair sighs and releases its pigment, eyes slide past us on the street. Not yet old enough to pity, no longer young enough to desire. We have to shout to be noticed, but we seldom do.



I'm not sure how much I'm going to be able to tell you. I have to assume you've done your homework; there's a whole mythology that's built up in the twenty-five years since my mother became Hive Mind. As for my experience, well, it's hazy. I was only twelve at the time.

Mostly what I have are flashes: the feeling of a cool hand against my feverish forehead. The brush of lips against my bruised arm. Her shirt wet with my tears as

I buried myself in her chest. When you're twelve, your mom exists only when you need her to; otherwise, she fades into the background.

It's painful to remember. Because now, of course, there's no getting near her.

I was in my room, reading with my headphones on, when she got stung. To be fair, she dealt with the sting quietly and on her own, swallowing her pain the way she always had. It wasn't until I came out of my room, probably wondering where dinner was, that I saw her on the couch with her leg propped up, swollen like a sausage, shiny and red.

She didn't make a big deal about it and neither did I. The swarm didn't start arriving until later that night, and until then, other than the sting, it was pretty much a normal day.

She probably got up to fix us some sandwiches. I probably let her.



That first sting hurt, the way a child's pinching fingers can hurt. The way an old photo can hurt. The venom spread, thick as honey, and the pain swelled and deepened. My skin, red and hot, broadcast its anger, something I had never been able to do.

Sometimes pain turns you into something you aren't. Sometimes it just brings to the surface everything you've been hiding.

Bees are fascinating creatures. Did you know that honey bees have barbed stingers? The barbs ensure that the stinger stays lodged in your skin, so that as much venom as possible will course through your body. It also means that when the bee pulls away, the stinger wrenches from her small, plump abdomen—the stinger,

and part of the bee's insides as well. Think about that for a moment. The bee literally pulls herself to pieces in order to sting you. She stings you anyway.



The superhero stuff didn't start right away.

People think it did, like she just woke up one morning and decided to become Hive Mind. Like most changes, this one happened gradually. At first there was just a single bee bumping up against the living room window while my mom sat with her leg elevated. Then a few more, crawling up and down the outside of the screen door. We didn't think anything of it, other than there must be a hive nearby.

"Bees send out a signal when they feel threatened," Mom said. "It calls the rest of the hive. The one that stung me must have done that, before she died."

I imagined the bees—hundreds of them, a hive-full, a legion—tasting distress in the air. I imagined them pausing in their work, backing their pollen-dusted bodies out of deep flowers and looking skyward, where the dying bee's panic broadcast its signal against the underside of the clouds.

By the time Dad got home, several dozen bees blanketed the screen. Mom reacted badly when my dad suggested spraying. She was already changing, although none of us realized it.

The bees found their way inside—a few at a time, crawling underneath Mom's blouse or buzzing through her hair. It wasn't as hard as you'd think for her to hide them in the beginning. It had been a while since any of us had really looked at her closely, even my dad. Even me. When we finally started paying attention, it was too late: she wasn't Mom anymore. She was a swarm.



Regrets are pointless. The past is an ancient, crumbling tapestry that will fall to pieces if you try to pluck out its threads and stitch them anew. Better simply to remain in the present. This flower, already brown on the edges of its petals, offering up its nectar.

I am not now what I once was. None of us are.

Still, if I had one wish, it would be to hold my daughter. All parents must eventually let their children take flight, but my daughter had to trust her wings earlier than I might have wanted. She was so young, her skin so tender and raw. No exoskeleton to protect her from thorns, from fingers and teeth. If I could have, I'd have used my arms as a shield; I'd have been her soft place to land. But I was no longer soft.

Don't ask me if I would surrender the hive if it meant having my family back. In my darkest, honey-filled chambers, I don't know if I would.



There was a man, that's what I can tell you. I don't know what he looked like. I wasn't paying attention. At twelve, I was already used to guys telling me to smile, commenting on my clothes or my hair, or my preteen body. But this one didn't stop. He started following me, peeling away from his pack of friends and trotting behind me as I walked home.

I must have felt threatened. I must have sent out a signal.

It happened so quickly. One moment I felt his breath on the back of my neck—reeking of anger and power and entitlement—and the next he was on the ground,

punctured, poisoned. Powerless. The swarm enveloped him, swallowed him in its barbed mouth.

I won't lie: it was terrifying. This was my *mother*. She'd always been my comfort, my safety. My home. Now, she was...violent. Unrelenting.

Dangerous.

From the buzzing, humming center of the hive came my mom's voice: *Go. Run home*. And I did. Of course, I ran.

That's when she became Hive Mind. That's when she got a taste for justice. Justice, or vengeance. Maybe they're the same thing.

I was stung, too, a couple of times. That's why Dad finally left and took me with him. But he wasn't there. He didn't hear what she sounded like. She knew she'd hurt me; she knew she'd keep hurting me, if she stuck around. So she told me to run and didn't follow me. In order to keep me safe, she sent me away.

Even though I don't blame her for what happened, I can't forget it. How the guy screamed and then, how the screams stopped. Maybe he deserved it. Maybe he was planning to attack me, but maybe he'd have backed off eventually.

Women can't take that chance. But that doesn't mean it's easy to think about.



The bees tangle in my hair. Crawl on my skin and excavate my nostrils, ears, and mouth. They decorate each finger like jewels. They've replaced my blood with pure venom, a sweet transfusion. I am poison. I drip honey in my wake.

They call me a superhero. I can see why; that word makes me into something familiar, a narrative they think they understand. But the truth is, it's never that simple. Being a superhero means getting stung as often as you sting. Your barbs turn inward as often as they turn out, and that line between being visible and invisible is just as complicated as it ever was. There's no alter ego, not really. You can't ever escape who you are, who you've become.



I know this isn't the story you expected. You wanted an exposé of some kind, an origin story. You want to slot her into the proper category, hero or villain. It's not that simple. Nothing ever is. You should know better.

I haven't seen my mother since I was twelve. No one has, not really. The swarm covers her like a cloak of invisibility from her hair down to the soles of her feet. I've read theories she's not even underneath there anymore—swallowed by the hive, that there's nothing but bees all the way down.

I think they're wrong. She's not the same woman she used to be; she might not even be my mother any longer. But she's there. She's always been there.

If you need some kind of a quote, or a moral, this is what I'll say: All of the comics and the movies, all of those kids in tights and masks—it's not real. It's just a metaphor. Think about it. The pimply, skinny-armed kid who wakes up one day with beauty and strength? The prepubescent, downtrodden outcast who discovers his true power in a singular moment of rage and fear? It's so easy, it almost writes itself.

Here's the real truth about being a superhero: it takes years. I'm almost the same age, now, as my mother was when she became Hive Mind. I've started to understand what it feels like to become invisible. I've started to think about how power shifts and changes. How the process of figuring out who you are, and how you *feel* about who you are, never really ends. It just evolves.

Like I said, it takes years. Years to decide that you want to be dangerous.

Years more before you realize that you already are.



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A Body and Its Hunger

by Sarah Ramdawar

Our bodies are scaffolding
for them to climb.
Our teeth are thirsty
for wood and
Hemoglobin wine.

They laughed us down
to basement apartments,
never afforded the glimmer of foresight
or fight with unmoulded breath.

But can you taste it?
We circumnavigate this helical despair.

You Super scripted,
Sized, Stored, Packed, Heroed,
this entirety.

Your consumptive beauty
—all your waste and refuse
has bloated itself
into oblivion.

These miasmic steam clouds
will be expelled.

I will feast on steel
I will devour plastics
I will devour these paneled walls
you think will hold me,

My body is a scaffold
for mine to climb.



A Canadian writer of Trinidadian descent, **Sarah Ramdawar** writes about the myths that permeate the everyday. She has short fiction in *Augur Magazine*, *Release Any Words Stuck Inside You II*, and forthcoming nonfiction in *Living Hyphen* magazine. While she lives in Toronto, she lives for the deep satisfaction of a freshly aquascaped aquarium, freshly laundered sheets, and dresses that fit just right. You can find her on Twitter @sararam

Honey and Mneme

by Marika Bailey

Elene comes back from death screaming, trapped, held still by the hands of black-eyed strangers. Every breath she takes tastes of blood and smells of burned flesh and incense, like she is a temple sacrifice traveling to the gods on a road of smoke.

Her eyes try to focus. Women, crying and pale-faced, hold her down. She tries to pull away. Her skin is too raw and her bones too delicate to bear the touch of air much less their grasping hands. She cries tears that boil away to steam. Her skin peeling away in curled crackling sheets—*krik-krak*—like bacon in a hot pan.

Someone watches. So fiercely, it pierces deeper than the pain. Her watcher's skin is pale, like white linen stretched luminescent over sharp bones, he glows in the semi-dark of the room. His tunic is more hole than fabric, the remnants still smoldering. So too do the charred claws that are all that remain of his hands. Their broken wreckage is held close to his chest, inner flames cracking through the skin like veins of molten gold.

He should be dead.

One of the wailing women props him up, pulling

him away as he tries to stumble towards Elene with a charred hand outstretched. It takes two of them to keep him back. Underneath the fire and blood, something still stirs.

Music. The still-liquid marrow of her bones rings with it. She knows he can hear it too, the man who is also on fire. Despite the wreckage of his body he smiles down at her, both of their hearts beating in time to that melody.



Time moves fitfully: snatches sound, the reflection of moonlight on white sheets. Always, always the pain.

On the orders of the healer, servants carry her from the women's quarters to the central courtyard's garden. It would be quiet but for the chorus of three who also commandeer a shaded space for themselves in the courtyard. Glykera, Hilaron, and Mikrion: her husband's chattering pinch-faced sisters.

Elene shivers, cold in spite of her swaddling: shawls, blankets, and quilts, all heavily embroidered with Asclepian theorems and Apollonian poetry to ward away infection and death. From this fabric nest she watches the shadowed doorway that leads from the courtyard to her husband's rooms and the wary stooped-back servants.

A figure blocks out the sun streaming against her face before reclining on the couch across from her own. Following close behind, a servant brings a table and a tray of food.

Phoibe has a broad face and broader shoulders that would not be out of place on a blacksmith. Her arms are strong enough to hold down her patients and, as gently-as-possible, force her medicines down their throats.

The witch takes grapes and some cheese while looking her patient over, tsking when she sees something she doesn't like. If Phoibe is afraid of the master's not-dead wife as the servants are, her manner does not betray it. Elene returns her frank appraisal, noting the god pendant hanging from a metal cord around her neck. "Shouldn't a priestess of Isidoros have better things to do than look after me?" she asks.

Phoibe grunts in between a bite of bread and herbed goat cheese. "Chat less. Eat more."

"Why?"

Phoibe sighs. "Why? Because I haven't nursed too many women back from almost-dead. Don't fancy you wading back into the Styx because you're too stupid to eat."

She passes her a plate of food and Elene is too tired to refuse. The burst of sweet and salt-musk mixing together on her tongue feels good, the tense muscles knotted across her back relax.

Unlike the broths and teas she was getting in her sickroom, the food is untainted with the lingering scent of her own death. For the first time she feels pleasure as a taste in her own mouth, and it is easy to do as she is told, eating until she feels slow and sleepy. The ever-present net of pain begins to fade.

"You're not from here," she says staring at the witch.

Phoibe takes a sip of watered wine and emits a pleased belch. "Why'd you say so?"

Elene laughs grimly. "Would have seen you before now. Every high caste woman hereabouts came to gawk at the half-Aethiope whore's daughter who trapped the lord into marriage."

Phoibe's gaze darts over Elene's shoulder. Over to the three women sitting nearby, sewing and gossiping in whispers, and then back again. "Trapped *him*, eh? Big game for someone I can pick up with one hand," she says. "Not any man, lord or no, can bribe my temple enough to drag my ass all the way here from Piraeus."

Elene feels herself tense once again, no longer lulled by the sunlight and the food in her belly. "The harpies say that he played for three days and three nights to call the Tartaros road to earth."

Phoibe doesn't shiver, but she does pull her shawl tighter around her shoulders although not a single cloud has passed between her and the bright morning sun. "I've seen healers blessed by Asklepios wipe the clouds from a mother's eyes. But to play the music of the spheres, and well enough that the princes of death had to bow to one of their oldest and most hated bargains? They will call his name in prose and song through Attika and beyond."

Elene consults her ragged patchwork memory. Little of what came before the moment she woke from the dead—undone and barely human—remains. She can still see his hands, burned like a suckling pig, still flickering with furious embers. "Why?" she asks.

Phoibe's soft face wrinkles with confusion. "Why? Why what?"

"Why did he do it?"

The witch startles like she's found something rotten in her food. "Shouldn't you know that?"

"Priestess, I don't even know how I died, much less why I'm alive again."

"Lord Iasonas loves you, of course," she says, and returns to her meal with a face like a door slammed shut.

Elene relents, turning to the fountain again, to the shadow and the light on the falling water. She raises one dark hand to her throat, worrying barely scabbed wounds until the pain is a constant and seductive throb.



Elene hears wings in her dreams. Birds swirl around her, so numerous they block out the stars. She falls and, reaching out, feels warm hands pulling her forward. Lips press against hers, wet with some liquor or foreign wine. Heat spreads from her tongue down to her center, blossoming into a sweet ache that lasts even after she wakes. Their face is hidden, dark like a midnight sea, but the lips whisper clearly against hers.

“It’s yours,” he says. “Take it back.” Another orphaned piece of her faded patchwork mind, it makes no sense, even when she wakes.

Every morning, she clambers out of the giant wooden bed before anyone else is up. It is a small rebellion, leaving her bed when no one can scold or, gods forbid, threaten to tell on her. But she treasures it. She can’t walk far yet, mostly she hobbles over to the huge mirror that dominates the room.

She wonders if she chose it, the woman who she was before but can’t remember being. Or was it a gift? It’s a ridiculous luxury, the glass is taller than she is, framed in gilt and flanked by golden lions. She leans as close as she can to her reflection, pulling the lid of one dark-circled eye closed, and turns that side of her face to the white light of morning. On her left eyelid, the face of Zeus, on her right, Olympia: the imprint of the coins that paid her way into death. She traces the marks softly, hoping they do not go away. They are the only part of her that feels real.



Soon Elene is carried into her husband’s presence for the first time since her strange and painful rebirth. They’re both still swaddled in their healing robes, scented with sachets of Phoibe’s sacred herbs.

Iasonas watches her constantly, his brow furrowed with worry, as if waiting for death to take her back from him. The sisters exclaim at his devotion, but he shrugs them off with the wave of a bandaged hand. “I could do no less,” he says. He loves his wife very much.

He says that often, like he is reciting a spell or begging a prayer: *I love you. My lost Beloved*, he calls her. *My love.*

The sisters repeat his endearments, warping them into admonishments against her. *Oh, he loves you. He loves you so much. Do you know how lucky you are?*

She blushes and turns away.

Do not hide from me, never again, he says.

Elene looks in his eyes and hears the crying of birds.

On later visits he plays music for her. Elene watches his graceful movements, rapt and quivering like a rabbit spying shadows from above, eyes landing on the hands that played the sphere-song worthy of Death’s greatest bargain. They have healed pink and soft with new skin. Iasonas grins when he tells her he will have to work hard to regrow his musicians callouses, winces when he pulls the strings to tune his instrument.

It is not *the* lyre he plays now, of course.

That one burned as Iasonas played it, the song consuming its wooden body until he strummed more fire and ash than polished wood. The pale scars on his arms and hands are all that remain of it. When he

speaks, Elene understands why he is lord and beloved. Listening to his voice feels like dipping your fingers into cool water on a hot day.

Sometimes, Iasonas' eyes catch hers: on cool afternoons, when the breeze is blowing in from the Aegean. He smiles underneath his blankets and coverlets. At those times he will put down his instrument and insist on being brought to her bench. Closer he smells like light, she thinks: light, grapes, and beeswax.

"What are you thinking, my love?" he asks her, lifting her hand to place a kiss in the center of her palm.

She shakes her head, shy in the face of this devotion she cannot remember earning. He only smiles at her denial and cups her cheek with one velvet-soft hand.

"No matter how weak I still am, I'll never regret it," he says. "Death would have kept you, but I never looked back, not even once."

Hilarion drops a cup and it shatters against the tile. The crack is explosive in the quiet. A shadow dashes across her husband's face, "Stupid girl, can't you do anything right?" he spits at her through gritted teeth.

A breath stalls in Elene's throat. But his anger is already spent and his sunshine smile restored, the moment come and gone as quickly as the path of a descending hawk.



Phoibe helps her wash her hair. It is long and thick, tightly coiled, and her arms are not strong enough yet to do the work of cleaning, oiling, and braiding it. She begins the task of detangling while reminding Elene to drink her medicine. Mneme and honey. Elene has asked Phoibe to teach her some small portion of the witch's herblore. She stores each new piece of knowledge in the

empty lockhouse of her mind like a raven secreting their hoard. It does not ease the ache she feels in the space where her old self used to be. But any knowing is good, she thinks. *Mneme, first grown by Isidoros at the banks of the river of death called Lethe, good for encouraging sleep.*

Phoibe does not say that she is a troublesome patient, but she can tell. It is easy to anticipate how other people will feel, Elene realises, when she feels so little herself.

Her back against the witch's lap, she leans her head along the warm length of Phoibe's thigh. She is warm and clean, and they smell like a distant garden. When her eyes flutter closed she can feel the weight of the death coins on her eyelids.

"How did I die, Phoibe?"

Those strong hands go still along her scalp. "I wasn't there, child. I don't know."

"The sisters, they must've told you something."

Phoibe snorts. "They've less than one brain to share between them, and if they do know anything they haven't condescended to tell it to me."

Would you tell me if they did?

You pick anything, an herb—a moment—when it's ripe and not before. Half of witching is knowing when it's time.

The rhythm of Phoibe's hands in her hair begins to lull her. But the unanswered question does not settle easily. Even in the warm bath, she feels the restless flapping of wings against the cage of her chest, a fluttering anxiety that demands a name.

Her previous life is a shadow-world, her only guide the half-heard whispers of someone in her dreams she can't even see. She feels their kisses, smells the crushed-green-leaf scent of their breath but still can't

see them. Nothing more than eyes and skin as dark as moonless nights. It's nothing. Less than nothing.

Struggling, Elene tries another step into the dark.

"Do birds cry?" She asks.

"A what?"

"I heard a bird outside my window. It sounded like someone crying. Like a baby, or a child?"

"No bird I've ever heard. Though, mayhaps it was a kite. The birds who travel between life and death as messengers for their masters."

"Their masters?"

"The gods of the dead."



"Take those out," Iasonas says, nodding towards the cascading braids down her back. "I don't like it. That's not how you used to wear it."

Elene's hand goes to her hair and flutters down to land on her throat. "I thought it was pretty... I don't remember a lot of things."

The music stops.

Elene and Iasonas were taking in the afternoon air, sitting on his balcony as they watched the light play across the vineyard beyond. His hands, never still, strummed a kithara while he hummed wordlessly.

The sudden silence rises gooseflesh along her arms. Iasonas' face darkens. It's so unlike him.

I barely remember myself, much less him, she realises.

But this is what she says, "I'll change them. I will."

"Good girl," He smiles, the sun shines once more. "I know you don't mean to upset me."

He takes her hand before it can finish its journey to her throat. Her habit of touching the space where her scars were worries him.

"Oh, my love, you'll be good for me, won't you?"

His grasp on her hand tightens. Those calluses are returning, after much practice. She can feel them catch against her skin.

"Yes, always," she says, blinking away the tears from her eyes.



Elene practices being herself in the mirror. This is the smile Iasonas likes best. When she widens her eyes so, the light colors them in a way he finds pleasing. Not knowing herself, she has made a study of her husband's memories of her to fill in the gaps where she used to be.

"I need you to remember. Would you leave me, when I need you? When I fought those who would have taken from me what is mine? Your love?"

She makes her face still as a mountain lake, judging her effort in her reflection. The quiet flutter in her chest blossoms into a squalling flock, and she reaches out blindly. Her hands land on a clay cup and she cracks it against the glass. Her reflection explodes into a prism of wild rolling eyes and gasping mouths.

Oh, what has she done?

Her blood is pounding, the sound almost overwhelming as she freezes in the wake of her destruction. She runs.

Away from the house of servants who are always present but never look her in the eye. A sound is pushing her along, her own thudding pulse, the clap of a thousand wings pushing against the air, or the sound

of heavy feet against stone. The pressure in her chest is pushing her on. She almost knows, in the silent way a broken bird knows which way to flutter towards, where she has to go. If she can forget who she is supposed to be.

Stupid girl...

You...

have taken from me what is mine...

That voice makes her turn back towards the house. The olive trees in Iasonas' orchard are ancient, their gnarled roots dipping in and out of the earth. Her bare feet catch against an upturned root and she is thrown to earth hard enough for the air to be shocked out of her lungs.



It's Phoibe who finds her, and Phoibe who lies for her. A clumsy fall is a good excuse for oh so many things. Elene says nothing. Phoibe's lie is so complete its wake leaves no trace on her serene face. Would Phoibe teach her how to lie like that, if she asked?

She might. The lying smile; *use against lords when a witch's other works are not at hand*. Elene falls into a potion-fueled sleep wondering what she wants to lie about.



"While I sing, you must follow/

I'll not let you be hidden/ Never let you hide/

What Death would not give, my love demands."

Iasonas writes a song. He says it's for her.

His smiles haven't been as steady since her fall. On his visits to her room, he sings to help her remember the way he says she was.

"I would be happy to sit with you in silence, my lord."

"But I must," he says.

She can hear his voice in her dreams, drowning out the sounds of flight. No one meets her in the lands of sleep; its empty fields blasted white by a watchful sun. When she feels sick at the sight of a single bird feather, drifted in from the window to land at the foot of her bed, she doesn't know why.



In spite of her recent fall, Iasonas has decided that Phoibe's work is done. Elene has always known that the guests would leave, but the sight of wagons packed to go has her heart beating out of time.

"Try not to fall again," Phoibe orders. Iasonas is out of earshot, helping his sisters into their wagon.

"You know how I died." Her accusation flies from her mouth before the thought is formed in her mind. She slaps her hand over her mouth as if she can pull it back in.

Phoibe pulls her in a close embrace. She can smell that faraway garden again, and hear the beating of her heart, strong and sure as the titanic wingbeat of an albatross.

"This world binds both you and me child, but I have one last lesson. *Flesh can hold many things too jagged for the mind to bear.*"

"What?" The words are nonsense, but Elene feels a sudden fluttering in her chest, a clawing screaming flock of grief.

“That bird, the one that cries, it lays its eggs on the shores on Death’s rivers. No matter how far they go from those waters, their body remembers the way back into death, back home.”

“How?” Elene’s eyes are open but she sees nothing, the sound of wings and birdcall almost drowning out her own thoughts. But heavy footsteps are approaching from behind. She feels Phoibe’s heart stutter and beat furiously at Iasonas’ approach.

“They listen, at the right moment.” Phoibe’s voice is even lower than a whisper. “The *other* half of witching is knowing when to force the time to be right.”

The priestess gives a smile Elene recognizes from her own practice.

A strong hand pulls Elene away, and Iasonas’s sunlight scent surrounds her.

“It’s time to go. Say goodbye, beloved.”

“Goodbye, beloved.”

He laughs. It sounds like one of her smiles.

“Thank you for all you’ve done, Phoibe. Your high priestess will hear from me,” says Iasonas in his lord’s voice.

Phoibe alights the front of the wagon and settles her belongings around her. The horses pull forward, and her cart begins to roll away. She does look back, once, but Elene is already gone.



Iasonas comes to Elene in the night, pressing himself against the full length of her body until all of her senses are full of only him.

I need to make sure you’re still here. Still mine.

His mouth is always hungry, as if she is a cup that can be drained, a plucked golden fruit to crunch down to its poison-pipped core.

She no longer dreams at all.



He sings constantly. The servants walk around dazed, and then begin to wear cloth wrapped around their heads, covering their ears. She would do the same, but he is always there. His soft water voice becomes a driving rain. Nary a corner or hiding hole in the house has any claim to silence. It flavors her soup and her bread.

She vibrates with the melody until her body shakes with a desperate energy.

Run, it says.

She flies out of the house and keeps going, through the orchards and fields of flax towards a small clearing. Her body propels her towards the squat hives and the golden sisters that work the combs within. The sun is high; the scent of warm sweet grass mixed with blossoming lavender and mneme has called all of the hive’s gatherers to work. The wave of happy buzzing flows over the wall of song, and suddenly she can do more than follow her husband’s words endlessly up and up through relentless melody.

A clay cup lies in the grass, chipped and cracked, but still a capable vessel.

By the river of forgetting, Sleep was born, their birthblood mixing among the water leaving trails of blossoming mneme in its wake. Mneme and the honey made of its nectar encourage Sleep, the gentlest of the gods of Death.



When the cup is empty, her thoughts are quiet again. She sleeps under the shade of the warm hives, herbs for her pillow. Elene dreams: a dark and silent murmuration sweeps her up and carries her along the path of a black river.

When they return her softly to her feet, the cloud of birds rises and falls to condense into a figure. They have night skin and star hair, and a face so familiar she can almost taste a name on her tongue. She has tasted them, and shivered under them, and hears them call to her,

“Take it back. If you want it, take it back.”



Someone is screaming, maybe. It is hard, underneath the blanket the mneme provides, to judge distances. But someone is screaming and she should go, perhaps. To them or away? Elene moves toward the sound. It may be Iasonas screaming.

I might like that.

When she arrives in the courtyard, she sees that it is not Iasonas in pain. A servant lies on the ground, arms raised over his head, fragments of a destroyed vase nearby. Iasonas’s fists rain down on his head, over and over like a staccato beat on a hide drum. As one, she and the servant make a sound of shattering. Her husband looks up from his work to face her. His eyes are as bright as a noon sky.

Someone is still screaming. It sounds like the call of a thousand birds, a flock giant enough to block out the sun and turn day to night.



Iasonas is traveling to the city. The words ring in her mind over and over.

Iasonas is leaving.

He kisses Elene on the cheek when he bids farewell to the gathered household. Her smiles are perfected by now, but this one is so bright Iasonas blinks under its glare.

Since those fast grabbing hands on her resurrection bed, she has been watched. All hands in this huge house are Iasonas’ hands, ready to bring her back to him. Report her words back to him. All things flowing steadily irrevocably towards him.

A witch knows when to force the time to be the right time.

Iasonas is gone. Something left coiled in her belly since she drank the meadow honey slips its leash. She orders the servants to leave her be. Off with them.

Who is she to give commands?

She is the one who was dead and now is not dead. One immediate fear wins out over the other.

Elene moves from room to room. They are perfumed with beeswax and oil, smoky wood and old wine: the scent of a rich man’s things. Everywhere something waits for his pleasure.

How long will Iasonas be gone? He loves his things. He loves me. Iasonas will come back.

Outside the wind surges. A storm maybe, blowing in from the sea. Birds call, screaming alack and alarm: the sky grows dark, be ready.

Iasonas will come back.

Behind a hung tapestry, she finds a narrow set of white stairs. They seem to stretch upwards infinitely, her head pulsing suddenly to the tune of Iasonas' song. Pain drops her to the floor. Elene crawls up the old slats on her hands and knees.

At the top of the stair a plain unlocked door opens onto ashes and blood.

Iasonas.

There is a bed, burned, sheets bloody and charred. The floor and walls are black. The fire would've risen nearly to the ceiling, its heat unbearable. Her vision wavers and distorts now, as if the heat of that blaze still burns in some version of this dead room. Memory and forgetting curl into a knot, nectar and mneme stirred together in the cauldron of her belly, heavy and hot.

Why does a man go into death to take back his wife? Is it love?

What kind of man loves like this?

Elene falls to the floor and covers her hands in the ashes of his devotion, paints her eyes with its kohl. She pushes charblack fingers into her mouth and stuffs herself full of her death until her mouth and teeth are painted black, until she can't eat anymore.

The ash sits heavy. Something deep in her belly writhes. She retches it all up until she is shaking on the floor, pulled into the waking dream of her lost memory, now found.



"Do you not rule here!" Elene howls.

"I rule *amongst others*, all of us bound by laws set down before time began." says Night's grandchild, guardian of hell, shepherd of souls.

Mihr, her dream walker. The god wears a cloak of feathers, black spangled with stars that match their bright hair. She's held those strands of moonlight between her fingers, grasped them tight in the midst of release. This will be the last time she smells her lover's starburned skin.

He holds her close while she cries. Even in halls built from the last sighs of the dead there can be new tragedies.

"The story is written. He's paid his way into hell, and not even a god can ignore his demand."

"I don't want to go."

He can only hold her gently, grief wrapping around them both.

"Roads can go both ways, if you have the will to walk them," he says, when their tears are exhausted.

"What can I do?"

"When you find it, take your death back."



Elene was dragged out of her own death screaming.

You fucking shit! Face me, Iasonas! Turn back and look at me!

She's no longer alone in the burned room of her resurrection. No thief is ever secure in what they have stolen. How could Iasonas stay away?

Iasonas the shit, Iasonas who was supposed to be gone and finally leave her alone.

Her understanding comes alive like a chick bursting through the thick shell of her amnesia. She knows, and she knows, *and she knows*: when she died, it was Iasonas' hands wrapped tight around her neck.

Her soul walked the roads to hell. The fields of rushes, bounded by rivers of bitterness and forgetting, glowing under the kind glow of Osiris's love and tended by his children. There was a godling with a gentle voice and clear eyes. Mihr's kisses tasted like flowers and rain. He took after his mother that way: grass and flowers grew under his feet anywhere he walked. He was often quiet, preferring to listen to her silences than his own words.

Every soul gets to rest. There are rules. Laws. *There are stories.*

Who goes into death to steal back the dead?

Iasonas and his music. Iasonas and his gods-damned possession. Iasonas and his love.

She'd prayed, all the way up the winding path from hell, that he would fail. If he turned back even once, she would keep her death.

Please let him look back. Gods, please make him look back.

Iasonas you fucking thief!

She stopped praying, and planned. Planting the seed of her fury and her love and her death deep inside her, ready for the right time to bloom.

A witch knows when to make her own time.

Elene's eyes open, dark and full of stars. Iasonas sees his reflection in their void, a bell tolling in his heart. But it's far too late for that.

She screams like an earthquake. Like a soul cracking through its shell and emerging into godhood. The sound is force, climbing out of her as an army gains upon a foreign beach. In its wake, nothing survives.



Roads can go both ways, if you have the will to walk them.

Elene is gone.

She's digging a tunnel through worlds with her screams, blackening time with her tears, and rending her way through existence with her teeth. It is a rough and uncouth mode of travel, but the method of infant gods tends towards the crude. She's in a hurry. Maybe later there will be time for care and subtlety.

Golden ichor burns and surges in her veins like laughter, manic and high. Yes, there will be time. There will be forever.

Forever begins in the land of the dead, by the river of forgetting, under the flowering stars, at the side of a sweet patient Death who waits for her even now. She steals herself and does not look back.



Marika Bailey is an Afro-Caribbean author and illustrator whose work has appeared in FIYAH Magazine and Strange Horizons. A childhood obsession with mythology led to her current habit of writing stories that try to explain, "where do people end and gods begin?" She lives in Brooklyn, NY with her husband and the softest cat in the world. You can find her tweeting about drawing and 80's sitcoms as @Marika_Writes_

Mothers of the Disappeared

by Tehnuka

Sita passed through fire,
proved her purity in men's eyes,
sought refuge in the forest with her sons,
then returned to her mother's embrace.

But Amma—who-was has nothing to save
Though she still hears black smoke
and feels orange flames, sharp thorns in bare feet
when her sandals broke on the long walk.

Now, eyes burning,
she walks a sun-hot dusty highway
in borrowed shoes, her gold thali long-lost.
Such a small loss.

Sweat cools her back
But her ears scream and her vision darkens.
She who bore children
who barefoot walked the jungle.

She has nothing to prove in men's eyes.
Nor do these other women, once called Amma,
Who only need to be heard.
Their children returned.

Their grief that men in high places ignore
awakens their own mother Poomathevi below.
Now she sunders.
Small furrow swells into crumbling rift

Across the A9 road.
It grows, but does not swallow them.
Spreads south through mountains,
splitting new steel railroad,
ploughing through land and water.

Until far out of sight in a far-off city
her path channeled in broken tarmac
through honking trishaws,
crowded buses,
gleaming tourist hotels,

Steps forth Poomathevi, tangled
hair and tattered brown sari.
A scent of wet soil and sesame oil.
Nondescript, she could be any Amma.
But she could not stop to embrace her daughters.

Righteous, she steps forth to high places.



Tehnuka is a member of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. She uses words to make sense of the world, and when it doesn't make sense, she uses them to make up worlds. When she is not writing, she finds herself up volcanoes, down caves, and in unexpected places—other people, however, can find her on twitter, as @tehnuka.

Shark Girls

by Caroline Diorio

There's a shark lady that comes into the diner on Friday nights. She's the oldest one I've ever seen, but that's not saying much. Most of them don't last long on land. She's thirty, maybe thirty-five, and she's got the ugliest damn kids I've ever seen: redheads, all three of them, with white eyelashes and ears that stick straight out. They're always scrapping about something whenever they come in, sounding for all the world like the seagulls that fight over stray bits of food in the parking lot.

I like her, though. She's always nice to me. That's a low bar, I know, but when you're a waitress, it's something.

The only thing that marks her as different from all the other tired mothers in the diner is her eyes: black as ink, no whites.

Tonight her kids are a little quieter than usual, and when the lady shifts in her seat, I can see the yellowed edges of a bruise on her right leg peak out beneath the edge of her sundress. I grab her an extra carton of fries from the trough in the kitchen, and I don't wrinkle my nose too much when the youngest of her kids stands up in the booth and grabs at the silver key around my neck with his sticky little fingers.

She smiles up at me, says, “Thanks, sweet girl,” and for a second, she almost looks like Mama.

The middle kid spills his chocolate milk across the paper menus, and the next table is flagging me down for a coffee refill by the time I’ve mopped it all up.



I drive past the old house on the way back to the dorms. There’s a gray sedan in the driveway. God only knows who’d be stupid enough to live in a house where a murder happened, if they even bothered to research the history at all. Some rich family from Raleigh, I bet. I picture a horse-faced blonde lady with thousand-dollar teeth showing her husband the listing. *This close to the beach, darling, and so cheap!*

In the backyard, there’s a wooden box buried to the right of the porch steps. A time capsule. Mama and I put it all together on my eighth birthday, while my father was at work. The whole memory is a little fuzzy, and I have to come at it sideways whenever I try to remember what we put inside of it. I know there were some photos of us in there, a picture I drew in kindergarten, Mama’s earrings, a few other things. She wrapped everything up in this smelly grey blanket to keep them dry, and when we patted the dirt down over it, Mama tucked the key into the pocket of her jeans.

“We’ll come back when you’re all grown up,” she said, “when it’s safe.”

I remember the way her hair felt against my cheek, as soft and cool as summer rain.

That night, Wilmington police responded to a noise complaint from some concerned neighbors.

They found my father in his bed with a steak knife in his belly.

Less than four hours later, I was an orphan.

Sometimes I want to go back for the box, but I know there’s nothing in there that will bring her back.

I crook the fingers of my right hand into a gun and jab it towards the house, imagining the windows shattering and the floorboards uprooting and the roof burning against the night sky. *Pow.*



My roommate wants to know if I want to come watch the shark girls sing.

“It’ll be fun,” Jackie says, swinging her bare feet off the edge of her bed. “You’re always working, Una. It wouldn’t kill you to relax a little bit.”

I’ve only been to see them sing once, when I was twelve. My foster father at the time took me. His name was Max. Max O’Brien. He was tall, wide in every direction, and he had a laugh like a fork in a blender. I don’t really know why he took me that night, what he was trying to prove.

The women came up onto the shore one by one, their shark skins going loose and slack when the air hit them. They stepped right out of them and slung them over their shoulder the way I’d seen men do with their jackets, hair hanging down past their knees. There were only about ten of them that night on the beach, but the way they sang made it sound like there were a hundred more, so sharp and endless it almost sounded like crying.

Shark women worship the moon, or if not worship, then something like it. There’s no exact word in our language for what it is to them. Mama used to sing to the moon when it was full, when Dad wasn’t home to hear it.

“My brother tried to nab him a shark girl once, way back when,” Max said. He was on his third beer by then. “Saw it with my own two eyes. He made a grab for her skin, and she beat him so bad he couldn’t walk straight for two months.” He snorted, like the whole thing still baffled him. “And she wasn’t even one of the big ones. One of those little reef sharks, I think. If she’d been able to drag him into the water... I don’t even wanna think about it.”

The memories I had of my father tended to blur together. There was nothing about him I wanted to keep. But all I could think about right then was the knot of scar tissue where my father’s eye had once been.

My mother did that. She didn’t tell me much about the night she got caught, about how long she’d fought my father, but she did tell me about the eye.

I knew by then where babies came from. I knew that men and women didn’t have to love each other to make one. But it wasn’t until then that I truly realized just how much I wasn’t supposed to exist

“Hey, now,” Max said when I started sniffing. He ran his big hand over the back of my head, the calluses of his palms snagging at my hair. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Earl turned out just fine in the end.”

I tell Jackie that I’ve got a headache, and that makes her sigh.

Jackie’s a nice girl. She doesn’t want to be my friend, not really, but I think she feels sorry enough for me that she invites me to things even though she knows what I’m going to say.

“You had a headache last time I asked,” she says, “but okay.”



The shark lady comes back the next week without her kids. She orders her normal meal: a classic waffle with two eggs on the side. When she’s done, she goes outside and starts smoking, the burning cherry of her cigarette bright against the dark parking lot.

I tell the cook I’m taking my break early and run to the back office where we all hang our coats and purses.

I don’t smoke, but most of my coworkers do. I rifle through their coat pockets until I find a pack of Marlboros, and I run back to the front with a cigarette clenched in my right hand.

I try to seem nonchalant when I open the door, but my heart is pounding so hard that it shakes my voice when I try to speak.

“Can I—can I get a light, please?”

She smiles and touches the tip of her cigarette to mine. I bring it to my lips, inhale, and immediately start coughing.

The shark lady laughs.

“That’s how I was when I first started,” she says. “Nastiest shit I ever tasted. Then I tried it again to see if I was doing it wrong, and—” she holds her cigarette up, pinky up like she’s at a fancy tea party— “now I need this every day.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I say nothing at all. She keeps smoking, looking me up and down.

“My mom was like you,” I say finally. “She got caught a little over twenty years ago. I know it’s a long shot, but I guess I was wondering if maybe you knew her. She looked kind of like me.”

The woman looks at me for a second, scratching at the base of her neck with one thin hand. There's a look in her eyes that I don't have a name for. The thin curls of smoke from her cigarette stretch between us before fading into nothing. "No," she says finally. "No, I'm sorry. I got caught eight years ago. It would have been before my time."

I nod, and I try not to let my disappointment show.

"For what it's worth," she says gently, "I could tell you were one of us the moment I saw you."

Something bright and sweet wells up inside me. "Really?"

"Of course," she says. "You may not have the eyes, but you can always recognize family."

Another beat of silence. Somewhere far away, a siren wails.

"I'll help you get your skin back," I finally say. "If you have any idea where it is, I'll help you find it."

She smiles at me again, but it's the kind of pitying smile you give a stray dog begging for scraps.

"I do appreciate that," she says softly, "but my skin's all smoke and ash now, I'm afraid."

I swallow at the lump in my throat. Of course he would have burned her skin when he caught her. Some men like to keep their shark girl's skin as a trophy, hide it away in their attacks or beneath their floorboards, but the women have a way of finding it. If you want to keep a shark girl, really keep her, you have to burn it.

"I hope he rots." The words are out of my mouth before I even realize it, but I mean them.

The woman snorts, a dry ghost of a laugh. "You and me both, but he didn't burn my skin. I did."

The cigarette falls from my hand and breaks noiselessly against the pavement.

"What?"

The woman sighs.

"Joel hid my skin out in the shed behind our house," she says. "I always figured he burned it, but I finally found it one night three years after I got caught. I'd just had my second baby, and lord knows I couldn't leave them behind."

"You burned it," I say, my voice embarrassingly faint.

She nods.

"The sea calls to you wherever you are, no matter how hopeless things seem. I knew that if I kept my skin, eventually I wouldn't have been able to resist going home." She drops her cigarette onto the pavement next to mine and stubs it out with the toe of her shoe. "Things are different, you know, when you're a mother."

No they're not, a voice inside my head screams. My father burned my mother's skin. She never told me that exactly, but he must've, because if she'd found it, I know she wouldn't have hesitated. A woman who stabbed her husband to death in his own bed wouldn't have thrown away her only shot at going home because her ugly, unwanted daughter might have missed her. She would have gone back to the sea and forgotten I ever existed, and I wouldn't have blamed her for a second.

I suddenly want to hurt this woman, to hit her and grind the smoking ashes of our cigarettes into her face. I know that it's not her I should be angry at, but I can't help it. I hate her. I hate her almost as much as I hate myself.

I don't remember saying goodbye to her. I don't remember walking back into the restaurant or watching her leave through the windows. Suddenly I'm back inside the diner, and a tourist with peeling cheekbones and bleached hair is screaming at me because her hash browns were undercooked.



I'm back in the car.

I'm back in the car, and there are blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror.

We're parked at the side of the highway, and uncaring cars hiss past us. I can't see Mama's face from the backseat; she's just sitting there, her hands locked around the steering wheel.

Behind us, an officer gets out of his car and walks towards us.

I hug my legs up to my chest. We left the house so fast that I didn't have time to get my jacket, and I'm cold.

"Mama," I say, "Mama, what's happening—"

Mama twists around in her seat and drops something into my lap. It's the key to the box we buried, small and silver and already tarnished at the edges.

"You keep this good and safe for me, understand?"

I open my mouth, but she's out of the car before I can even form the words. The cop is yelling something, but Mama is already sprinting across the highway. A semi blares its horn as it barrels towards her, but it's too late, it's too late.

I scream and open the car door, but the asphalt suddenly turns to water beneath my feet, and I'm falling though, sinking into nothing—

As soon as I wake up I get out of bed and sprint to the tiny bathroom that connects our dorm room to our neighbors. I barely make it to the toilet before I vomit. I'm crying so hard that I almost choke before I finish.

There's a timid knock on the door.

"Una?" Jackie says. "Are you ok?"

"Go away."

I hear her footsteps retreat, and I spit to clear my mouth before flushing. I brush my teeth three times before I can finally stand to look at myself in the mirror. My face is still damp and swollen, and there are huge creases beneath my bloodshot eyes. The key has left little indentations at the base of my throat while I was sleeping. I take it in my hand and run my thumb over the edges. I close my eyes.

The only thing in the time capsule that I can see clearly is the picture I drew: a little stick figure drawing of Mama and me at the beach, waving hello to a group of sharks in the water. I remember drawing them all using a nature encyclopedia from school, copying ten different species onto the blue-crayon scribble of the ocean. I scrawled the word "family" across the top of the page in bright red crayon.

I try to remember everything else we put in the box, really remember it, but none of it amounts to more than a few bright flashes of color and metal, all of it disappearing into the fold of that gray tarp—

No, that's not right. It wasn't a tarp. It was a blanket, a big gray blanket, but not a warm or soft one. It must have been one we didn't want anymore. When it brushed my arm while Mama wrapped everything up, it felt like sandpaper—

For a second, I forget how to breathe.

And then I'm grabbing my keys from off my bedside table, not even bothering to put on my shoes before running out the door.



I haven't seen the backyard in over ten years. There's a little swing set in the corner now, ghostly white in the dark, but I don't care about that. I'm standing on the right side of the porch stairs, staring down at the ground.

For all I know, someone might have already dug it up.

For all I know, the new owners of this house will wake up and see some strange woman standing in their backyard and call the cops.

For all I know, I came here for nothing.

The sea calls to you wherever you are, no matter how hopeless things seem.

I sink to my knees, and I start to dig.



The sky is turning gray in the east by the time I pull the box out of the earth. My fingernails are broken, and my hands burn and shake when I put my key in the lock.

The gray bundle probably only weighs a few pounds, but to me it feels like I'm holding the entire weight of the sky in my lap. I unfold it slowly, taking in what Mama didn't let me see: the pale underbelly, the ragged dorsal fin, the delicate folds of the gills—

A piece of paper flutters to the ground. I pick it up and unfold it. It's my drawing, exactly how I remember it.

On the back of it, I see my mother's shaky handwriting:

You'll meet them all when we come back, and they're going to love you almost as much as I do.



The sun is rising, and I'm standing in the ankle-deep surf, my mother's skin wrapped around my shoulders. The moon has faded to a pale smear in the sky, but I can almost swear I hear singing.

I walk deeper into the water, and the skin begins to fuse to mine, the bones beneath shifting into something greater than the sum of their parts.

I'm up to my neck now, and my mother's gills, my gills, open and close. Some small part of me wants to turn back one last time and say goodbye to Wilmington, to the jagged teeth of the houses that line the beach. I don't look back. I keep walking.

The water closes above my head, and I'm alone with the sound of my mother's heartbeat, the sound of the current that carries me home.



Caroline Diorio's work has been published in Joyland, the NoSleep Podcast, Daily Science Fiction, and Flash Fiction Online. She lives in (and is endlessly inspired by) North Carolina.

It's Never Just a Necklace

by Ashland East

Things stirred in the Mist Wood. Things armed with claws and teeth and malice. Elligia Mistwood ignored them. Sunk her shovel into wet earth. Even in the dead of night, she was safe inside her family burial ground.

“Little help?” she said between huffs of exertion. “You came to me, remember?”

“Maybe this was a mistake,” Bexley squeaked, her own shovel forgotten in a white-knuckle grip. “Losing a necklace won’t kill me.”

The Mist Wood understood the implication. Fog tendrils twirled in delight at the terror flowing from the pampered townie. Bexley turned white. Not ghost-white, of course, because ghost-white wasn’t possible for the living to replicate and woe to anyone who alleged otherwise within earshot of the dead.

“Graveyard’s warded,” Elligia said. “What’s out there cannot get in here. We can dig up Mortan next to explain how he did it.”

The Wood crawled over endless rolling hills. It was older than the town of Heron’s Neck. Older than the Inn that predated the town. Older than Elligia’s family, but there was no telling townies that. They still believed the earliest Mistwoods had settled a sunny patch of meadow and conjured the Mist Wood to protect them. Superstitious dolts.

Two days ago, Bexley had chased down Elligia after school. Desperation cut unfamiliar frown lines on Bexley’s face. She asked if the Mistwoods had any powers to retrieve stolen items. Elligia wasn’t interested. Bexley was born one month after Elligia. In the fifteen years since, they’d rarely spoken. Not Elligia’s necklace, not her problem.

Bexley insisted the theft involved magic. How else could it vanish from the teacher’s locked desk? It had taken courage for Bexley to approach a witch with her problem. Elligia relented. She was dying to try the raising potion anyway. A part of her pointed out it would be nice to spend an evening with someone. She gave that part a withering glare until it hid.

Elligia threw a clod of dirt onto Bexley’s shoes.

“Sooner she’s awake, the sooner you’ll be out of here,” Elligia reminded her. “Start digging.”

That got the townie’s attention. She set the lantern closer. Eyes closed, she mumbled a prayer. Silly girl. Still, it appeared to fortify her. She began to dig.

Shovels thudded against a coffin. After she swept dirt from the lid, Elligia tied her white hair back. With care, she lifted a vial from a bag slumped beside the grave. Luminescent purple liquid sloshed within the corked glass. At least it looked right. This was the first time she’d made it herself; her parents were traveling. Again.

“Does that really wake the dead?” Bexley whispered.

“Last chance to back out,” Elligia said. “Once she’s up, she won’t return until her task’s complete. That’s how it works.”

Bexley sighed. Doubt and worry brushed her face, and Elligia snorted disgust. Two nice parents, lush brown hair, smart as anything; Bexley had never learned to hide how she felt. There’d never been any need.

“My uncle just made me that necklace. To be an heirloom. Someone stole it. I want it back.” She nodded at the tombstone. “You’re sure she’s the one?”

Mistwoods had been buried here for three centuries. For the case of the stolen necklace, Elligia had selected the older of two sisters still infamous decades after their deaths. Their graves huddled beneath a squat tree.

Persuasia Mistwood

Consummate peacemaker. Negotiated quotas with the nightbeasts, dropping death rates to the lowest in town history. Traded with the Crow King to protect crops. Thrice victorious in trials accusing her of witchery.

Died at age 32, shot & killed by Sheriff Annadel Perch while warding the Mist Wood in what was absolutely not a hunting accident.

Uphoria Mistwood

Inveterate revenger. Inspired the Axfall riots in response to a price-fixing scheme designed to bankrupt her uncle Axfall Mistwood. Lured a posse intent on hanging her mother to the Doompond

where none survived. Ambassador to owls. Routinely escaped witchery accusations through acts of dark magic.

Died at age 29 in the same manner and on the same day as her sister. She remains furious in death.

The coffin lid opened with an unholy groan. The girls gazed down at Persuasia’s body. It wasn’t as decomposed as nature typically demanded. In the Wood, an owl hooted. Farther off, a nightbeast howled a lament.

“Oh, hush,” Elligia muttered. Give a girl a second to compose herself before the unpleasantness. Elligia pinched her nose and drank half the liquid. Fought back a gag. Her lips went numb. She poured the other half over her ancestor’s desiccated lips.

Dead breath wheezed. Dried lungs crinkled like bellows in the ruins of an abandoned hearth. Bones crunched against the coffin’s sides, and glowing purple eyes opened.

“Good evening, cousin,” Elligia said. “I need your help.”



Lanterns lit the cobbled roads of Heron’s Neck. Heavy iron things that hung from posts in every yard. Townies, fools that they were, thought light kept away what lived in the dark. Tonight, it served to highlight the difference between two girls flush with the pinkness of life and the tall, sharp-featured dead woman beside them.

The road ended at spike-topped gates. Two stories of dark windows and blood-red brick loomed in the darkness. Shadows arced overhead, crows circling on silent wings. Persuasias's brow crinkled. Bexley flinched.

"A prison?" the dead witch asked.

"Yes," Elligia said as Bexley corrected, "It's the school."

Persuasias inhaled and frowned. "The theft took place here."

"My necklace was locked away when we went outside for exercise class. It was gone when we got back."

"I will need to see its absence. It is possible I can trace it." Persuasias's voice was breathy but strong. Her arms and legs stuttered once or twice before she ascended the steps.

Elligia frowned. That wasn't supposed to happen. She'd followed the family recipe to the letter. Making a mental note to check her work, she tugged on the dead woman's cloak.

"Around back."

A patchy field passed for the schoolyard. Houses huddled beyond a rickety fence. A dog barked, then light filled an upstairs window. Elligia hurried to the basement door. Persuasias took a jerky step toward the house, and the barks strangled into silence.

The basement door was secured by a heavy iron chain and lock. Elligia pressed a hand to the cold metal and asked it how it liked being a lock ("It's ok,") and did it always want to be a lock ("Well, no, bit yeoman for my tastes,") and what it dreamed of being ("A sword in the hands of a crusader."). Elligia started to protest, Mistwoods being well aware of what it was like to watch armed hordes descend upon your home over and

over again, but Persuasias pinched her arm. Elligia asked the lock how it would feel to be a sword ("Like glory in sunshine,") then asked if it would show her so it raised up its arm in a victory pose. The lock clanked open.

They entered the dark basement, and Persuasias led them through the pitch black to the stairs. The girls took over from there. A minute later, they stood in a classroom.

"Open a window," Persuasias said.

Elligia obliged, throwing up glass and pushing open one shutter. The dead Mistwood stood grave-still beside the desk. The girls followed her lead. For a while, no one moved. Bexley whispered to Elligia.

"Is she dead again?"

A crow soared in through the window. At inhuman speed, Persuasias snapped a hand around the crow's feet. Wings beat panicked flaps, but the Mistwood's grip was inescapable.

"Open," she instructed. The bird's beak popped open, and Persuasias dragged her finger over its tongue.

"Crow saliva," she said. "Expert thieves, crows." She opened her mouth and dragged the saliva finger over her own tongue.

Elligia looked away. "Gross."

"I might vomit," Bexley said. She gagged and bent forward. "Or extra vomit."

Persuasias took no notice. Crow flapping like mad in her unforgiving grip, she drew the ghost of a necklace onto the desk with her double-spitted finger. It began to glow. She beckoned Elligia to the desk. Oh, please, no.

"A trace of dead marks what's lost."

Elligia groaned.

“A trace of life marks what’s left,” Persuasias finished. She grabbed the crow’s beak and held it open.

Elligia dragged her finger over the crow’s tongue. She dragged it over her own. Witchery always insisted on being vile. Bexley disappeared behind a desk. Elligia ignored the sounds of retching and traced the glowing necklace outline.

The light flared then faded. Footsteps appeared on the floor in the same weak glow, like moonlight reflected off the eye of a hunter. One at a time, ghost-feet lit then vanished. They led out the door.

“Follow them,” Persuasias set off in pursuit.

“Bexley, we have to go.”

A hand appeared from behind the desk, one finger raised in request. A dry hack, a wet spit, and a post-release groan. Bexley reemerged. She wiped her mouth.

“Let’s get this over with.”



A living witch, a dead one, and a girl with an empty stomach walked through town as it slept. Firelight and shadow splashed them in uneven rhythms. Footsteps flared then faded. It didn’t take the odd trio long to arrive at a small bungalow.

Marsh grass grew tall around a squat house. Mismatched shutters guarded the windows. The whole thing slouched to the right. Water whispered nearby, just out of sight. The bungalow was built too close to the water, and it was sinking. The ghost-feet padded up a gravel path and vanished through the front door.

“Who lives here?” Elligia asked.

“I don’t know her name,” Bexley said. “She just moved here. From the Springs.”

A low fence surrounded the overgrown yard. Bexley pushed on the gate. Elligia grabbed her arm.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting my necklace.” Bexley spoke with the puffed-up energy of the vindicated.

“In the middle of the night?” Elligia raised an eyebrow. “From a possibly magical thief?”

Bexley’s fire cooled. Elligia shook her head. Rich kids never considered consequences; they’d never had any need.

“No crows around,” Persuasias said. “I’ll go in myself.”

A shadow crept among the overgrown yard. A tail pointed straight up. It weaved among tall grass and feral shrubbery.

“No need.”

Elligia crouched. In mews and gargles, she spoke to the yard. She held out a hand. A grey cat emerged and rubbed against her outstretched fingers. Finger crooked, she beckoned Bexley down. The cat sniffed at Bexley’s knees and purred acceptance.

“There’s something in there that smells like her,” Elligia dug bits of dried fish from her pockets. The scales were stained unnatural orange, but cats never cared. “Can you get it for us?”

The cat took the treats in two big bites. Its pupils grew huge. Without a sound, it scurried through the underbrush. In the light of the bungalow’s only lantern, its eyes shimmered orange. It disappeared around back.

“You can talk to cats?” Bexley asked.

“Yep.” Elligia said. Persuasias raised a disapproving eyebrow. Ruin all my fun, cousin. “Magic treats help.”

Enchanted cats were as skilled hunters as the ordinary sort. The stray emerged after only a few minutes. Head held high and proud, the necklace jangled in its jaws. Bexley took it and shoved it into her pocket. Beaming in delight, she reached down to pet her thanks. The cat hissed and bolted.

"I better get home. If my parents realize I snuck out, I'll be dead." She blanched and looked at Persuasia. "Sorry."

"Keep your sorrys, child. I have no need of them."

"Plus you can use them later to blow stuff up," Elligia added. She was eager to try that spell herself.

Bexley started back down the dirt road, toward the brighter lights of the town proper. She paused and turned back.

"Thank you," she said. No grudging note beneath it. "I'm glad you agreed to help."

Before Elligia could manufacture a suitable quip, Bexley hurried off into the night. The young witch tried and failed to stop her heart from warming. She motioned for her cousin to follow. It was a long walk home.

"How do you think the woman did it?" Elligia asked.

"Bent the light around her body. Forgetting Frost. There are ways." Persuasia wheezed an acrid breath. Elligia tried not to gag. "I will take to the library. It is wise to understand who has come to Heron's Neck before you bury me again."

For the rest of the walk, neither spoke. The road curled through the trees and under a huge wooden gate. It ran aground against the circular green that centered the Mistwood estate. Half a dozen cabins, dark and

boarded up, surrounded the green. A manor house loomed at the end of a lantern-lit drive.

They entered through a side door into the manor. It had been a long night, and Elligia was eager to clean remnant crow spit out of her mouth and climb into her warm bed. But an energy thrummed in her chest, and when she passed the hall mirror, a big smile stretched over her face.



The next evening, as Elligia sweated over a pot in the kitchen, a deep knock boomed through the manor. Two kittens, one black and one white, sat watch nearby. As soon as Elligia stepped away from the thickening stew, they leaned forward, eyes on the simmering food.

"Absolutely not." She grabbed one under each arm and marched to the front door. With a huff of frustration, she nodded. The door opened itself.

A tall woman dressed in fine traveling clothes stood on the porch. She flashed the coldest smile Elligia had ever seen. Around her neck hung Bexley's necklace. Oh no.

"Hey, kid." The woman had a lilting, throaty voice like a songbird that had been up all night. "Your mother home?"

"How'd you know?" Elligia didn't bother with appearances. There was no need to lie when she was already caught.

The woman's smile never wavered. She glared through hunter's eyes. Hungry and calculating. Her gaze ignored Elligia. The white kitten hissed. Elligia dropped him.

“It’s always the Mistwoods. Your mother should not have stolen from me. I’ll wait in the parlor.”

The woman tried to enter but claws shredded her skirt. At her feet, the white cat, now fully grown, growled and swiped again. The black cat, newly adult with tufted ears and voluminous fur, primed herself in Elligia’s arms. Back legs tensed. She locked eyes on the woman’s throat and hissed.

“It wasn’t my mother.” Elligia straightened her back. . “How’d you get the necklace back?”

Those awful eyes finally focused on Elligia. It took all she had not to flinch.

“I propose a trade. You Mistwoods have something I need. I have the girl.”

Footsteps creaked on aged steps. Persuasia rasped a curse then a spell. Elligia blinked, sucked in a huge breath. She felt dizzy.

The sun was setting. An hour had turned in a moment. The stranger looked just as confused, but she recovered faster than Elligia.

“Not just rumor, then.” The woman studied Persuasia’s face. “The Mistwoods really can raise the dead.”

“It’s been thirty years. Why aren’t you old?” Persuasia asked. “Or dead?”

The woman winked. “Magic.”

“Getting dark.” Persuasia smiled with a coldness to match the stranger’s. “The Mist Wood isn’t safe at night.”

“Precisely why I’ve returned to Heron’s Neck,” the tall woman said. “You dropped something when last

we met. I’ve rationed it well, but I’m almost out. Make more, and I’ll spare the kid’s friend.”

“Mistwoods don’t have friends.” Elligia meant to sound unflappable, but she could hear her own bitterness.

Persuasia spoke with a stilted cadence. “We can come to an arrangement. Strike a bargain. There’s a happy ending here for everyone.”

Elligia was convinced. Negotiate and agree. Obvious, really. She didn’t realize Persuasia was working a spell until the stranger spat onto the ground.

“Still trying to build bridges over hungry rapids. You never did learn.” The woman pointed toward the Wood. “Bring it to me before sunrise. That spot by the old birch. You remember.”

Smug assurance dripped from the woman like viscera from a vulture’s beak. She laughed, and Elligia’s blood boiled. Warnings groaned in her mind. This woman was dangerous.

With a sarcastic bow, the stranger walked away. She passed onto the road through the wooden gate, head held high like she was in no danger at all. Tentacles of mist uncoiled from the trees. Even at a distance, Elligia could hear cackles of hungry delight. At her feet, the white kitten arched his back, hackles spiked along the ridge of his spine.

Mist swirled around the woman but didn’t touch her. The laughter faded.

“How’d she do that?” Elligia asked.

“My sister and I were warding the Wood at the property line. By the old birch. We’d only just started. She must have taken the potion from our bodies. It’s kept her safe all this time.”

Chills swarmed Elligia's body. Goosebumps bloomed on her skin. The black kitten mewled discomfort and leapt from her arms.

"Was that really...?"

"Sheriff Annadel Perch, as violent and selfish as ever." Persuasia closed the door. "If we're to save Bexley, we have a lot of magic to do and only one night to do it."



Rotten metallic stink cut with the perfume of newly bloomed flowers clung to Elligia's clothes. The crisp freshness of pine needles coated her nostrils. Feeling had been sapped from her lips and fingertips. Her head swam from the sensations. Also, the blood loss.

"What is in this stuff?" she asked while trying not to breathe.

"You really should have learned this by now."

Elligia and Persuasia stood at the edge of their family land. Darkness coated the Wood. They'd lit fires, but the light couldn't banish the mist. At the edge of vision, the white bark of a huge birch tree stood out from the canvas of shadow. An unseen owl hooted in the canopy.

"Survivors," Persuasia said. "What lives in the Wood feeds on fear first and flesh second. The warding potion gets its power from things that survive. Perennials, evergreen trees, Mistwood blood."

The older witch thumbed a corked vial of green liquid. Deep in the woods, wary eyes glowed between the trees. Nightbeasts never stood this far back for Elligia. Then again, maybe they didn't for Persuasia either.

"We ward young things, things that will last. Saplings. Adolescent deer that will grow new antlers year after year. It protects but not forever. Nothing does."

The mist drained away. A moment later, two figures coalesced in the night. Bexley appeared unhurt, but her face was haggard and her eyes, red. Probably spent the day terrified and crying. Perch walked behind her, careful to keep her hostage between herself and the witches. Fury shoved aside Elligia's unease.

"Potion ready, fires lit, and an hour to spare." Perch grinned. She looked like a lion after a kill. "You always were the reasonable one."

"Simple trade. Your words. Let the girl go." Persuasia again spoke in a stilted pace. "And the potion is yours."

"Give it to the kid," Perch said. "And stop casting."

She pulled out a revolver. Ebony wood and charred metal. Even at a distance, Elligia felt spellwork waft off the weapon. Guns could be enchanted? What had Perch done, what had she learned, in her time under stolen Mistwood protection?

Persuasia handed Elligia the vial. She approached, eyes on the gun.

"It's alright, Bexley. This is almost over."

Elligia stopped just beyond Perch's reach. She strained her ears. No bugs chirped, nothing rustled among the autumn leaves. Even the glowing eyes had gone.

"Why did you kill my cousins?" Elligia asked.

"I was the law. Witchcraft's illegal." Perch shrugged. Remorseless. "The town required justice."

"Here." Elligia extended the vial. "Let her go."

"Take it," Perch ordered, poking Bexley with the gun.

Bexley took the vial. Her eyes told a grim tale; fear and confusion and a sliver of relief. Rich kids never thought it could get worse because it never had. She handed the potion to Perch. The former sheriff popped the cork and inhaled.

“That horrible stink really is so sweet.” She let out the happy sigh of a wolf laying down with a belly full of deer.

She grabbed Bexley and began to back away. Elligia yelled. Persuasias frowned.

“Can’t give up my protection until I’m out of town. See you again in a few decades, Persuasias.” Perch nearly sang with triumph. “Give my regards to your sister.”

The fires went out. No moonlight shone through the branches. Utter blackness swallowed them. An owl cooed alarm.

“Consider your regards rejected,” someone said. Her voice was high and musical. It wavered with unbreakable surety and unrepentant menace.

Perch cursed. A clack and a shout. Something crashed into Elligia and knocked her to the ground. A whoosh overhead. The nearest fire burst back to life. Bexley; Perch had shoved the girl into Elligia, and they’d both gone down.

Uphoria Mistwood stood atop a cracked tree stump. She looked just like Persuasias, the same sharp lines on her face, the same serious gaze. Unlike her sister, she was short and wiry. An owl sat atop her shoulder. She was better preserved, as if spite had kept her whole.

Perch whirled her gun and fired. The owl beat its wings and the bullet thudded into the stump. It caught fire. Uphoria laughed and stepped unhurt out of the flames. Her movements were fluid and graceful, and Elligia swelled with pride. That’s the potion done right.

“The town requires justice, Anna,” Uphoria said.

Another whoosh overhead. An owl swooped, talons extended. Perch ducked, fired, missed. Another flash from the trees. Another owl, another near miss. Perch hopped away from the fire. She kept the others in front of her.

“I killed you both once.” Perch fired again. The bullet screamed off into the night. “I’ll do it again.”

Between the flicker of the fire’s light, Persuasias and Uphoria vanished.

Elligia grabbed Bexley. They ran away from the fight. The property line was so close. Perch’s pistol cocked. They weren’t going to make it. Elligia shoved Bexley forward and leapt between her and Perch just as the gun banged.

A wet thump and a screech. Elligia fell onto her face inside the wards. She braced for the horror of gunshot pain. Seconds passed, but nothing came.

“Oh no,” Bexley sobbed. Elligia rolled over.

An owl lay dead. A pained cry rang out. Beside the body, a shadow unfolded and spit out Uphoria. More owls swept down from the trees. Talons dug into Perch’s shoulders, her back. She shot and retreated until she stumbled over the birch’s roots.

Persuasias, crouched on the big tree’s lowest branch, snapped off a branch. She threw it to her sister. Uphoria sang to the night in an owl’s coo, low and sorrowful. Persuasias layered below it the discordant call of a crow.

Perch pushed herself to her feet. She turned to run to the safety of anywhere else.

Branches came to life with a horrific creak. They swept toward Perch. She dodged the first. Another caught her chest and dragged her inward. The trunk split into a barred gate. It swung open. Perch screamed threats as branches shoved her into the tree. The bark-gate slammed shut. For a moment, it looked just like a jail. Then the trunk folded over itself and Perch. The night fell silent.

Bexley was ok. A few bumps from the fight, still terrified, but Perch hadn't done her any physical harm. Elligia's leg bled from her fall. Persuasia stepped inside the wards. Uphoria lifted the owl's body with tenderness.

"She's dead?" Bexley asked with hope.

"Jailed," Persuasia said. "Two murders, two life sentences."

"Three," Uphoria corrected.

She pulled something from the dead owl's curled talon. The necklace. She gave it to Bexley, who took it with a grimace.

"She has the vial," Elligia said. "Won't that keep her alive until the spell wears off?"

Persuasia shook her head. "The potion protects. That is all. What spell kept her from time's grasp was not ours."

"Whose then?" Elligia asked.

"Fool child." Uphoria said. "Do you think the Mistwoods the world's only witches?"

Oh. Elligia blushed, half anger, half embarrassment. She hadn't given much thought to the world away from Heron's Neck. Her parents traveled all the time. She'd spent her life alone in a town that hated her. She spent

so much energy trying to survive, she had none leftover to wonder.

"She hated Mistwoods," Bexley said. "She hated you. Why did she pick me?" Confused and angry and resentful.

"The necklace," Elligia said. She'd thought about how the wards worked. "Because it was new, and it would last."

Bexley hadn't deserved what happened. She looked hurt, and someone deserved blame. Maybe it was always like this. Maybe Mistwoods would always get blamed for Heron's Neck's problems because it was easier than accepting that sometimes the world was dangerous, that some birds' beaks were sharp enough to draw blood.

Elligia didn't know what to say. What can you say to a girl who was robbed then kidnapped because of your family and its history? Because of who you are?

It was a shock when Bexley wrapped her arms around Elligia and squeezed. Elligia couldn't remember the last time she'd been hugged. She clamped her arms onto her friend. Was that what Bexley was now? Could Mistwoods have friends?

"That awful woman," Bexley said with a sob and then a laugh. "That awful, awful, woman."

Persuasia sighed. She lifted something; Perch's gun.

"We have mementos," she said. "We must return to our graves before sunrise."

Elligia nodded and stepped out of Bexley's hug.

"Come on." She started toward the graveyard. "I'll bury you both."

"Get two shovels," Bexley said.

Elligia looked at her in confusion. Bexley tried on a smile. It was bright and lively. How did she manage it after the day she'd had? Elligia snorted. Rich kids.

"You had to dig them up for me," Bexley said. "What kind of friend would I be if I let you bury them alone?"



Ashland East likes stories about raising the dead, defending the living and keeping a sharp eye on those in-between. He started writing when he was young, but didn't really go for it until he was less young. Even at (insert age here), you gotta start sometime.

Redlands

by Jay Harper

Stop me if you've heard this one.

Let's say here's a woman, who rides out into the desert, into the red, dead badlands with nothing to her name but the weight of that name. Nothing on her back but the weight of her bones. And nothing on her hip but a revolver, a sloping grey thing the size of a toddler, propped on her hip like it was her own child.

Say she's been hurt, this woman. Say she's been hard-up and hard-used, and weren't none of it even a little bit fair. Say she lit out one night, under a sky like a hole, yawning black and empty like an open grave. Let's say in this country of this woman, grief—cold, angry grief—is a kind of a horse, flea-bitten and high-hocked. Let's say that's the same everywhere, ain't it, that sometimes all you have to carry you forward is the sting of that grief.

Say she stopped, slid from her horse (roan, and soft-nosed, and breathing harder than it is kind for a creature to have to breathe), and say she stood and bared her teeth into the wind and howled when the wind howled. Let's say everything this woman ever held to her heart

was buried in the ground behind her, in a country called the Past. They do things different there.

Let's say this woman—let's call her Tully—let's say she slaps the dirt from her thighs with an old leather hat, and hunkers down to set about making herself a fire. She knows the burn in her throat can burn but it won't keep her warm. She knows that way out, on the edge of everything, where the ground cracks open marrow-red into the bones of the world, there's Justice. They say there is, so there must be.

Tully broods by her fire, squinting into the dark.

The next day, she swaps the gun for a shovel, in a town called Can't-Take-It-With-You.



Tully rides, and her thighs blister. The blisters break. She sleeps. She waters the horse from her own canteen; for herself, Tully presses her face to the walls of slot-canyons, and licks at the hard, dusty water weeping from the rock. Tully goes hungry, Tully tightens her belt, Tully does as needs must—gnaws pemmican and holds up the odd stagecoach, a train.

Tully knows, like you may know, what they say about the Redlands—way out the ass-end of everything with the great, broken-toothed skull of the mountains curving away in the far distance, and the cracked marrow-red of the rocky ground slowly baking and bleaching in the sun, and the sky staring at you, blind, milky, cataract-blue, blue like a dead eye filmed over—in a place like that, surely there must be some Justice to be found.

They say the Redlands are a cold comfort, a mean, desert-cold, where all the great and grand truths of the world are to be found, hiding in a hole in the ground,

because you'd put 'em somewhere safe, wouldn't you? God, locking up his papers in the safe of the red-rock bluffs, all the Mercy and the Grace and the Justice that you never see in the day-to-day, because you'd have to earn them.

This is Tully's last and secret catechism: that the hardness matters. That Justice can be found, if you just hurt *enough*.

Because Tully has hurt. And wouldn't a place like the Redlands, which is nothing but, have to be hiding something *good* in a hard, red place? Wouldn't Justice live where the Dead don't, the last and the only thing any of them were looking for? Wouldn't it just have to be true? Wouldn't it just have to be, before everything stopped meaning anything at all?

You know?



God, it just ain't *fair*.

Tully digs. Comes up empty.

Tully's hands get raw, then wet, then hard.

She is not who she was, probably. Probably not anymore.

She can barely even remember all the reasons why she's doing what she's doing, just that she *has* to, just that she can't not, just there has to be some way to get right.

Sometimes she throws the shovel down, and howls and howls, until her throat cracks, howls until her lungs burst to ribbons, and sometimes that helps.

Mostly it just makes her feel six kinds of stupid.

The digging hurts, but it's a better hurt, so Tully tries, as best she can, to swallow her screams.

It tastes like nothing, nothing at all.



So Tully ain't the first to light out looking for something to make it alright, to make it make sense. Ain't the first to swap a gun for a shovel and go out into the red, dead badlands, trying to dig up some truth to it all. But Tully's the first to find *her*.



Let's say Tully rides so long and so hard her horse comes up lame.

Let's not say that.

It's too sad, poor thing didn't do nothing to deserve that, and the horse, at least, can be afforded a little grace.

Let's say Tully rides so hard and so long, she drops from the saddle like a stone. Say she hits the hard, red ground, say the insides of her eyelids fizz with hard, red stars before they go black.

Say she wakes up when a hard, red woman nudges her temple with one bootheel, and says, "The hell you lookin for out here, then?"

Say Tully croaks "Justice," through the swaddling haze of a concussion and lips cracked to bleeding.

And let's say the woman laughs, a vulturine, tobacco-y rasp of a laugh, and spits into the dirt, and says, "Well, lucky you. You found her."



Justice (Montclair, from a good family back East, 'cause she'd have to be, wouldn't she? Wouldn't she just.) has a narrow, rabbity jaw, and a downy blood-buzz of hair, barely more than a rusty shadow on her scalp, and eyes like a mad prophet, which is to say no eyes at all. Instead, two chunks of roseate feldspar wink in her wind-burnt face, flinty and pink as a winter dawn.

Let's say that in the country of Justice Montclair, they say that it takes hard eyes to see a hard truth, and a hard tongue to say it, and they can teach you the second and give you the first. In her country, the thing that carries you forward is a duty, which is a kind of a horse, long-faced and high-strung, a chestnut gelding with one white sock.

Tully's been up for an hour or two, plying her shovel, fat fishtail braid glued to the back of her neck, while Justice and the bay both whistle through their teeth.

"Ain't gonna find what you're after," Justice hums, narrowing her rosy granite eyes under her hat.

Tully huffs. "And I suppose you'd know."

"Sure would. You ain't the first one to come out this way."

Tully stabs her shovel into fleshy red earth, braces heavily on the handle.

Tully says: "Okay, then what's here?"

Justice spreads her hands. She slouches, leans way, way back in the saddle, and stretches out her empty palms, perfectly balanced. There is an awful pink light behind her stony eyes, shining through them like marble scraped thin.

“This is just the Redlands. There ain’t nothing out here but dirt and blood. All I have to tell you is the thing you don’t wanna hear. The ones you loved who let you down could only carry so much, and they weren’t wrong. The ones who hurt you sleep free and easy, and when their heads hit the pillow, they don’t even think about you at all, not even a little, and you will never make them understand or regret what they did. There’s no Justice out here. What you want ain’t Justice, anyway, because Justice, real Justice is bigger than you, and me, and this place, and it don’t stop with just hurting them back.”

Tully narrows her eyes right back. Tully sets her jaw like shovel-blade to the edge of a grave.

“Could start there.”

Justice laughs. It is neither a friendly nor a companionable sound.

“Sure could,” she allows, “Sure could. But you’d never stop. You’d hafta change the shape of the whole world for that.” Justice snorts, “With your fuckin’ shovel.”

Her stony eyes slip shut.

“Could never do it all alone.”



Truth lives in a hole in the ground, like a diamond, or diamond-back, just as hard and twice as mean. This is a thing they say in Tully’s country, and that Truth brings Justice, and if Tully can just find the one thing, the one white-fanged glittering nugget of the Truth that would prove that all the hurt happened, and it was real, and it meant something, then everything would come right. They’d be sorry.

She could make them sorry. If she could just find it.

In her secret heart, Tully is chewed down to the bone, and nursing a hate that it fell to her at all to prove anything.

Tully nurses this hate like a baby.

Justice Montclair thinks the baby has Tully’s eyes.



Let’s say Justice Montclair was a Justice of the Peace back home. Let’s say Tully was nobody. Let’s say Justice had an accountant for a daddy, let’s say she learned to settle up accounts before she even knew what settling was. Let’s say there’s one fire, and the horse-blankets are thin, and the desert is cold at night, and let’s say that Justice holds Tully to her like a scream you can’t let out. Justice has a hard mouth like a bullet that can only say things you didn’t really want to hear, and let’s say Tully buries her face in Justice’s neck and whispers “it’s not fair,” and let’s say Justice licks hard, salty tear-tracks from Tully’s face like the walls of a slot-canyon, and says, “I know. I know. It never is.”



In the mornings, Tully digs and Justice watches, and when it gets too hot to dig, the two of them fish in a muddy trickle of arroyo that oughta be ashamed to call itself anything more than a stream. At night they sit by one fire, sucking on fish bones that taste clean and cold and like swallowing screams because there’s nowhere to put them. Their ankles knock together. Sometimes Tully stares too long at the firelight thrown up against the rocky crag of Justice Montclair’s awful eyes.

“What do you see out of those?”

“Bits,” Justice says, “Pieces. Shapes of things. Mostly things folks don’t want seen.”



Let’s say there is no Justice in the Redlands.

Let’s say there is no Tully.

Let’s say they saddled up, two women on two horses, which are grief and hurt and duty, with a shovel, which is good for laying foundations, and a thing between them they cannot name.

Let’s hope they make it.



Jay Harper in an itinerant prophet of the Wastelands, and a graduate of U.C. Davis with a degree in Linguistics and Cultural Anthropology. They currently live in Chicago with their girlfriend, and the skulls of several small mammals. This is their first publication

On brutal wing

by Brian Hugenbruch

I step into the center of the glade
with darkness draped around me like a cloak,
and (shivering) I peer into the trees.
The Hunter perches on an oaken branch.
I cannot see her face. The owls hoot
amongst themselves—a strangely feathered moot.

I pull my knitted cap from off my head.
It’s what my mother taught me (rest her soul).
And when I kneel before her, as my Pa
had warned me, ere he passed, I shut my eyes
against the shadows looming all around.
My heart attempts to leap toward the ground.

“It’s time to speak your question, child,” she says.
At first the words are stuck inside my throat,
a jumbled mass of mangled notions. But
the air hangs thick, and not a feather stirs,
and so I force them out: “I... want to know
where home is now. I’ve nowhere else to go.”

My folks are dead, of course. The hut was burned by raiders; neighbors (those not killed) were hauled away to work in distant mines. I hid amongst the trees, at the edge of these haunted woods where even monsters feared the shadows' reach and winds could whisper close to human speech.

The Hunter brings me back from memory with laughter. "Child," she says, "this is your home. You come to us with darkness in your heart, with wisdom earned through terror, and a strength of will to strike your foes. Oh yes—your home is here. Receive your wings; you needn't ever roam."

The harshness of her voice inspires inside of me a horror, and I turn to run too late. I've taken seven steps—and then the talons burst from out my weathered shoes and tear the dirt. I cry out, but my voice is wisdom as a song. Was this my choice?

I flap my wings and settle on a branch of gnarled and twisted oak. She smiles at me, this Hunter, Mother, Teacher... Witch. The wood seems brighter with my owlish eyes. Sharper, and more alive. The raiders, were they here, would look upon our eyes... and learn to fear.

The wind arrives—and with it comes a cry of pain, in human voice, as brutes and beasts return to break yon weaker souls. I look askance as Hunter raises up. "We hunt," she says, and all the woods takes brutal wing as one. It's hell. It's home. It's everything.



Brian Hugenbruch lives in Upstate New York with his wife and their pets. By day, he writes information security programs to protect your data on (and from) the internet. By night, he writes speculative fiction and poetry about imagination, identity, family, and time. His poetry has also appeared in *Abyss & Apex*, *Liminality*, and *Silver Blade*. No, he's not sure how to say his last name, either.

Making Justice

with Erion Makuo

Intention and result are the two halves of Justice. Even with a specific goal in sight, your journey can be balanced, or upset, by unseen forces or the consequences of your own actions. In January 2020, we reached out to Erion Makuo, who created the bewitching cover for Issue 6: Ambition, and asked them to be our Artist-in-Residence for 2021. It wasn't until September that Erion was available to produce covers for our 2021 themes. In a matter of months, we received four unique, gorgeous works of art that we are so excited to show off.

The Pinterest Board for Issue 13: Justice amassed a trove of retro astronauts with giant glass bubble helmets, bulbous laser pistols, and brightly coloured space suits. At the time, I was reading Mary Roach's *Packing for Mars* and learning about my city's free beach wheelchair rentals. Beach wheelchairs have large wheels that can handle different terrains, moving from asphalt to sand to water. I could easily imagine a similar vehicle rolling through the dusty roads of Mars.

I wanted a wheelchair user with a thirst for adventure and a smirk that meant trouble.

Erion sent three images with different approaches to the theme. The first was a younger woman, turning to fire at the viewer. The second was more military with proud shoulders and a boxy rifle. The third was pin-up style, with a gun pointed skyward and a flowing scarf.

We loved all three proposals. Erion is a master at creating dynamic pieces, relaying the character's joy or resolve. Along with the sketches, Erion let us know this was their first painting of a person with a disability. They asked us to review our final choice for any positioning that would be inappropriate.

Intention: a rebellious wheelchair-user who could cause space trouble at a moment's notice.

Result: Well. The result was unknown, but we knew that we were still carving our own path. We could choose our favourite piece and move forward without considering where we would end up. Who needs a map when you can guess, right?

We took a step back and asked Erion for more time to consider the piece and especially the positioning of legs and torso in the image. Via Facebook and Twitter, we sought a paid sensitivity viewer who would be willing to give us some of their time.

Our search introduced us to Allison Wallis. Allison is a writer, wheelchair user, and the founder of the Facebook group Binders Full of Sensitivity Readers. She also has a graduate certificate in Disability and Diversity studies. Allison first asked about how we envisioned the character and offered suggestions on the different ranges of movement and different ability levels we needed to consider and apply to the concept image.

She noted the outreached leg positioning on the first image made little sense for a wheelchair user, though the crossed legs would be fine for an ambulatory wheelchair user. Smaller issues like increasing the distance of the back wheels and the casters could easily be changed, and Allison also dropped the now-obvious-in-retrospect comment that a long flowing scarf was a strangulation hazard. For the chair design, Allison mentioned:

Another issue may be the back of the chair. Most chairs have backs that provide a lot of support for the back. Some people have very low backs, some people (like me) have backs that come up to the shoulder blades, and some people need a headrest. It depends on the needs of your character. But people generally don't sit as far away from the back of the chair as in these illustrations. It seems a little too curved.

We made a list of Allison's recommendations and returned to Erion. We were now positive that the first image, with the old school laser pistol, was the perfect action shot for the cover. Erion took some time and sent us back a new sketch with some important changes. The legs were now on the wheelchair, the safety belt was more obvious, the back of the chair was lowered, and the twist in the back was less arched.

Happy with the image changes, we confirmed the new path and moved forward. Erion sent us four colour schemes, each adding a markedly different tone to the image. We were initially drawn to the hues of orange and yellow in one of the illustrations but it also gave off the faint impression of a dying sun, adding more pathos than we wanted. We ended up choosing a rainbow ringed planet alongside a bright red spacesuit.

What could have been an exercise of arrogance ended up a truly collaborative process. We knew the journey we wanted to take and the story we wanted the image to tell. Erion shaped the journey, but Allison helped us carve the path. Intentions and results. We hope that the result of our action is an inclusive work of art that makes us all long for a little bit of space ruckus.



Written by Rebecca Bennett

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

Find the sketches from Erion Makuo on our website.

Thank you again to Allison Wallis. Her bio is below.

Allison Wallis is a freelance journalist, writer, and disability rights advocate. She lives on the North Shore of Oahu, Hawaii with her daughter, husband, Koa the Tripod dog, and Rosie the chinchilla. Allison earned a Business Administration degree from UIW in San Antonio.

Mostly homebound, Allison has learned to live well at home. She volunteers with her local Legal Aid office as a Fair Housing advocate and helps fellow chronically ill and disabled people learn how to navigate the medical system. An ambulatory wheelchair user, she loves a good, long ramp because rolling down it feels like flying.

Justice Is a Gravitational Lens

by Sameem Siddiqui

You know that Dr. King quote, about the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice? For me, this quote always triggers an image of distorted light streaking around a gravity lens. As if justice is this massive object that, depending on your vantage point, has the ability to obscure, distort, and magnify all at once. If you're aligned perfectly, you'll see what's on the other side, amplified. You'll see every injustice so clearly that it'll drive you into a productive rage or demoralized depression. Some of us are fixed to that alignment. We have no choice but to stare it down, day after day. But others can just drift, a light year or two off course, until the injustices become unnoticeable.

That's my attempt to give meaning to what's probably a nonsensical random association in my head. But, maybe that's alright, because, like justice, that image is just what I make of it. And, if the analogy holds, justice moves and changes in its own right. Gravitational lensing can be caused by a massive, violently churning galaxy or super massive black hole. Forces that are

hardly constant or stable. Maybe this holds for justice as well.

That's a disturbing thought. It's comforting to think that justice is universal and constant and that it's just our understanding of it that changes overtime. But really it's just an imperfect clump of mass that's tumbling and churning through the universe as it interacts with external forces. And we're the primary external force. We, or rather a small subset of us, have the power to force justice or chip away at it gradually.

In Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology*, Benjamin makes the fundamental point that race itself is a technology. It's a human-made classification system used to power a huge component of our societies. Racialization is an engine calibrated with weights and values. It takes people within our society and outputs decisions about what should be done with them. About what opportunities should be provided to them. About where they're allowed to live. About who they're allowed to marry. About what they're allowed to do with their lives.

It's important to remember that with every machine, with every system, there's an intended user that's going to reap the benefits of the output, so let's think of justice as technology, or at least something we use technology to shape and manipulate. We have to continuously ask the questions: who are the intended producers and consumers for justice served in a society? Who is justice designed for? Who are its designers? What are its designers hoping to obscure, distort and magnify? Where, in the view of society, do they place the lens of justice? Who and what do they allow it to examine? Who do they allow to walk by unnoticed?

And when all that is decided, what technologies are developed or co-opted to enable and enforce this justice?

In the anthology *Palestine +100: stories from a century after Nakba*, writers were asked to imagine what life in Palestine would be like in 2048, 100 years after the massive expulsion of Palestinians from present day Israel. None of these stories imagine a great deal of hope for the future of a physical Palestinian state, but all of them explore how technology will continue to be used to restrict their lives and presence in physical spaces. However, many also imagined how technology would be used to carve out virtual spaces through the advancement of AR/VR. Bleak as it is, some of these writers imagined that, if there were any justice to be had in the future of Palestine, it'd be sourced through AR/VR. Almost as if justice in the physical world could no longer be reshaped.

In the US, the recent ubiquity of smartphones and police body cameras have played a weird role in justice. While they've exposed a great deal of injustice disproportionately perpetrated on the Black community by police, they're also a voyeuristic tool readily exploited by capitalist media enterprises. The Black community has been pleading to the rest of us for decades to pay attention to these injustices, but it has only become a mainstream news topic when there's footage of Black people being harmed. Yet, when footage is mysteriously unavailable, the issue doesn't quite dominate our news cycles the same way.

Since we're so intrigued by this type of footage, why not strap body cameras to people with the most power in our world? If cost is an issue, let's start small and buy just enough for the president, vice president, cabinet members, congresspersons and senators. Systemically, these are people who can do a great deal more harm

than any single police officer. So why not require all their professional dealings, the rooms where it happens, backroom conversations and all, be a matter of public record? This extreme level of transparency sounds intense, but given the massive scale of influence these people have on the world at the moment, I'm not sure it's entirely unreasonable.

But what if, instead, we just scaled this influence down? In *Infomocracy*, Malka Older explores this by restructuring the world's governments with centenals, "microdemocracies" with constituencies of no more than one hundred thousand people. The system works on the backbone of Information, a massive tech company that has taken over basic bureaucratic functions which enable the global electorate to not only vote, but to stay informed on what and who they're voting for. This is key, as the story explores how such a system is made vulnerable when its technology is infiltrated and subverted. But even without any foul play, political parties that get elected in these centenals might ladder up to larger conglomerates with an inordinate amount of power. While Older shows justice in this world of microdemocracies will continue to be imperfect, she demonstrates their potential to move us toward a more just global union.

No matter the shape of our systems, how we measure their success says a lot about how we think about justice. Over the last one hundred years, gross domestic product (GDP) has been the gold standard for measuring societies. Of course as a country's GDP rises we see improved standards of living, but it doesn't measure how even those improvements are. It's just an average that could be masking massive wealth inequalities. For instance, the US has the eighth highest GDP per capita but the fourth highest wealth inequality in the world.

GDP then seems mostly useful as a metric for investors in a country to gauge their return on investment. In *Doughnut Economics*, Kate Raworth imagines a more just set of metrics that would instead seek to keep societies in a carefully calibrated doughnut between fundamental civic needs (health care, education, social services, infrastructure, etc) and practical ecological realities (resource management, environmental impact, climate change, etc).

It sounds frustrating to think of justice as ever changing, massive and complex. How can we constantly construct the most perfect tools and systems to reshape and harness this gravity lens to solve problems and protect the vulnerable? But, it might be the only way to deal with how clever yet short sided and selfish we can be as a species. Inevitably, we find ways to circumvent systems of justice, either to overcome the oppression these systems were designed to enforce or to bend these systems to favor some over others. And, perhaps as long as matter in the universe continuously churns, accretes and disintegrates, so will justice.



Sameem Siddiqui is a speculative fiction writer currently living in the United States. He enjoys writing to explore the near future realities people of South Asian ancestry and Muslim heritage will face in the coming centuries. His stories explore issues of migration, gender, family structure, economics and space habitation. He's attended the Tin House

and FutureScapes workshops and his stories have appeared in *Clarkesworld* and *ApparitionLit*. Some of Sameem's favorite authors include Kurt Vonnegut, Octavia Butler and Haruki Murakami. When he's not writing, Sameem enjoys reveling in fatherhood, watching 90's *Star Trek* and tinkering with data and music. You can find him on Twitter @s_meems or at sameemwrites.com.

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