

# APPARITION

## Literary Magazine



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**ISSUE 15:  
CONTAMINATION**

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DECEMBER CUCCARO**



# Apparition Lit

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Marla Bingcang, Kel Coleman, December Cuccaro,  
Sylvia Ho, Venne Hrzaan, Ewen Ma and H.E. Casson  
Guest Editor: Aigner Loren Wilson

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# A Word From the Editor

by Aigner Loren Wilson

**D**ear reader,

I am honored, shaken, and blown away by the fact that I am sitting here writing this to you now. You, of course, aren't going to see this for another week or so, but know I'm thinking about you now, always, and forever.

Because, for me, that's how I see being an editor. I'm not a gatekeeper or a curator keeping readers from writers and writers from readers.

My job as a reader and editor is to act as, well, patient zero.

Stories come in, all with their own merits—okay, fine, some without any merits—and they each hold this sorta pathogen or ghost. It's sometimes hard to see what these stories carry or if it will be harmful, beautiful, traumatizing, worthwhile, healing. That's why content warnings and notes are such a beautiful thing! They are warning labels to prepare you for how a story is going to affect you.

**CAUTION THIS STORY MAY REMIND YOU OF THAT ONE FAMILY MEMBER YOU HAVEN'T TALKED TO IN A WHILE.** (The Godmaker's Cure by December Cuccaro)

MAY CAUSE READERS TO CRY OVER BREAKUPS THAT SHOULD NEVER HAVE HAPPENED AND ONES STEADILY ON THE HORIZON. (I Wear My Spiders in Remembrance of Myself by Kel Coleman)

READ WITH TISSUES/A FRIEND/CLOSE TO YOUR NEXT THERAPIST APPOINTMENT. (the whole damn issue)

For themed issues like what Apparition Literary does, there's an even smaller pool of stories to sample from. A story that may be a knock-out won't catch if it doesn't align with what we, as carriers of spec fic, want to send out into the world. Submissions are your chance to spread your stories past the pages on your screen or in your journal.

And that's what writers, I think, should remember when submitting stories.

The testing stage is over. Once you send your stories out, they'll grow, mutate into something new with each host they latch onto.

In this weird metaphor, what I'm trying to say is: stories change you.

They reshape how you see the world, yourself.

As guest patient zero for the Contamination Issue of Apparition Lit, I hope that I helped choose stories that feed your loneliness, your need for good stories, that ache you can't name. My greatest wish as an editor is that these stories fully and deeply infect you.



**Aigner Loren Wilson** is a queer Black SFWA, HWA, and Codex speculative fiction, poetry, game, and nonfiction writer whose work visits themes of family, love, and friendship. She is an associate editor and copy editor for *Strange Horizons* and the horror podcast *NIGHTLIGHT*. On top of her guest editing role with *Apparition Literary*, she is also serving as a guest editor for *Fireside Magazine's* Winter 2022 Issues. Aigner writes regularly for *Tor Nightfire*, *Discover Pods*, and more. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Lightspeed Magazine*, *WIRED*, *The Writer*, *FIYAH*, and many more. She is also currently querying a BIPOC queer scifi adult thriller. To check out her short story and poetry collections, games, and courses visit her website (<https://aignerlwilson.com/>).



# I Wear My Spiders in Remembrance of Myself

by Kel Coleman

**M**y earliest memory of the spiders is from preschool. I'm toiling over a pot of plastic spaghetti, and I look over my shoulder to ask the boy whose mom is friends with my mom if he wants meatballs with his serving. He's building a wobbly tower out of wooden blocks, and our teacher kneels across from him making cutesy faces. She pats his head, and her fingers linger in his hair, squeezing and pulling at the dense curls.

A spider the size of a pea crawls from her mouth and drops to the floor like a black tear.

I'm transfixed, only distantly aware of the spatula digging into my palm. The boy doesn't seem to notice the spider, too busy with his blocks, and it's right in front of the teacher, but she doesn't seem to care. The longer I watch it jittering toward the boy, the harder it is to see. There are just three spindly legs on his jeans before it vanishes completely.



The next time I see one of the spiders—the kind that comes out of people—is in a cooking class with my mom at the rec center.

There are eight of us, plus the instructor, standing around a folding table in a cramped lunchroom. In a few places, the faux-wood tabletop peels away from the brown rubber rim like oversized, misshapen fingernails. The table is too low, even for a fifth-grader, so all of us are stooped over our cutting boards, trying to chop tomatoes as cleanly as the instructor and failing. Each cooking pair has their own set of ingredients and utensils, but we only have two electric burners between us. The male half of the couple my mom and I are sharing our burner with gestures at me, smiling. He says something to my mom about my absent father and two spiders crawl out, twin stitches at the corners of his mouth.

I jerk back. The spoon I'm holding hits a silver bowl. Yellow tomato seeds nestled in their reddish ooze slop onto the table.

The spiders lower themselves onto the couple's cutting board, threads hitched to the man's stubble. I start to point, but Mom snatches my arm out of the air and murmurs apologies as she drags me out of the room. I can feel everyone staring, and I want to shout back at them, *Why are you looking at me? Didn't you see what came out of his mouth?*

I resist Mom's pull, but she doesn't let go until we're halfway down the hallway. She looks around before speaking, her braids shifting with a sound like reeds in the wind.

“Aniyah—”

“That man—”

“I know, it’s—”

“The spiders—”

“I know.”

Mom explains how some people can see the spiders, but most people can’t unless they were made for them. How the people who make the spiders can’t feel them. How they aren’t our doing, but they’re our problem now.

“Can we go home?” I ask. I’m hot with embarrassment at what the man said and at what everyone must think of how I reacted.

But we have to collect our things, including the spiders because, according to Mom, they’ll just find their way to the house anyway, and it’s better to know where they are.

It’s not until we’re in the car, gusts of summer heat coming through the window, that it occurs to me Mom overlooked an easy solution. I can’t stop staring at the opaque pill bottle in the cup holder, and before she can get on me for littering, I snatch it up and toss it out the window.

“There,” I say, smug.

Mom sighs. “They’ll be back.”

One of the spiders—her spider—is on her door handle after we park. She uses a tube of chapstick to herd it into her purse. As we’re stepping into the air-conditioned house, something tickles my neck. I yelp and flail and the spider—my spider—falls to the floor.

I stomp on it. Twice. Hard. I grind my foot into the laminate.

When I lift my sneaker, I look for the black smear, but I already have a sick gray feeling in my stomach.

Rigid, black filaments pick at the mesh sides of my

shoe, then the round body of the spider phases from transparent to visible. I kick off my shoe and scream, more angry than frightened.

Mom pulls me away from the spider and into a hug. She apologizes and doesn't let go until my breathing is normal. I don't know why she's apologizing—it's not like she made the spider—but I let her say she's sorry, that I should go get myself a snack, and she'll take care of it for now.

Later, Mom gives me a matchbox and tells me my spider is in it. When I ask what I'm supposed to do with it, she says she puts hers in a drawer and goes about her day.



In the middle of my freshman year, I join the debate club because I have a crush on the senior who runs it.

I flirt with him. Clumsily. I compliment him on his talking points, his Jordans, and his clean edges. He smiles indulgently, and I see the way the older girls roll their eyes at me. It's not like I expect anything. It's just, he's smart and he holds the door open for me like a gentleman. I write his name in my black-and-white notebook and draw hearts all over the page.

One afternoon, debate club is cut short because of snow and he offers me a ride home. I text my mom to let her know and run to the bathroom to check my breath and reapply my pineapple body mist. I lean into the mirror and wish my new hair growth wasn't so obvious, but I practice smiling and tucking my hair casually behind my ear and am satisfied with the effect.

He has a black ice air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror, and the sandalwood scent fills the car as he blasts the heat.



The snow is just starting to fall. It melts when it hits the front windshield.

I complain about algebra, and he commiserates about the teacher, who was the same when he was a freshman. He talks about her pop quizzes and excess homework, but I'm thinking about how she calls on you just to make you feel small, the spiders you earn by not knowing the answers. He's telling me about the colleges he's applied to when he parks on a quiet side street a few minutes from my house.

His coat crinkles as he turns to look at me. I can taste my heartbeat.

"So, Aniyah... I noticed you lookin' at me." He licks his lips. "You're pretty cute for a freshman."

He asks if he can kiss me, and we move awkwardly to his backseat.

His lips are dry and he smells like fruit snacks. I pretend our tongues are dueling lightsabers. If I'm doing it wrong, he doesn't correct me. He turned the car off when we relocated, so his hand is cold under my shirt. I flinch. He chuckles.

I gently push him away. "Could we wait, maybe? I don't have a lot of experience." I don't admit this is my first real kiss if I'm not counting the handful of pecks I shared with a girl at swim camp when I was twelve.

He looks at me like I switched languages mid-sentence, then he smiles. His tone is playful. "What are we waiting for?"

"Uh, I don't know. I thought maybe we could go on a date?"

His expression makes me feel silly and young. He squeezes himself through the front of his jeans. "But

I'm hard now. You're so pretty; I can't wait." He uses his free hand to cup my cheek.

I bite my lip, making my teeth sticky with gloss.

"What if you just touch it?" He starts to unzip his pants.

But I tell him my mom is expecting me. I say please take me home.

He's a gentleman, so he does. He doesn't turn the heat back on, though, so I distract myself by making clouds with my breath.

He says he thought I was mature for my age. His jaw is clenched so tight I don't know how the spider with the thick, yellow-spotted thorax makes it out.

It crawls across the center console, phasing in and out of visibility. By the time we pull up to my house, it's in my lap. I know I shouldn't bother, but I brush it off my pants and onto the snow-dusted grass as I get out of his car. I give him a tiny wave. He fiddles with his radio, not looking up.

I want to ask if we're still friends, but all I can muster is, "See ya." I shut the car door harder than I mean to.

He doesn't say anything before he drives away.

Mom isn't home yet, so I go up to my room to do homework. As I get situated at my desk, the yellow-spotted spider appears on my laptop, then darts forward. Its bite is like a hot curling iron pressed to the back of my hand.

I hiss and jerk to my feet. I've never been bitten by one before.

I grab the mason jar from my bedside table and use a piece of paper to brush the spider into the jar with the handful of others.

I think it's adrenaline when sweat bubbles on the back of my neck and my heart sprints, but then the phantom bite mark balloons to the size of a marble. I'm hot and cold and trembling and if there's any oxygen in the room, I can't tell.

When Mom gets home, she finds me kneeling over the toilet, palms flat on the tile. She brings me water. When I show her the cause of my sickness, she doesn't ask where this new kind of spider came from. I get the feeling she sort of knows.

I skip dinner and go to bed early, but can't fall asleep. The ghostly red swell on my hand throbs in time with my heart, and the backseat of his car is burned on the inside of my eyelids.



I meet a girl at one of the pubs near campus. She has rosy skin, glossy black curls, and a smattering of freckles under her eyes. She's the first person I've ever met who discusses her spiders so brazenly.

While she explains that they're a major issue within her doctorate program, a spider dangles from her hair, another paces up and down her arm. She pauses to go to the bar and comes back with a drink for me. She shoves into the booth next to me and continues talking like she never stopped.

"And anyone who tries to raise hell with the department about them is eventually pushed out." She drains her cocktail in three gulps. "But I don't care."

As we drink, we move on to casual topics like my reality TV guilty pleasures and her ball python back at her parents' house in Ohio. She introduces me to picklebacks and our first kiss is salty.

I take her to my apartment and introduce her to my roommates, who are playing a video game in the living room. All of us have spiders—except Liz, who can't even see ours unless we hold them up to the light and she tilts her head just so—but we don't usually talk about them or show them off around strangers. In the hours we spent at the pub, I got used to the girl's spiders being on display—I actually kind of like it—but Dee texts me and tells me she's making everyone uncomfortable, so I shuttle her to the kitchen.

I scrounge up just enough sugar from ill-gotten diner packets to make dough for butter cookies. The girl sits on the island and asks about my summer internship at the “fancy restaurant.” I tell her it was mostly washing dishes, though I did have some fun with the fry chef.

“Ooh,” she says, “tell me about that.”

But when I describe the way his beard tickled, she stiffens.

“I thought you were gay.”

I grin. “At least half the time.”

She tells me she has to go, actually. And before I can ask for her number, she's out the door, leaving behind a spider of her own making.

I put the sheet of cookies in the oven and eye the spider blinking in and out of view, steadily coming toward me across the counter. I put my hand out because I can tell it's not the biting kind, and it crawls onto my palm. I consider putting it in my hair...

But Dee comes into the kitchen, and I close my hand around it. I ask her to keep an eye on my cookies for a minute and jog up the stairs to my room. I drop it into the shoebox under my bed. The new addition is quickly lost amid scrabbling limbs.





I meet the man with the tawny eyes online. He has a blazing sense of humor, and he loves that my style of cooking is “so unpretentious.” We fuck like dying things, like crash survivors stranded in a sticky, dizzying jungle.

Which is probably why he gives me the wildest, most vicious spiders.

They escape no matter where I put them. They bite. They burrow, making phantom tunnels in my flesh and bulges under my skin. One night, I dream that I’m eating plump, pink salmon. No matter how fastidious I am, I keep choking on bones. I wake with my throat twitching and run to the bathroom. I don’t let myself see what comes up.

After a while, I can’t help recoiling when he reaches for me. I’m disgusted by how much of an imprint he’s already left. He tells me if I won’t give it up, I can’t blame him when he finds it somewhere else.

We break up during our six-month anniversary dinner. He leaves before dessert and takes the car with him. I stay and eat the cheesecake we were going to split. It is unctuous, the raspberry coulis vibrant. I take my time sipping the accompanying espresso, then call my mom for a ride.



Kessa is the geekiest, weirdest, loudest person I’ve ever dated. She makes nachos with kettle chips, runs a D&D group for women of color, and collects pig figurines and mini-bottles of liquor no one is allowed to drink.

When Kess complains about spiders, which is often but with very little heat—she does so at full volume. In

the middle of crowded restaurants, parks, in the theater before the movie begins. People stare. At her. Not at the spiders, of course, though she has plenty and they follow her everywhere. She tells me she's never tried to keep them contained, but she doesn't mind that I do.

It's only two months in, after a Sunday morning spent in bed has wrapped me in the sweet citrus scent of her, when I throw an arm over Kessa's sweat-slick waist, pull her against my chest, and think, *I love you*.

Mom invites her to Thanksgiving with the whole family, all forty-two of them. I warn Kess they can be A LOT, but she insists on coming. And, even though I'm the cook and plan on bringing no less than three side dishes, Kess has to bring her "award-winning" carrot pie. She won't tell me which award it won and won't budge when I try to get her to make one with pumpkin or sweet potatoes like a normal person.

At Thanksgiving, Kessa plays with my baby cousins, talks football with my uncles, and promises to tutor two of my cousins in math. After dinner, she drinks wine with my mom and my aunts and talks about her spiders, even showing off one that's hitched a ride on her jacket. I pat her leg and try to change the subject.

My aunts surprise me by talking about their spiders in kind. My favorite aunt's voice even gets scratchy with withheld tears. I'm ashamed of myself, but I leave the room. Because it makes me uncomfortable to hear their stories. Because I've always thought of them as giants with skin like elephant hide. Because nothing much has changed since they were our age.

When I come back, they've started in on dessert, little helpings of everything on each of their plates. The carrot pie is even represented in tiny, tiny slivers.

Everyone dutifully tries the pie and makes “mmm” sounds.

When Kessa is out of earshot, my favorite aunt smiles at me. “I like this one, ‘Niyah.”

Another aunt says, “Mmhm. But please tell that child, ain’t nobody ask for carrots in pie.”



After all of our possessions are crammed into a moving truck, Kessa and I stare out at the city from our high-rise one last time. I was going to wait until we’d settled into our new home, but she leans into the window, bracing a palm against the glass for a better view of the street below. The setting sun frames her in honey-gold. Without thinking, I get down on one knee behind her, pull the ring box from my jacket’s inner pocket, and hold it up. She takes so long to notice my arm starts shaking. I clear my throat.

Kess turns around and gasps. Then she throws herself at me before I can even ask the question.



Mom always said it might take me a while to find my people, being Black and queer and in possession of “a finely tuned bullshit meter.”

But I do. And I’m surprised to find them in the suburbs.

We make friends with people who are passionate about art and food and saving the world. I secure a location for my catering business and assemble a team that reflects the diversity of our new neighborhood. I fall for a guy named Julian who is witty and mellow, a photographer by day—usually for events, sometimes for his own projects—and a drag king by night. When

his ex-wife sells the house they once shared, Kessa, though she never wanted a roommate, begs him to move in with us.

Of course, there are spiders.

Kessa brings home a new one from work at least once a week. And the last time Julian went to the ER, he left without treatment because the doctor spat one onto the thin, paper sheets. Julian called him on it, but the doctor refused to acknowledge it even though Julian knows he saw.

I do my best to keep mine contained, but when I'm stressed, they have a habit of getting loose. I'll sit in my favorite chair, only to jump to my feet when one appears on my armrest; or slam down my glass of whiskey right before I swallow a biter floating in the amber liquid; or try to read a book and find it hard to ignore the shifting of the tunneling ones under my skin.

And sometimes... we give each other spiders. Never big ones, seldom biting ones, but it doesn't matter because they're always a burden. We learn from each other, though. We work to catch the spiders before they can crawl from our mouths, and we grind them to a bitter paste.



We're at the studio in the city that Julian's renting for his latest project. I'd planned to busy myself with menu-planning at a nearby cafe, but Kess has talked me into coming up.

The setup is minimal. A bare wooden floor, a bare white wall, a few lights, and a tripod. The only people in the room besides me, Kess, and Julian are Julian's assistant and a makeup artist, whom Kess waves away because she spent two hours doing her own makeup.



Sooner than I'd like, Julian is done with test shots and like a sick magic trick, Kessa's spiders materialize. Some are just bulbous, furry thoraxes, some just wiry limbs, others fully visible, still others are probably visible only to her. They crawl over her shirt, her collarbone, the hollow of her neck—my favorite place to kiss—her hands, her jeans, and—

I try not to look as horrified as I feel because Kessa is smiling and posing like superwoman, proud of what she's survived, and I would never take that away from her.

Afterwards, while she's in the bathroom, Julian hands his camera off to his assistant and walks over to the corner I've been lurking in. He squats down and asks me what I thought.

I tell him the truth. That I don't understand how he can do this project or how Kessa lets those things sit on her skin every day or how she smiles through it all. Julian nods while I talk, then fetches a tablet to show me the other photos he's taken for this series. They're incomplete, he tells me. The spiders still need to be added back in.

Each photo is different. Melancholy, defiant, euphoric, one is so raw and jagged it's hard to look at but even harder to look away from. The one thing they all have in common is how open they are; even the brooding self-portrait Julian took has a vulnerability in the eyes. I fall a little in love with each of his subjects. And when Julian asks me if I'd like to try a shoot, no obligation to finish or let him display the results, I say yes before I think of all the reasons to say no.

Back at home, while I catch up on menu-planning, Julian hands Kessa a tablet and a stylus. I peek over at the screen. She's smirking, hands on hips, with none

of the horror I saw rendered by the camera, at least not to my eyes. Following Julian's instructions, Kess traces the outlines of spiders only she can see in bold colors and thick lines.



Julian encourages me to bare some skin—the result will be more evocative, he says. So, I put on a black sleeveless top and a pair of black jeans.

The setup is the same. I try to wave off the makeup person like Kessa did, but she says I should at least let them put some powder on me to reduce shine. Once I'm standing in front of Julian, my focus has narrowed to keeping down my breakfast. He takes a few test shots, then he tells me it's time.

So, I close my eyes and think of my spiders, willing them to come to me.

Julian tilts his head. "I don't see anything. Normally, I can see a few of them." When I don't respond, he asks, "Are they there?"

I open my eyes and glare at him. "No." I soften my tone. "Sorry, no. I don't know how."

Kess made it look effortless, and maybe, for her, it was... she keeps her spiders close, just waiting to show them to others. I've spent my whole life containing mine—I don't know how to do the opposite.

For the next forty minutes, I try everyone's suggestions: I close my eyes and visualize the spiders, I do breathing exercises, I sketch the one that stands out most vividly in my mind, I yell at the top of my lungs even though it feels like goofy improv shit. Nothing.

I apologize and tell him to forget it, but Julian shushes me and rubs his chin. Finally, he asks his assistant and

the makeup artist to leave the room—in fact, he says, if they could go get everyone some lunch and take their time, that would be great. The assistant splutters and insists they're needed, but Kess volunteers to do their job, saying, how hard can it be to get stuff out of a bag?

Julian has to smooth things over, but they leave.

He gives me a gentle smile. "Now, Aniyah, it's just me and Kessa. We've seen some of them before, could you start with those?"

I try visualization again, but still, nothing happens.

"What if you open your eyes," says Julian, "and just talk. Tell us about one of your spiders and how you got it. Be as detailed as you're comfortable with."

For long minutes, I stare at a scuff on the wood floor, memorizing its feathered edges, then I tell them about the boy from high school... the snow drifting past the car window... the moment magical until... his hand cold on my stomach...

A spider materializes on the back of my hand, and I instinctively try to shake it off. Julian tells me to leave it, keep talking.

The spider starts as a translucent thing, hard body like a raindrop, limbs like spun sugar. As I talk, as I acknowledge it, its opacity shifts. The lighter end of gray then gunmetal then black with those marigold spots. Somehow, I know it won't bite me again.

As I tell the stories, the spiders are summoned from the box I store high in a closet at home. Some come quicker than others, some more assembled, some less, others as ghostly as my memories of receiving them. Only a few bite, as if most have lost their fangs. But the bristling mass makes a parade of my flesh. My breaths come short and shallow, and there is one on my face,

picking at the delicate skin of my lips. When Julian asks if I want to stop, I don't know how, but I manage to shake my head. Frantically. I want to do this for each stage of myself, every Aniyah that survived so I could have a life full of food and love and drag shows and pig figurines and even bad reality television.

When I get to those six months with the man who used words like scalpels and the spiders writhe between muscle and skin like butterfly needles trawling for veins, I realize I'd been braced for them to tear their way back out, thinking of my body as their container. But this is as seen as they will ever be. Something about this irreversible invasion, that it can't be completely shared, even with the two people I care most about, that I will always bear these spiders so intimately...

Kessa starts towards me, but Julian puts out an arm to halt her and continues snapping photos. I hate crying. And because I hate crying, my jaw is clenched against the act. The sound that escapes is like a rusted hand crank.



Julian lets me into the gallery hours early because I can't be here when the exhibition opens. I can't look at people looking at my picture. I can't listen to their judgments of the lighting or my shaky sketches when it's my pain that's on display.

I walk around the circular exhibit, starting with the other seven photos in the series. I'm especially interested in what each of them chose for Julian's title prompt, *I Wear My Spiders-dot-dot-dot*. Kessa's makes me smile: *I Wear My Spiders, They Don't Wear Me*. Julian's makes me laugh: *I Wear My Spiders Because FUCK YOU*.

I finally come to my photograph.



Cross-legged, tear-streaked, my hands squeezing my knees, my eyes gazing directly into the camera like an accusation, or an appeal. Brown skin, black outfit, and all over, crude spiders drawn in white—chalk outlines of trauma. Underneath the tracings, visible only to me, are my actual spiders. I give in to the urge to touch the dark wood frame, tracing one corner with the tip of my finger.

I thought I'd feel pride like Kessa or bitter satisfaction like Julian, but since I'm the only one here, I just feel... seen.



**Kel Coleman** is an author, editor, and stay-at-home mom. Their fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *FIYAH*, *Anathema: Spec from the Margins*, and *Unfettered Hexes: Queer Tales of Insatiable Darkness*. They are also an Assistant Editor at *Diabolical Plots*. Kel is a Marylander at heart, but their new home is in the Philadelphia suburbs with their husband, tiny human, and stuffed dragon named Pen. You can find them online at [kelcoleman.com](http://kelcoleman.com) and on Twitter at [@kcolemanwrites](https://twitter.com/kcolemanwrites)

# Inextricable

by Venne Hrzaan

on the third day,  
the ache in your chest becomes a bloom  
(muscle injury, you thought, tendonitis)  
but instead it is a  
    two-inch tall seedling  
    with three thin, quivering  
    verdant-green leaves  
and after consuming the ship's encyclopedia,  
you determine it resembles a thistle plant

good that it is not a muscle injury from  
repairing the hull breach last week  
    bad because the organ scan shows  
    you are ~~being subsumed~~ dying

protocol for contamination  
is to  
    slowly, gently,  
    stoically  
    enter the immolation chamber

but you are alone so  
no one is there to  
chide you as  
you angle your ship off the return course,  
away from home,  
(being gentle with the small  
plant protruding  
just to the left of your right breast,  
tendrils rooted around your  
superior vena cava already)  
setting course toward  
distant stars you will  
never reach

let this be, you think,  
a quiet, comfortable tomb  
for  
the  
two of you



**Venne Hrzaan** writes speculative fiction and poetry. When she's not guarding corn muffins from her cat, she sketches the fantastical, or takes walks in the strange tangle that is Florida. You can find her on Twitter @vhrzaan

# The Godmaker's Cure

by December Cuccaro

**O**n the far side of the Redbloom forest, Morena made gods—of wind, water, stone, and of other found things, of love, good fortune, nature, and whatever else called to her. She loved the nature gods best, the ones that smelled of berries ripening to wine in the sun and felt like hazy summer naps. She held such a god in her cupped hands, one she'd shaped from antler and clothed in shed deer velvet. Morena lingered for a moment in the god's thoughts; he dreamed of trees reaching down into the deep earth, napping in the dappled sunlight, and offerings of honey. He was ready for worship, but not from her. Godmakers do not have gods of their own.

She tied a bit of twine around his cloven-hoofed foot with a soft paper label describing his preferred offerings and bounties he could give in return. Then, thumbing him lovingly one last time, she took him outside to place in the basket with all the others. The wicker basket was half-full, though there'd been a dozen gods in there yesterday. Perhaps they'd been adopted, she thought, though usually visitors come and ask before taking one—worshippers tended to be a nervous bunch, full of questions.

As she plunked the god into the basket, the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. She looked out across her garden. Beyond the little wooden fence separating her home from the forest, a young woman stared back at her. She looked no more than fifteen and, though it was warm out, she clutched a gray and thin-worn woolen cloak about her. She was lean in a way that spoke of hardship, and her eyes, dark as rain-soaked soil, darted from Morena to the basket of gods outside the cottage door.

“I think I need your help,” the girl said.

Morena was used to pilgrims coming to make requests. Her first instinct was to offer the girl a god of good fortune, a gentle god who would lead her to a warm hearth, or a new family—that was usually what stray young women needed. She reached down into the basket, brushing the tops of each god’s head and waiting for them to answer her touch, but none of them clamored to be claimed.

Before she could say anything about the gods’ refusal, the girl offered, “I can pay,” and opened up the leather pouch at her hip to reveal a purse full of gems and silver coins.

The contrast between her apparent poverty and the pouch of wealth intrigued Morena, though she had little use for money. “What’s your name?” she asked as she beckoned the girl to come closer.

“Aradia. Dia.” The girl shuffled obediently into the yard, but no further than the first cobbled step of the garden path.

Well, that wouldn’t do. Morena gestured again, a little more impatiently this time. When the girl wouldn’t come any farther, she moved to close the distance between them.

Dia raised a hand to stop Morena as she drew near. With trembling fingers, she let her cloak slip to the ground and tugged down the neck of her loose shirt. Grafted onto Dia's chest was a god. Morena had never seen anything like it; it looked larger than any of the gods she'd ever made, almost the size of her forearm. It had its back to Morena, and the upper half of its stark white body extended out from Dia's sternum. Its arms wrapped around her neck and its head pressed against her throat, which bobbed as she swallowed nervously. Where it blended into the girl's bony chest, thick veins ran like rivers from the girl's skin onto the god.

Morena reached out and touched it gently. It was warm and softer than it should have been, as if growing its own flesh. Yes, she realized, it was feeding off Dia. It would kill her and take her body. Gods were dangerous in human form, they could be destructive creatures with uncurbed appetites, taking and taking without regard for the mortals they abused. Shaping them into idols, as Morena did, limited their powers and created the give-and-take relationship that benefitted both parties. The god twisted around and swatted Morena's prodding fingers away. It hissed something incomprehensible as it did so, and the malevolence emanating from its wrathful stare summoned a pit in her stomach. It had no eyes and no mouth but gaping darkness where both should have been.

"How close did you keep it?" It seemed a silly question after she asked, for obviously, the girl must have kept it clutched against her heart else it wouldn't have lodged itself there.

"Under my clothes."

Gods were not meant to be carried so closely—you put them on an altar, but you don't carry them. Morena always advised pilgrims and would-be worshippers



not to keep their gods too close, though she had never actually seen the consequences of a lengthy overexposure. Perhaps her mother had, the one who'd taught her how to channel the gods she heard into creation, or her sister, who had always been the one whispering to the gloomier gods, but she couldn't ask either of them; the first due to death, the second due to an ardent lack of desire. It had been a long time since she'd seen Eliana, and they had not parted favorably.

At mother's funeral, they had divvied up her bones, according to which ones begged to be shaped into gods. Morena had always had the stronger connection to mother, and to the kinder sort of gods, and so she had claimed mother's good bones. And some of the bones she still had, wrapped in linen cloth under her bed, waiting for the whispers of creation to beckon her shaping hands.

Eliana had been left with mother's lower jaw bone, the half-rotted teeth that had occupied it, a few fingers, and her left femur.

It had been years since she'd thought of her sister—the twenty years since their mother had died—but this looked like Eliana's godmaking.

“Where did you get this?” Morena hadn't ever made anything so eager to take and wasn't quite sure what to do with it.

Dia shrugged her shirt back into place. “It was my mother's.”

Morena pursed her lips. Not made, but inherited. Inherited gods were often unwieldy, picky little things. They get used to a certain kind of prayer, certain offerings. It would feed off Dia until she was nothing but a carved-out vessel for its destructive will, and by the time it finished, it would be strong enough to walk

away on its own. She looked at the girl again; the yellow cast to her skin spoke of a wasting illness and even as Morena watched, the veins connecting girl and god pulsed with the blood it drank, a steady flow of stolen life. The unevenness of the gouges where it had been carved to shape confirmed to Morena that this terrible god was her sister's.

Morena's instinct was to turn the girl away; she didn't know how to handle Eliana's work. But it would be a danger to leave someone in this condition—what havoc would it wreck upon the world once it was done draining the girl's life? There was nowhere else the girl could go; there were few godmakers, and fewer still who would work on such a malformed deity. She couldn't in good conscience let it loose. And for the little petty part of her that took pleasure in such things, it was another opportunity to prove herself the stronger sister.

"Come inside," she said and took Dia by the elbow.

As the girl drew close to the cottage door, the unclaimed gods in the basket began to protest. Their cries rang in Morena's mind, a cacophony like too many bells clanging against one another as they all clamored to be the first one obeyed, but Dia didn't seem to notice their displeasure. They would have had to have been greatly upset for their calls to reach Morena without laying her hands on them, and that was usually the kind of thing others could feel as well. Curious.

She guided Dia to a chair beside the cold hearth. She didn't often bring pilgrims inside her small home, but it didn't seem right to do this all out in the open.

Smoothing her apron down with a swift swipe and kneeling beside the girl, Morena asked, "Now, before we continue, I must know: what is this a god of?"

"Desire."

As if responding to a name, the thing squirmed under Dia's shirt. What an awful thing to inherit. There are no good gods made of desire—petty, impulsive things that they are. Morena had never needed to dislodge a god from a worshipper before but thought perhaps balance could disentangle the god from the girl's skin. Dualistic gods were out of fashion for the moment, but surely if she made a counter to the desire god, it would have to release Dia.

“And what does it desire?”

“Everything. Anything. Its wishes are frequent and fleeting.” Dia crossed her thin arms over her stomach. “And it's hungry all the time.”

Morena patted the girl on the shoulder, then rose up again. She didn't want to feed the god, but it wouldn't do to let it starve the girl. She gathered a loaf of fresh bread, soft white cheese, and a mug of apple cider. Dia murmured a soft thanks as she tucked the cheese into the bread and took a bite. As she ate, the god's grasping white hands reached out of her shirt and pawed at her chin, snatching up the stray crumbs that fell from her lips. She took a sip of the cider, and then dipped her little finger into the mug and offered the god a few drops. Morena couldn't help flinching at the sight of the squirming god. The whole thing was unnatural. She busied herself with clearing the remains of her morning's god from the workbench, scooping bits of antler velvet into her cupped hands and tossing them out the little window that looked out into her garden until she heard the sounds of eating slow and then stop.

“Better?” she asked, turning back towards Dia. “Good girl. Now, what did you desire from it when you took it as your god?”

“Magic.”

Her curt confession stirred Morena's pity. "Did it ever tell you magic can't be granted?"

Dia stroked the god protectively. "If I had some aptitude, it would enhance it. That's what my mother told me. It had done the same for her."

"But you don't have any natural skill?"

"I don't think so," she admitted. "I kept it close, gave it everything it wanted, but I never got a thing in return. I stole for it. That's where all this came from. I'd never stolen anything before, I swear. And I won't ever again if you can get this ... *thing* off me."

"Let's calm down," Morena said, raising her hands in a placating gesture. "Let's ... try something simple. Take a deep breath and then release it."

Dia breathed in and out obediently, slowing her breath each time as she calmed down.

"Do you feel guilt for what you've done?"

"Of course," the girl said.

"Then you know you've done something wrong. And now you can let it go."

Dia heaved a heavy sigh one last time, and Morena caught the warm breath in her cupped hands as it rushed out. It was weighed down with shame, and at first, resisted Morena's initial attempts to shape it into release. But just as often as it was an exercise in creation, a godmaker's job was based in the battle of wills between maker and god; she only needed to shape it to her own will. She plucked out the strands of guilt—here a stolen necklace from a friend, there a bolt of silk from the village tailor, a lie told about change received from the butcher—until the god was light and airy as it should be. Once it was freed of its burden, she shaped the captive breath into a breeze strong enough to stir

hair and remind one of things lost. It was faster work than she usually did—godmaking was usually a slow process—but she didn't have the time to labor.

Still, it was a skillfully wrought god, pleasantly warm in her hands and smelling like the cider on Dia's breath. She offered the god of release back to Dia, who took it as if she wasn't quite sure how to hold it. It was a fine, misty sort of thing, the kind of god you had to squint to find.

"Now what?"

Morena didn't have a real answer for that but she said with confidence: "Give it over. Let it take over the other god."

The girl pulled down her shirt and blew the new god into the desire god's gaping black mouth. It breathed in the release god, its pale chest swelling up. The misty god screamed shrilly as it disappeared into the desire god. The god coughed, a small but audible sound, and Dia doubled over in pain, clutching at her chest. It nuzzled back against her neck. Had it grown larger?

"Are you alright?"

"I'm not sure." She sounded winded, as if she'd been running.

What was the god doing to her?

"You don't have very long," Morena said. "Where did your mother get her god? Have you shown her what happened?"

Dia looked away as she brushed her hand over the protrusion in her chest. "She made it. But she doesn't know I have it."

Morena gave the girl a long look. There was a familiarity there, one she hadn't seen—or hadn't wanted to see. "Your mother is Eliana."

"Yes. The godmaker."

She swallowed her distaste; Eliana was barely a godmaker, but now was not the time to argue. "Did you know who I was when you sought me out?"

The girl cradled the desire god's head in her hand like it was an infant. "I knew of you. Mother told me she had family somewhere. It wasn't until I needed another godmaker that I thought to search for you."

"Perhaps I'm not the one to help you. It might be time to leave."

"I stole it," the girl said, quickly. "I needed to. I have no magic of my own. She was going to disown me."

Not an inherited god but a stolen one. Eliana had been weakly gifted herself; it came as no surprise to hear her child had no magic at all. The pity she had felt at first shifted into something uglier. She couldn't help it. Her whole life had been in competition with Eliana, and Morena had always come out on top. But she had deserved it, hadn't she? She had put in the work to be the best godmaker; why should she have to fix her sister's mistakes?

"I think you should ask your mother for help."

"How can I?" the girl asked. "She'd tell me it was my fault for not trying hard enough. For not putting in the work."

Morena flinched. How often had she heard her mother say it to Eliana, and how often had she watched with joy as Eliana struggled when they were just Dia's age? If Dia had come so far to be saved, who could say she hadn't put in the work? Did she deserve to be left to



such a fate, devoured by a grasping god? She wanted to comfort the girl suddenly, to fling her arms around her shoulders, and tell her it would be okay.

Instead, she said, “We’ll try one more time. What is the god made of?”

“Bone, I think.”

Of course, it was—it must have been their mother’s. Only Eliana could take a gift and twist it into something so awful. Hadn’t mother always known how terrible Eliana was? How incompetent, impatient, unwilling to put in the work? She stared at the girl, at the small pale hands stroking her neck. She recognized it now—the femur Eliana had taken, the ball joint made into the god’s head. But every god Morena had made from mother’s bones had looked like mother, soft curls and a gentle smile—was this what Eliana saw when she thought of their mother? A snarling, gaping thing?

What is the opposite of a stolen bone? One freely given. She felt a pang of remorse for her sister’s child—her niece. Blood of her blood. She hadn’t been kind to her sister, much the same way their mother hadn’t, but she hadn’t thought it would lead to this.

She patted Dia on the leg and then from the small space under her bed pulled out a bundle of linen cloth. She unwrapped her mother’s remaining bones and picked up the femur. She shaped the balled joint into a little head, with long curls and a soft, serene face—mother’s face, that looked so much like her own, and perhaps if she would have smiled, like Dia’s. She called a god of love into it. She held it to her ear, and it hummed a lullaby she didn’t remember but soothed her troubled heart.

“This was your grandmother’s bone. It should match

the other.” And she offered it to the girl. “A god of love, freely given.”

Dia took it and pressed it against her bare skin. The god in her chest reached out and did the same, its arms wrapping around the maternal god's waist. And it opened its gaping black hole mouth and bit down on the other's head, splintering it down the center. It crunched the bone greedily, devouring the unconditional love just as it had the god of release. At least this god did not scream as it was eaten. But losing the second god confirmed what Morena had already suspected: the god of desire was growing larger, its head nearly the size of Dia's fist now.

“I suppose that wasn't supposed to happen,” Dia said softly.

Morena's chest ached with guilt and with the loss of a god made from her mother. What did it mean that one of Eliana's gods could best her own, one made with her mother's love? Whatever the truth of it was—her weakness or the god's strength—it irritated her.

“Have you tried cutting it out? With a knife, perhaps?”

Dia's eyes widened fearfully. “No. I'd rather not.”

“What if that's the god talking? Calling for its own survival?” Morena pushed. “It might have to be forced out. If it kills you and gets loose, you'll be unleashing havoc on the world.”

Dia rose from the chair. “I'm sorry,” she stuttered. “I shouldn't have come here.”

She looked so like Eliana, trembling as she shaped gods under mother's critical eye. Morena should have seen it before. The girl fled out the door.

Morena followed after. “Wait,” she called. “Come back. I'm sorry. I've one more thing to try.”

Dia stopped before the gate and turned around slowly. “Okay.”

“Wait here.”

Morena would give it one more god. She went into her home again. Her chest ached with guilt and something else; a god grew inside her, waiting to be collected and shaped. She sat on her bed, next to the open linen cloth that contained her mother’s remaining bones. She plunged both hands into her chest, past the skin, the fat, and the constricting muscles and severed her breast bone from the cartilage connecting it to her ribs. It came out easily enough, though she felt hollow and sore after. She shaped it with memories of Eliana and the pride she’d felt when mother had held up her gods as examples that Eliana should strive for, the relief she’d felt when she’d escaped a scolding for something her and Eliana had done together, and the way she’d gloated over Eliana the first time a pilgrim had picked her god. Childish feelings she’d held for too long—twenty years too long. She left the tang of salt tears on her tongue as she held the god close to her chest, which sagged in a little more than it used to. But then it faded, and she felt nothing else from the god. It looked like Eliana, sour-mouthed and stern, and like her sister, it did not speak to her.

A god of remorse, made of bone, and freely given.

She returned to Dia. “Last one.”

The girl held it distantly in both hands. “Mother,” she said, softly.

“Remorse,” Morena corrected.

Dia offered it to the god of desire. It ate this one, too. But as it crunched at the bone, the veins connecting

to Dia blackened and withered. It shrank down and drooped, its bone yellowing as if aging.

It fell to the ground and crumbled into dust. Dia rubbed her palm over the spot where the god had been latched onto her just moments before. There was no scar, nothing to suggest a god had ever been sinking into the girl's skin.

"I taste salt," she said, softly, then touched her own face to see if she was crying. She cocked her head, listening. "And what is that sound?"

Morena didn't hear it, but she knew it well: the call of gods waiting to be made. She wrapped her arm around the girl's shoulders. "Come here. I'll teach you."



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# Mushroom Head

by Marla Bingcang

**D**ear Dad,

Yesterday, I found Ben. The tip of his nose had been nibbled off. His shirt was shredded to ribbons, revealing ribs like raked sand and the sloped crater of his stomach. He was so thin I could have pressed my finger to his flesh and saw its impression on the other side. Below his belly button, a wide, dry slit had been cut. I lifted the flap with the back of my thumb and found he was hollow inside but for a nest of black ants. They crawled onto my finger, itching, bearing strips of meat on their heads.

The slit reminded me of Mumma's scar, the one Annie made when she was born because her head was so big she couldn't come out the right way.

Mumma taught me a lesson when I came back. I was supposed to be gathering, but I dropped everything tripping over Ben. At supper, Mumma laid out raven stew for me, herself, and Annie. No vegetables or herbs thanks to my supply run. I stirred the tough, pinkish meat around and didn't eat. Then I asked Mumma if any man-eating beasts lived around here.

"Why are you asking me that?"

I muttered something about Ben. There was a clang to my right. Annie dropped her spoon and slapped me on the shoulder. It all tumbled from my lips: the paleness, the stench, the pits where his eyes should be, like they'd been scooped out.

I think I sensed in advance Mumma wouldn't be too pleased to hear it. "Don't go back there," she said. "I don't want to hear no more." And you know well how Mumma can pinch the life out of the air.

I picked at my stew. Mumma and Annie eased back into their seats. But then I pictured him rotting out there, tossed by the elements.

"Can you help me carry him back?"

"Why!"

"To bury him in the garden, next to Dad."

This is the part where Mumma sent me to my room.



Dear Dad,

I visited Ben again. I crept around the things I left behind strewn at his fingertips: a dirty coat, a raven wrung of blood, sticks and sticks and sticks. I decided they were not mine anymore.

He was not the same as last time. His stomach formed a mound. I thought rabbits were making a burrow out of him, so I pulled a twig off a tree and jabbed it through the slit in his gut. Out it came, slicked in gray. The ooze drizzled off the end onto the tip of my boots. It bled from the slit, everflowing, soaking the ground as if I'd struck the rock at Horeb. The stink lingered in my nose long after I left, like steam off an oily soup.

When I came home, Mumma ordered me to jump in the bath.





Dear Dad,

We're going to have to hole up soon; the cold is blowing in. The cold is good though. It makes gathering easy. Yesterday, Annie and I found this lady come wandering, said she was lost. We offered to take her home and let her sit in front of the fire, even offered to carry her purse for her. She followed us until we found a ditch to kick her in.

It's funny. They always ask us if we got a phone.

In a week when her eyes go blank, we'll gather up her clothes. I checked her purse on our way home and found a dozen cherry-flavored hard candies. I stuffed them into my pocket before Annie got a chance to see. Most of what we've been eating lately comes out of the old jars we keep in the cellar. Sometimes it's rabbits or ravens soaked in sour water, but other times it's these reddish slabs—what we stocked up on in the winter Ben disappeared. Annie hates them all, but she hates the red meat most especially, which is why we trade candy like prisoners trade cigarettes.

Annie urges me not to eat the red meat. I need no persuasion but how it seems to slither down my throat. She begs Mumma, too, but Mumma never budges. "He gave this to us," she says, "Be grateful."

Mumma doesn't say Ben's name anymore.

Well, this morning they butt heads on that again. They got to yelling, in the way that only Mumma and Annie can, and I used it to slip away and lay down for a while. See, there's this knob on my head that's been killing me. I must've bumped into something.

Boy, it aches. I think I'll stay in today.



Dear Dad,

Annie discovered a mushroom growing out the back of my head, soft as a baby's ear.

"It's 'cause you never take a bath!" she said, wresting it between her knuckles.

I thought Annie would rip out my scalp, just how a stubborn weed tears up the turf around it. The mushroom was rooted beyond the bone, laced into my brain. Her pulling burned holes into my vision.

I shoved her away.

"It's really in there, huh?"

I nodded.

Annie considered this, taking her chin in her hands, then went to her nightstand and drew out a pair of hair-cutting scissors.

I must've left contrails in my wake.

Over the week, I'll have you know, I whittled myself a stake to use as Ben's grave marker for when the snow was bound to fall. I swung it like a bat as I walked. When I got to him, it turned out I didn't need a grave marker anymore. From the slit in Ben's belly had sprouted three gray stalks like snail's eyes, watching me as I drove the stake into the ground with just my hands and a damp stone. It was silly: my crooked stake, and the stalks twice its size.

You should understand I wasn't out there long. It was three hours at most, I swear, the sun hadn't moved a tick in the sky. When I came home, there was Annie, waiting for me in the kitchen. "Look! Look! Oh!"

I blew open our bedroom doors and threw myself onto the vanity. On the top of my head, pushing aside my hair, another mushroom had appeared. Then another, pushing out from a lump on my cheek. I touched them and felt them just the same as my own cold skin. When I pulled my hand away, the tip of my finger was stained the feeble color of mushrooms. I rubbed it into my sleeve. Mumma, who had appeared in the doorway with Annie, came over to me in three long strides. She pried my arms away and gave it a look that lasted half a second.

She left—“Ah, it’s nothing. Let him be!”—while I rummaged through our wardrobe for a hat.

Annie followed her with hard eyes all the way out.



Dear Dad,

It’s been hard to write recently. The snow came, the kind of snow that doesn’t sink under your weight but breaks. Last winter was the same but with Ben, which made it fuller. Mumma has since burned all of Ben’s wooden dogs. I remember how they seemed to leap on their own on the edges of my vision. And I remember how the fire made them burst. He carved them sitting on the second-to-last stair and nowhere else, letting the shavings collect on a blackened sheet. When they were smooth enough, he let me hold them. “This is a golden doodle,” he said, pointing with his calloused thumb, “Dad’s dog. And this lil guy here is something else, probably.”

Mealtimes were not much different back then. I scarfed down Mumma’s watered-down soup with nothing to choke on. And when I would finish, I became aware of the other bowls and spoons, sloshing and dull clinks, the residue dried on the edge of thin lips, and

the burning in my stomach. Annie was vigilant over her soup and made a barrier with her arms, but I wrenched them apart and grabbed bits out of her bowl with my bare fingers.

No one's realized it yet, but it's me what half-killed him. He could cleave through the earth if he wanted. When Ben began pouring his bowl into mine, that's when he collapsed. It was like crushing a can.

I think I'll stop writing now.



Dear Dad,

Thanks to the scrote who invented snow, I sit inside and smear my skin off the furniture. All week, Annie's been sweeping up moist clumps of my hair. I have bald patches which are pink, rubbery, and infested with egg-sized lumps, where mushrooms push against my skin like incoming teeth. Upon crowning, gray ooze leaks from the opening and slides into my clothes. There's a lump on my eye too, but Mumma says it's just irritation. It burns and itches no matter how much I rub it. I'm losing sight in that eye. That's why it's been so hard to write recently.

Yesterday, I was particularly sick of the indoors and tormented by that magnetizing urge to return to Ben. I stole Annie's coat, layered it over my own, and crunched through the forest. The night was bright with the snow reflecting the moon. It had never before occurred that snow came in gray.

He laid in a vignette of dead grass, dry and undisturbed. Not a snowflake landed on his skin or in the area around him. I held my distance. The snail-eyed stalks peered down at me, swaying in tight spirals. My stake had fallen over. Ben was dead, but he flourished.

Stalks shot up from his nostrils. His eyes, too, were enveloped, and his mouth was choked with a gray bouquet. Red stubs colonized his bloated hands and feet and raced over his legs like a pox disease. The sweet gray ooze leaked freely from his orifices and had soaked the ground around him to swamp. I struggled to take steps in Ben's clasp ing mire. I was close enough to poke his bloated belly with the top of my shoe. It smeared off like cream.

I returned and pressured myself into snipping off one of the mushrooms with Annie's scissors. Gray ooze flowed freely onto my bedsheets. No blood. Pus, I thought, as I bit dashes into my tongue.

Next morning, three more mushrooms had grown in its place.



Dear Dad,

The snow is really coming down now. There's nothing to do but to occupy myself, and I am very occupied. I tried to throw a towel over the vanity, but Annie got real sore at me when I did.

My left eye cannot see. The eyelid wraps around the mushroom stalk when I blink. I tried pulling it out—I screamed through my teeth. But the mushroom could not be removed, unless I would like my eye to hang from it like a ripe tuber. Patches of white fuzz grow on my arms, a thousand needle threads, and when I tug at them, they pull away like moss but sting as if I were ripping out my hair. I remember I once brought a jar full of oranges up from the cellar. You were alive then, teaching Annie numbers at the time, and you took them away from me. You turned them around and showed me

the fuzzy patches racing over their skin—you called it mold.

I was glad to throw out those oranges before. Now, my stomach hurts so much I'd eat anything if you put it on a plate. Mumma and Annie too.

Yesterday, Mumma sent me and Annie to the cellar to bring up all the remaining jars. There was no more of that red, salty meat. Did I tell you it was Ben who fetched it all for us? Last winter. Two bloody bags full. But it wasn't him who lugged them home. It was Mumma, though she said Ben did all the work. And it was tough work. Ben couldn't come home that night, Mumma said he was too tired to come home right then.

I pulled on the end of the bag and the meat tumbled out, misshapen and mismatched. I had never before seen meat like this, nor so much in one place. Annie and I would've dug into it raw, but Mumma swung a pail of water in front of us and told us to get washing. There were two organs like pink ropes—intestines, I realized. I grabbed these first since to me they were most grabbable. I peered inside and found that they were hollow and dirty. Mumma nudged me, "Wash those until they squeak."

Then Mumma fired up the oven, and soon the whole kitchen smelled like the inside of a wallet. I sat in front of it, feeling the heat of tortured flames on my face.

The legs of the table curved in, bearing the weight of the meal. Mumma placed one white ball, like an oversized olive, on each of our plates and told us to eat. My teeth sunk easily into this strange fruit. I stuck my fork into the pink rope I had washed, which had been sliced into small, bite-sized rings, and cut apart the spongy, stretchy meat Annie had cleaned. All was salty

and slightly bitter, but I was voracious before all else. My meal was gone as soon as it had arrived.

The slowest eater was Annie, who kept examining her food. She took the white ball from her plate and held it close to my eyes, comparing them, I think. Her face warped like she might have smelled something. After I withdrew to our room, I heard her hurling all the rest of the night.

Ben did not get to enjoy the product of his work. He did not come home the next day, nor the next.

I guess we know what happened to him out there.



Dear Dad,

Last night I woke up to the voices of Mumma and Annie rising through the floorboards.

Annie was shrieking. Mumma was not so hysterical, but she bellowed in a way she rarely did toward Annie. I wanted to savor this moment, but I could not distinguish a word, and soon the screaming became like a thousand buzzing flies. I touched the new budding in my ears.

Air breathed through our cracking window. All the gooseflesh mushrooms on my skin prickled. I rubbed my face into my pillow and recoiled at the gray sludge squeezed out of it. Then came a smack and a thud.

Not long after, Annie came into the room and threw herself into her bed. I pretended to still be sleeping. When my own breathing slowed, I could hear hers, thin and reedy. She was not there for a minute before her yelp broke the air. Annie threw off the covers and felt through her nightstand for a match. She struck it twice, thrice. The little flame erupted, and she held it over the



back of her hand. She turned to face me. There, between her white-fuzzed knuckles, a mushroom had grown.

I wanted to apologize to her, for whatever reason, perhaps because it was I who brought the disease home. I figured Annie would have said something. But she did not. She blew the match and crawled into bed.



Dear Dad,

Mumma pushed and pushed, but the door won't budge unless we wanna tear it off its hinges. The windows are gray with snow pressed against them, and I am sitting by the fire, writing this to you now because my own bed is molding and oily. Annie is reading over my shoulder. She's been by my side all day, to pester me, I think.

There is nothing left in the cellar, but Mumma won't admit it. She's got a pot boiling with nothing in it. Right now, she's fastened to her stool, sharpening a big ol' knife at the countertop. Two days ago, I ripped off the leather cover of my journal and chewed it until it was soft enough to swallow (Annie's been hiding her boots ever since).

I feel like a sleeping dog, laying on the rug in front of the hearth like this. It's harder to think. The mushrooms grow wild in place of hair. Gray buds bloom in my ear, and the back of my throat prickles me. My back is acneic with ripe, egg-sized bumps. I think of Ben right now and his own wild crop, poking out of the snow, swaying and waving and curling in wind that isn't there. In my dreams, I cannot help but bite into his sweet face. The custard texture is consistent from skin to bone and all the same pervasive gray. It is like cutting into cake. When I prod under my eyes, the skin dimples and does

not reform. And when I run my fingers along my arm, it smears. The carpet is pulpy where I have lain. There is gray crusted under my fingernails, and gray is stained on my skin.

Dad, I don't know when I'll get to write to you next. Mumma's been looking at me, not in the eyes, but inches above, where pale mushrooms sprouted. She's been looking at me this whole time. I know that feeling in her face. I grew up with it, always gnawing at my heels. I feel it now as my stomach grinds itself. There is hunger in her eyes.



**Marla Bingcang** is a rising high school junior living in the Chicagoland Area. “Mushroom Head” is her first published story, and it certainly won't be her last! When she isn't writing, she likes to sacrifice her spine to art and computer games. She also teaches creative writing to younger children at Youth Passion Project.

# träumerei

by Ewen Ma

i.

she was fifteen when she drowned in brine  
(reeled in by the siren-song of a  
tomorrow beyond reach)

ii.

at twenty-two, he fell hard and fast  
(into the hunt for a scorched-earth utopia)

iii.

when I was born my mother would  
have named me after frost  
(they say nothing can compare to  
the glory of summer snow)

iv.

by fifty, I will be a starveling ghost  
(the husk of every unbartered  
self I was never meant to be)

v.

thirty years ago my father's  
own haunting began  
(in a red square a world away, filled with  
rose-raw youths he will never grow old with)

vi.

at the age he was then, I stood on a roof-brink  
to watch lachrymator fumes flood our streets  
(and laughed with mad grief for  
every terror that was to come)

vii.

for a year, we tallied each day on the  
pavement with yellow chalk  
(those sunflower and umbrella days,  
when rain was not yet a killing storm)

ix.

we wore our first masks as  
schoolchildren in hell-white wards  
(and she whispered in my ear that her uncle's  
lungs gave out on him the other week)

ix.

the morning our death was carved  
in stone the city did not weep  
(in the five seconds between a flag  
and a flag, a song and a song)

x.

nights on the barricades have a way  
of collapsing into each other

(with the impermanence of lovers  
beneath a cut of neonlight)

xi.

and my skin cracks with the  
weight of a hazy dawn  
(neither of my bloods dare  
speak their own names)

xii.

but the time has long passed  
for the simplicity  
of a cicada  
dreaming of bitter winter.



**Ewen Ma** is a speculative fiction writer-poet and theatre deviser made in Hong Kong. Ewen's work can be found or is forthcoming in *Uncanny*, *Fusion Fragment*, *Anathema*, *Liminality*, and *Voice & Verse*. They're also a 2018 graduate of the Clarion West Writer's Workshop, and was shortlisted for the Gollancz & Rivers of London BAME SFF Award in 2020. Ewen lives in London, where they research visual cultures and occasionally dabble in filmmaking. Catch Ewen online at <http://ewenma.com> or @awenigma.

# She Dreams in Bronze

by Sylvia Ho

**M**onsters live here.

As do demons. Angels too, though they are more discreet about it.

And, sometimes, even gods.

Ghouls, spirits, stray souls—no matter who you are, Hotel Ze accepts all.

And Momei serves.

The Hotel exists as a luxury for any who seek rest and a little more. Located on a precipice overlooking swirling pools of mist and perpetually canopied in tooth-aching strokes of pinks and oranges, the thousand-room building attracts both weary travelers who stumble through by chance and dedicated regulars alike.

It is a rest stop from the rest of the world; a pause before the next paragraph; the intermission splitting a play.

But the grandeur of the Hotel has long been lost on Momei. From daybreak to sunset, she knocks on a thousand doors framed in gold, their luster long dulled by the film of apathy glazing her eyes. Her steps skid

across marble, dodging gaggles of teenage wood spirits still wrapped in pool towels, her heels pressing against cherry walls like a phantasm—subconsciously present but never fully registered.

“Payment collection!” Momei calls, staring at the warped bronze version of herself reflecting in the shiny 388 nailed into the door until it opens to a four-eyed monster swathed in a bathrobe, two of his four pupils warily trailing her up and down.

She checks the notebook log. Of course—a first-time guest.

“We collect any kind of payment from our guests, just as long as something in your possession is relinquished to us for each day of your stay,” she clarifies as she holds out the leather bag sitting against her hip. “It doesn’t necessarily have to be of monetary value, just something that is yours.”

The guest’s contribution is less than illustrious (a dirty arrowhead), but it works, and disappears into folds of leather.

Within the Hotel’s glamour, a foulness crawls. The demon in Room 606 tries to drop an explosive into her leather bag, his ears blooming pink and angry beneath his gel-crunched combover when Momei coolly suggests alternative payments. The low-ranking angel in Room 830 silently deposits her payment with a nose turned so high that Momei checks there is nothing on the ceiling. The swamp ghost in Room 913 launches into a fevered tirade about the subpar quality of last night’s buffet special, and Momei tastes copper as she weathers stormy, misplaced words.

Her fatigue must be apparent. By the time she reaches the ninth and final floor, the guest in Room 995 reaches out and slips something cold and hard into Momei’s

hand, even though they had already deposited a gold coin into the leather bag. “For your hard work,” the shawled being whispers, pressing a ringed mahogany finger to their chapped lips.

The marble sits in her hand prettily—almost too prettily, like a false jewel sold by a street vendor, its glossy crimson surface luring in one too many gullible buyers. Momei cannot parse out the guest’s true nature—a god perhaps?—but she glances down at her notebook before saying, “Thank you... Firehe the Eleventh. I’ll use it well.”

Staff members are not allowed to accept personal tokens from guests, but Momei pockets the mysterious marble anyway, patting it as if to reassure the guest of her appreciation.

Firehe the Eleventh tugs their shawl closer around them, nodding before closing the door.



The leather bag, now a hefty sack of assorted items, is deposited at the tenth and topmost floor of Hotel Ze. She leaves it along with the log with the secretary by the Hotelier’s office, then watches as another secretary scurries off to the bell tower to mark the sixth hour of the evening—and the end of her shift. The Night Collector will be waking soon, for the guests who were missed during the day, courtesy of those flimsy *OUT EXPLORING* signs hung on their doorknobs.

The garden is drenched in muted hues of persimmon when she enters it. Tucked along the edges of the Dusk Wing, this secluded leafy nook has always been, in a way, her own intermission. Here, she returns after the evening chime of the bell and drapes herself over the edge of the garden’s lonely marble fountain, her only



companion being the sitting woman shaped in bronze at its center, the statue framed by geometric rivulets and staring over Momei's shoulder with lackluster eyes.

She peers over the edge at the ripples below. If she looks closely, there are ghosts of shiny offerings at the bottom of the pool. No doubt cast by guests who rub their hands and pray to the bronze statue on the pedestal with hopes that somehow, someone out there will hear them.

Momei knows this because she does the same. The crimson marble is in her hand until it isn't, plopping into the water like it belonged. Her eyes flutter shut, and her fingers intertwine.

She does not say her wish aloud.

"Don't you have any friends to eat lunch with?"

Momei jolts, nearly choking on a gut-punch of air, her hair whipping across her face as she searches for the source of the voice. "What—?"

"Up here."

The statue is smiling down at her.

Momei stares. The sculpture looks as it always has—a woman sitting on a stool, loose robes unwinding across narrow shoulders, her arms drawing inwards as if caressing herself—full lines and curves cast eternally in a palette of rustic coppers. The statue blinks.

It *blinks*.

Nothing else moves except those bronze lips as it says, "Hi. I'm Carthea."

Several moments too late, Momei tries to reassemble herself into a portrait of serenity, but the hammering in her chest suggests she is not doing a very good job. "Oh. Hello?"

The burnished smile curves in amusement. “Hello to you too. What’s your name?”

Momei tells her. The smile stretches wider.

“Momei,” Carthea repeats, and Momei, the Day Collector, feels a shiver waltz up the nape of her neck. “Lovely name. I’ve always wondered. I see you here. Every day.”

Momei’s cheeks rud. “You’ve been alive here this whole time?” she asks, incredulous. “What exactly—are you a registered guest? If not, I’m afraid you cannot stay here without payment.” She doesn’t know why these words come out with such hostility, but they do, and the statue’s mischievous smile finally disappears.

“Technically, I was,” Carthea says, “but the curse didn’t make my stay exactly voluntary.” Her eyes flutter downward, but the statue’s head does not budge, nor does the rest of her body.

The zest in Momei’s stomach twists. “Curse?” she parrots blankly.

Dull eyes lock onto hers as the smile returns. “But you broke it. Just a tiny bit, but you did. Please, I’m sorry for scaring you earlier. I’m just so excited to finally speak again, and, well, I feel like I almost know you already, watching you eat here every day.”

“Help me understand. Who cursed you? And you said I broke the curse? Then why are you still here?”

Carthea grimaces and recaps a story about a scholar from the Northern University of Dreams, trekking towards the Sandtoothed Jungles in pursuit of academic answers for a thesis on daydreams—supposedly the hardest of all dreams to catch and actualize because of its conception in the realm of consciousness, unlike common dreams of slumber.

(Scholars at the University train to become Dream Saints. Momei has never knowingly met one until now. Nor has she ever wanted to. The art of converting pieces of one's dreams into reality is impressively difficult and awe-inspiring, she's sure, but she would very much rather her dreams stay dreams, thank you very much.)

One fateful night of rest at Hotel Ze. A walk for fresh air in the garden. A stranger she befriends under the moonlight.

A drink poured, a drink toasted.

A drink finished.

Then nothing for five years but her own stream of consciousness, a view of the Hotel's garden she can paint down to the flower by memory alone, and the inescapable bitter smell of bronze encasing the once-supple folds of her skin.

Until a plop of water and a searing pain across her face—the first physical feeling Carthea's had in years.

“You don't know who did this to you? Or why?”

Momei feels her ears blaze, livid on the statue's behalf, but Carthea says, “No. I suppose it was bad luck; right person, wrong time.”

Still— “How? Was it the marble?” Momei strains her neck for the discarded trinket behind the fountain's bubbling depths. Her efforts are futile; once beyond the cerulean surface, the donations become phantoms, sinking even from memory.

“Where did you get it from?”

“A guest gifted it. A token of their appreciation,” Momei explains. “I suppose it was magical then?”

“I have a hunch,” the statue muses, “but it's something we'd have to test. That is if you're willing to help me.”

Momei plants her hands against the cold stone of the fountain's edge and, slowly, firmly, nods.

Carthea smiles.



Enthusiasm is an ill-fitting mask.

Momei coats her words in syrup, smile gooey in the face of the sharpest jabs.

“It’s not in the object itself,” Carthea had said, her metallic lips twisted thoughtfully. “The magic is in the energy given with the object—and we’re looking for ones given with the intention of kindness. Try being more pleasant with your guests, see if you can receive more of these gifts.”

So Momei acts for an inkling of change, a shift in just a sliver of guests. Dulling a fraction of their usual unpleasantness, their knives reluctantly recoiling, sheathing sticky. She breathes easy as Firehe the Eleventh presses a silver coin into her hand this time. “Keep it up,” the guest whispers, dimpling.

The Hotelier’s secretary blinks at her newfound demeanor but says nothing except, “The Hotelier sends her praise for your progress. A little more effort, and you’ll get there yet.”

The corners of Momei’s mouth wane. She doesn’t know whether to say thanks or to ask how much more is ‘a little more.’

She returns to the garden again that night and un.masks for Carthea.

“Momei!” The statue’s smile is bright against its dull surface. “Did you get anything?”

Momei waves the silver coin triumphantly. “Let’s see

if you're right." The coin flips in the air, catching the moonlight in glimpses, as it drops into the water.

"Make a wish," Carthea whispers playfully, but Momei already has her eyes closed.

By the time she opens them, Carthea is laughing.

No, Carthea is *moving*, throat tipped back in an illusion of levitation as coils of her dark hair ebb against the wind. But her torso, arms, and legs remain as they are, perpetually frozen in bronze.

Carthea beams at Momei, teeth as luminous as her moon-kissed brown skin. "Thank you, Momei. Truly, truly. I would kiss you now if I could."

Something catches flame at the back of her throat, but Momei swallows, and through the cloud of extinguished char, responds, "But it's not over. You're not free yet."

"No, not yet."



Firehe the Eleventh's stay at Hotel Ze ends, but that's alright; Momei soon finds compassion in a new guest in Room 278, a ghoul with a tendency to wet his sheets.

"Sorry, but could you call for the cleaners again?" the child asks timidly. His sticky hands benevolently gifts her a square piece of wrapped chocolate. "Thanks so much."

It's still not enough despite her efforts. The guests of the Hotel do not pay her more than half a glance, much too concerned with ballroom galas or daily buffet specials or personal projects in the privacy of their rooms. It is difficult to blot the spots of a leopard, no matter the method, the dye concentration, or the will.

So it takes much longer than she expects.

A week elapses, there have only been enough gifts to free Carthea of enough bronze to reach her lower ribs. The robes folded against her shoulders emerge the color of polished ivory.

Now that she has fully freed her arms, Carthea is vividly animated—hands in constant movement as she launches into another tale as Momei huffs and sips her lunch, back pressed against the curve of the fountain, stomach warm with diluted bean and root soup. Streams of sunlight punch through the overhead trellis, and their conversations are accompanied by high calls of winged friends and the occasional buzz around blooming daffodils.

At heart, Carthea remains a scholar, and five years of captivity have made her voracious for knowledge of the outside world; Momei's breaks are kept occupied with questions on the development of technology, prominent news and events, the latest magical discoveries.

And she tries to answer as much as she can. But her answer is often no answer.

"I haven't left the Hotel in fifteen years," Momei confesses, the words rolling out like an apology. "And I likely won't leave until many more." If ever, but she doesn't say this.

Carthea has her chin nestled into the palm of her hand. She frowns. "Why not?"

"The Hotelier—my grandmother—says I cannot." Momei takes a deep breath. "Not by blood; she took me in at a young age. I don't remember much of where I'm from, but she's always said it doesn't matter anyways because my focus should be here. She's training me to take over the Hotel one day, to be a mage like her, running the family business. This is all part of my training."

“Being the Day Collector?” Carthea asks, skeptically.

Momei nods. “Got to start from the bottom up.”

“And those random knick-knacks you collect as payment? What does your grandmother do with those?”

Momei picks at a crack running along the fountain’s curve. “She says there’s power transferred through objects—I suppose like the way we’re chipping at your curse. Something about the history of an object is tied with identity: its line of owners, the tears and blood polished from it, its journey from conception to the present.”

Carthea seems to understand. “And that identity holds power, even in fragments.”

Momei nods, surprised, but continues, “But how exactly? I don’t know. The Hotelier says I’m not ready for that part of my training yet.” Fifteen years. *A little more.*

She tilts her head back, catches Carthea’s dark gaze already spilled upon her. The woman-statue doesn’t look away as she says, “You don’t want to stay.”

Momei cannot look away either, although it’s beginning to strain her neck. “I don’t know.”

“Tell me where you want to go.”

“I can’t. I’m tethered here; it’s my responsibility.”

Carthea tuts, dissatisfied. “Pretend it isn’t. What then?”

No one has ever asked her this before, so Momei thinks deeply before she responds, fingering something from the gentler alcoves of her mind. “They say the Train that Goes Onward will take you anywhere; find a platform, board the Train, and it will take the passenger to any realm, any far off land or underwater forest or

sky island they'd like." A distant place, blooming in pigment like a memory in watercolor, of a life lived long, long ago. Where the doors weren't rimmed in gold and the people were kind. The muscles in her cheeks begin to strain like her neck.

A sudden nudge against her cheekbone makes her flinch, and Momei nearly rolls into the fountain's waters. "Carthea!"

The woman in question cackles, her laughter loud and boisterous. She's holding a long twig, the end of which had just been well-acquainted with Momei's face. "I think this is the first time I've gotten a good look at your teeth." Carthea grins, baring her own. "You were thinking of a place. Where?"

The bell tolls twelve, saving Momei from a response.



The month passes in howling winds that scatter leaves across marble by day and biting chills that crack teeth by night.

The guests of Hotel Ze are stingy with their warmth. Carthea is not.

She is freed from the hip up now. Momei drapes blankets over Carthea's shoulders before dusk and begins to bring bundles for herself for the nights she accidentally lulls off into the realm of unconsciousness mid-conversation, limbs twisted against stone in positions that are likely to bring a doctor of the spine to tears. She never remembers her dreams in the morning.

One night, Carthea asks to braid Momei's hair. With a short ladder secured between the bottom edge of the fountain and the base of the statue's platform, Momei



delicately balances across the rungs, her back to the woman–statue.

When Carthea’s hands brush through her hair, goosebumps tingle across her arms, haunting as a ghost’s first breath. But Momei closes her eyes and lets herself lean into the nimble fingers combing through the strands, the soft touches grazing her scalp. Carthea multitasks, roping in sections of hair as she talks about her family—her many families, she says, the one she found at the University and the one actually from home. She speaks of another name she had, tickles it into Momei’s ear, sounding out the round syllables until the other woman carves the tones with her tongue correctly.

Momei thinks about what it must be like to have a home that also thinks of her as home.

Without realizing it, Momei turns her head and murmurs a long-lost name like a reply. Its arched, striking sounds whistling across her shoulder, a blade rusted from disuse. When she does, she stills, feeling somehow like she has spoken a lie and waits for the blow across her face, the rings of Hotelier’s hand scratching pink. But then Carthea hums and repeats it, calling her, and Momei is so startled to hear her native name held against another’s tongue that she thinks she’s in a memory.

“There.” Carthea’s hands finally fall away from her head, replaced with an unwelcome feeling of sudden missingness. But Momei peers at her reflection over the water and gasps, admiring the other woman’s handiwork.

“It’s beautiful,” Momei breathes, and she means it. Violets and pink cosmos nestle into the crannies of the braid, and sprinkles of baby’s breath shine like pearls against her ink-black hair. She wonders when Carthea

gathered the flowers. She thinks she hears Carthea saying something. “What did you say?”

The other woman coughs—though it sounds suspiciously very much not like a cough—and reaches over to thumb in a loose strand of hair that has fallen across Momei’s face.

“Nothing.”



After the tide of two more full moons, Carthea is almost free.

The bronze reaches only up to her ankles now.

Their days are numbered, and Momei is reminded of this whenever something grisly begins to broil in her core as she sees the bronze slowly wear away with each new offering to the fountain. But such feelings are childish and fleeting, and she knows she is better than that.

And, of course, Carthea herself is more than ready to go.

“Make a wish,” she says as Momei tosses a glass trinket into the fountain, the phrase now more of an inside joke than anything.

But Momei makes one every time—and this last one is for Carthea to be free.

She opens her eyes to see that her wish has been granted.

Carthea’s feet are no longer bronze but brown. The woman-statue is now, finally, a woman.

But before her mouth can open to celebrate, Momei is doused in a great splash of water, and a hand roughly clamps over her lips.

Momei feels someone pulling her *up*—and she struggles fiercely. Her legs find purchase around the other person’s body, and she tries to twist free. For a moment, she thinks she’s bested them. But when she finally blinks the water out of her eyes, Momei can see that she is far too high up. They are not on the ground. They are on the statue *platform*, in the middle of the fountain.

Her daze betrays her. Her opponent overpowers her, flipping their positions and pushing her back against the platform. Momei grapples with the foe, hands slipping and sliding, limbs slick with water. Then she feels something sharp pressing against her neck, and she freezes.

“Please,” Momei finally pleads. “Wait.”

The blade against her throat trembles. A familiar voice says, “I’m sorry.”

It’s unclear if the fluid streaking from her eyes is sourced from the fountain or from within. Perception blurs, then clears, and beyond, haloed by the lune, Carthea looks down at her, her face twisted into uncharacteristic lines. Like the flowers woven into her hair many moons ago, Momei wonders from where Carthea conjured the deadly weapon edged across her throat.

“Why?” It comes out as a croak, barely a sound, but Carthea understands.

“I need to do this. If I don’t ... I can’t be free.”

“I thought...” Momei cannot finish her sentence. Her limbs unwind, dropping like stones, undone by betrayal. An intermission for her, a play for Carthea.

The razor ices in harder. Carthea’s breath is hot on her face.

Then Momei hears the clatter of steel against marble.

Instead, something much softer cuts into her neck. Carthea sinks into the crook of her shoulder, quivering lips pressing against her collarbone, her body racking with sobs. “Forgive me,” she cries into the base of Momei’s neck.

Momei lays there, baffled, then asks, “Was this your plan from the beginning?”

Carthea pulls away, her dark eyes shining. Moonlight peeks through her curls. “Let me tell you the truth.”

So she does:

A scholar from the Northern University of Dreams stays at Hotel Ze for a month, a vacation after a productive summer in the Sandtoothed Jungles.

A statue she befriends in the garden. A statue already half-freed by decades and decades of random offerings from guests.

A trick of friendship. A betrayal.

It was never a hunch. She knew what she needed to break free since long ago; she just needed someone to make the first crack in the iced river, the first offering of kindness.

A curse that is not a curse, but rather a centuries-old cry of anguish, dictating that one can only be freed if there is another to take their place.

This statue, this piece of art that has been stolen, art that has been taken by pillaging and force, will no longer stay inanimate, as decided by a talented but beaten artist long ago. It will no longer be ogled at by millions for its otherness in a land far from home—a land that destroyed home but took along only the pretty pieces.

No, it will steal back. A soul for a soul.

Then nothing for five years but the smell of bronze on her skin, until Carthea hears a plop of water and feels a searing across her face. And hears a wish—a daydream, if you will.

*I wish this pretty place would rot.*

Carthea's degree from the Northern University of Dreams may still be pending, but she has heard all of Momei's dreams.

"I was damned from the start," Carthea says. "But I can't leave you here—this place you despise so much." Her voice breaks, and Momei finally pulls her in close, faintly aware of the resistance already gnawing through her bones, her flesh, the dandelion hairs on her arms.

"If only that guest hadn't given you that marble," Carthea cries into her hair, "if only you hadn't offered it to the fountain. Oh, Momei, what were the odds?"

Momei thinks of the pain of the statue's artist, of his land, and his people who were never given odds.

Night and silver hang above them like props in a play.

"Do it," she whispers, the words a lump of bronze in her throat, and when Carthea begins to pull away in protest, she clings on. "If not me, then who?" Momei murmurs something into her ear. She feels Carthea's heart pounding against her own chest. Finally, the other woman's head nods into her cheek. "This is my last offering. Take it."



Days quickly press into a week.

There is a new statue above the fountain now—not that anybody notices except the woman pacing in the garden, day and night. She is hardly ever in her room;

the Night Collector knows where to find her to collect payment.

The woman has written letters to her friends, who are now full-fledged Dream Saints and to the University, desperate for answers. When she's not in the garden, she's at the library in the Half Moon Wing. But when she's in the garden, she trains until fevers crown her head, and persimmon expires into the plum of twilight.

Nothing has worked.

Every day she is tempted to offer something material to the fountain, to get it over with. But she knows that to finally, truly sever the curse, she must end it a different way.

No more stealing. She hopes to do the statue's artist justice.

There is a new Day Collector. He has the same ink-black hair as Momei, the same hollowed cheeks.

She wonders one day if the Hotelier knew about the statue all along. She must, the woman thinks. The Hotelier, a mage who built an extravagant dominion upon remnants of identity, yet neglects the willful offerings of kindness glimmering at the bottom of the fountain. The Hotelier, a thief with replaceable heirs, their names stolen and their histories purged, all grinding for an opportunity they'll never receive.

Perhaps there is more power from things taken, things stripped and coerced and demanded. She thinks of how ugly that power must be, to run a place like Hotel Ze.

She sees the Hotel as it really is, under its stolen beauty. Tally-marked stone concealed behind floral wallpaper. Blood and saltwater mix in the blush dappled

across the cheeks of a muraled cherub on the ceiling.  
Fractured and mangled bones gleam a polished gold.

She sees the Hotel the way Momei saw it.



How does a Dream Saint hear the dreams of the petrified, much less actualize them into fruition in order to bring them back to life? She sits on a ladder stretched between the statue and the water, ruminating, and finally thinks the answer is something like this. Her fingertips stretch, meeting wind. She whispers something about meeting her halfway.

To know someone is to see their longings. Their wishes, their daydreams.

She remembers mouthing a name under rustling leaves and a lazy sun, all arching vowels and striking syllables, and thinks she knows.

Another month crumbles by like stale bread.

The woman knows when she hears it.

*To answer...*

She holds on tight and listens, reaching out.

To answer your question.

Her forehead is slick with sweat. A warm drop runs down the length of her nose. She does not let go, straining closer, closer, and please, please, let this be it. She holds a wish in her mind and hopes Momei meets her there.

*I wish I could go home.*

She tastes salt on her lips as they curve.



They are almost late for their train.

They run across the platform, fingers interlocking, exhilarated giggles escaping into the murmur of the crowd. A daffodil tumbles to the ground in their wake; lips press against where the flower used to sit on her temple.

Sometimes a release is also a return.

The Train that Goes Onwards leaves as the clock chimes twelve.



**Sylvia Ho** is a writer of speculative fiction who stares at spreadsheets by day and blank Word documents by night. Originally from California, she's now based in Seattle where she's perpetually on the hunt for the best boba milk tea in the city. Find her sporadically on Twitter [@sylviaistyping](https://twitter.com/sylviaistyping).



# Creating Contamination

with Erion Makuo

There is an organic energy to commissioning cover art. I can start with a vision or direction, but the artist is the one that leads. Paths diverge, go uphill or downhill, and there are times we end in a completely different place than intended. For the Contamination cover art, I was inspired by photos from the Avenue of the Baobabs in Madagascar. The trees are thick and stretch up into the sky. In the dusk, they seem otherworldly.

Erion created three concept images, each with vastly different energies. The first was serene: a woman in the distance, balancing weight on her head. The second was almost joyful: a woman surrounded by birds, staring directly at the viewer. The third was prideful: a woman, head down, smoking a pipe, possessing the answer to every question you've ever had.

I wanted something peaceful to balance the bright colours and active nature of the past two covers. I asked Erion to proceed with the first image and its baobabs,

and we decided on a peaceful blue morning—with light blues waking up the scene.

However, I quickly realized we were missing the speculative element to the image. I launched several suggestions: adding two moons, changing the colour of the trees, placing a ship in the sky. Erion expanded on my suggestions by adding large antelopes behind the baobabs, with the woman's path leading to them. We now had a fantasy inspired image to further contrast from the last covers.

Cover art finished, right? As Erion finalized the piece, a similar but more striking idea took hold. The colour scheme was darker than I had wanted and didn't have the baobabs from the original conceit. She reached out and wanted to know if I was interested in this new design:

*I've been experimenting a bit with the illustration to see if it could be improved and stumbled upon this composition. I really like how the pure black sky contrasts with the antelopes, but it's missing both the baobabs and the lighter color palette you liked before.*

As the majestic baobabs shifted into alien antelopes, the image balanced between menacing and peaceful. The darkness of the sky and the brightness of the moon made the woman look small but also stand out in negative space. The shapes were obviously different but the feel was the same.



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.

For more information on Skateistan, check out their website.

# When We Lost Touch

by H.E. Casson

**W**hen I started reading statistics, I stopped reading books.

It wasn't a choice. As the Covid numbers in my hotspot city crept up and up, I lost my ability to interact with stories. There's science to explain this. Apparently, the part of my brain needed to concentrate on written language was preoccupied with the new, unknown contaminant that had entered our world. Space, previously filled with the imaginations of my peers, was now dedicated to keeping myself and my education-worker partner safe. Well, safer. We scrubbed our groceries, washed everything in hot water, stayed double masked—all in an attempt to avoid contamination.

The word contamination is a curious one to dissect. At its core is the word 'tangere'. It means to touch, either physically (tangibly) or emotionally (intangibly). It's related to words like contact, tactile, and contagion. The dichotomy of this root-word tells the story of the pandemic. We are touch starved, the human body craving contact with others. At the same time, we put up barriers to avoid sharing a contagion with those we care about. In learning how to avoid the virus, we consume information about it. Soon our brains are overfull with

new word combinations: index case; social distancing; super-spreader event.

This dichotomic theme informs speculative fiction, back to its earliest days. How often do stories of contact with the unknown become cautionary tales about invasion? Early science fiction cast humans as the endangered party, but newer stories reflect on our capacity to do harm. Star Trek's prime directive, as introduced in the original series episode Bread and Circuses, acknowledges the thin, illusory veil between contact and contamination.

"Don't worry, but I think I have to go take a Covid test," my partner declared just one day before our second province-wide shutdown.

Internally, I weighed the factors. Yes, he worked in a school, but he also had seasonal allergies every April. Still, he immediately quarantined in our bedroom, while I claimed a small five by seven foot sunroom as my domain. Everything in between was the neutral zone. We were careful to leave as much time as possible between any necessary shared spaces, like our one bathroom.

The next day, his results came back positive. Within a few hours, we were both running a temperature and my tiny room started to spin. I took my test the next day, but it was recommended we keep separate until my results came in. Because of a surge in cases, and the Easter long weekend, there were three days where we shared an illness, but never a room.

That's when, after more than a year, I started to read again. I can't say for certain what shifted. Perhaps, now that the worst had happened, my anxiety was able to shift. More likely I just needed a distraction, any distraction, from a new, even more powerful fear—that

we could be one of the statistics I'd spent so much time reading. Now that the contagion was in my house, no article about cleaning doorknobs could give me peace, so I read comic books. Ones with lots of pictures and very few words. Then I started reading short story collections. One story at a time, I slowly savoured the *Nothing Without Us* anthology and N. K. Jemisin's *How Long 'til Black Future Month?*

When my test came in (also positive) we were able to blend our home. Too tired to do anything else, I started re-reading my comfort books. Works I'd read as a kid. In a few days, I binge-read my collection of Philip K. Dick paperbacks. The unreality of his work, the constant questioning of what can be known and trusted, made particular sense as I experienced the lingering neurological symptoms of the illness. When a paycheque came in for an ironically timed essay I'd written on the subject of resilience, I spent it on an e-Reader.

This allowed me to deep dive into works written by friends, acquaintances, and mutuals. When they posted about new projects, I was excited with them, knowing I had the capacity to read what they'd created. I downloaded books by indie speculative fiction writers like Whitney Hill, Dianna Gunn, and Stephen Graham King. Back issues of magazines I used to devour were suddenly delicious again (which, having lost my sense of smell and taste, was a welcome change). Though I couldn't share physical, tangible space with members of my creative community, I could engage with their words.

My favourite words I read this year, though, came from my doctor's office: "We are now booking patients in your demographic for first doses of the vaccine." I got the jab a month to the day after I'd come out of quarantine. I

marvelled at the concept that a little bit of the thing I'd been so unnerved by, rendered safe, was what could protect me.

I thought back on how I'd re-found my ability to read and saw that it started much the same. A little bit of language to prime my exhausted brain: a verse by Terese Mason Pierre; a story by Sameem Siddiqui; a flash piece by Avra Margariti. I built my capacity to engage with the language centres of my brain, working my way in paragraphs back up to books. With words, as with the vaccination, a small dose had a big impact.

So while this has been a story about the dangers of contamination, it's also been a story about the value of contact and of our ability to stay in touch with each other. It's a story of gratitude toward the community members helping us get the vaccine, and to the creators who are still telling stories. This issue is full of stories written, edited, and shared by folks who found a way to connect in this uniquely disconnected time. It can't have been easy. I hope, somewhere in these pages, your brain finds the tonic it needs. Perhaps a small dose of words that can distract, excite, and engage you, until we can come together again.



**H. E. Casson** (they/them) is a queer writer and voice actor whose words have been shared by Taco Bell Quarterly, Serotonin, and Malarkey Books. Their voice can be heard in Moonbase Theta Out, Disenchanted, and Seminar. They believe in kindness, in fine prose, and that the pigeon is nature's greatest single

accomplishment. Visit them at [hecasson.com](http://hecasson.com) and as [@hecasson](https://twitter.com/hecasson) on Twitter.



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



**Year 1: Apparition (January 2018); Delusion (April 2018);  
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