

Apparition Lit

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A Word from our Editor

by Kel Coleman

When I'm 8, I use my grandmother's boxy computer and Comic Sans 14-pt font to write stories about girls who don't fit in, but who still manage to go on adventures. In fact, they're better suited for adventures *because* they don't fit in. Since they don't have a place in the world, there's nothing holding them back and they don't need anyone's help. (I'm too young to worry about author intrusion.)

Around 15, my stories become about teens tasked with saving others and stopping evil. They're always outcasts and traumatized (though I don't think of them that way at the time). Their powers are often elemental and destructive, their pain can burn their homes to ash, turn their friends to enemies. (Their fathers are dead because my father is dead.) They're unlikely saviors, maybe too broken for the challenges they face, but they know what it's like to be lonely and afraid and in need of saving, and they won't leave anybody else to feel that way.

In my early 20s, I stop reading and writing for fun. It's not that I don't miss flying with dragons or kissing boys

with cold lips and even colder hearts, but I can't afford to escape reality. (I would never come back.)

In my late 20s, I start the slow process of scraping off the emotional grime that's insulated (stifled) me. I get a library card and listen to audiobooks on the bus. I rediscover the fantasies and the futures that took me in when the real world wasn't safe. (Funny how finding a home can free you to travel.)

Now, in my 30s, the stories I love have changed and matured with me. I write for all the girls and not-girls I was, as well as the unfathomable being I aspire to be. And while my reading now takes me across many genres and styles, there will always be a special place in my heart and room at my table for the misfits. Even if we have to add a chair or two and get real cozy with each other, we're making the space.

Which brings me to the most exciting part: sharing creative work that I loved!

The Apparition Lit team and I have brought together four stories that are often as uncanny as they are familiar, and as often windows as they are mirrors: "Through the Glass, a Full Sea" by P.H. Low, "Paper Teeth" by Mare Knaupp, "The Sea Hare" by Wailana Kalama, and "A Catalog of Gifts from a Crow" by Jo Miles.

We have also four incredible poems for you: "Helen After Helen" by Rasha Abdulhadi, "I, Hunger" by Nnadi Samuel, "Invertebrate Gazebo" by Angela Acosta, and "Marriage" by Yee Heng Yeh.

And lastly, we've been graced with an essay by Tania Chen called "Symmetry, Horror & Identity."

Originally, I wanted to talk about the parallels in theme and subject matter I saw throughout the issue, but I don't want to spoil anything, and besides, now I'm

curious: What similarities do you find? I wonder if we'll see eye to eye.



Kel Coleman is a mom, editor, and Ignyte-nominated author. Their fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in FIYAH, Anathema: Spec from the Margins, Apparition Lit, The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2022, and others. Though Kel is a Marylander at heart, they currently live in Pennsylvania with their husband, tiny human, and a stuffed dragon named Pen. They can be found at kelcoleman.com and on Twitter at [@kcolemanwrites](https://twitter.com/kcolemanwrites).

Through the Glass, a Full Sea

by P. H. Low

Content notes: dysphoria, internalized racism

You see her first when you are five, pinching your nose and cheeks and wondering if the greenish shade of your skin, which you'll later learn is just the tint of glass, means you are made of cheese. She moves a half-breath before you do; speaks a language you have already forgotten, her pink mouth forming a childish perfect

Nǐ sì séi?

Wait, you say—tippy-toeing to reach above the faucet, pulse racing beneath your skin at this evidence of your blossoming magic—*wait*, but when your fingers smudge cool surface, they meet only your reflection.



There is a girl behind the mirror.

Ten years old and her nose is not swollen pink-blotchy like yours, her palms not slimy from wiping tears from too-small eyes because her younger sister,

lying on the floor, tilted her face up and said, *your nose looks like a pig's nose* and laughed at you for liking the boy in your Sunday school class.

She didn't say no one could love you. She didn't need to.

Nǐ yé yǒu mèi měi ma? you try—*do you also have a younger sister?*—and the other girl says yes.

Do you—hate her, sometimes? The h-word out of your mouth is a dare: you have never tried in front of your parents, are terrified of how they would look at you after.

Her mouth purses. *No*, she says, at once a question and statement, as if this should be obvious, and you think: this is what it means to be beautiful, this is what it means to be good.



Twelve, in the minivan side mirror, where sometimes you do not recognize yourself: fragments of your face rearrange each time you look, new angles to jaw and mouth and nose. Yet they are always the same in photos, all cheeks and no eyes. You stop watching movies—stop aching after actors who meet each other's gazes, whose sheer intensity of feeling and touching and *looking* is enshrined on those altars of light and shadow—because afterward you will stride around the house expecting your parents and sister to see you, too.

Nǐ yào sǎn me? asks the girl behind the mirror, but your mother sits in the driver's seat and you cannot respond.



Fifteen, shivering naked in the bathroom, white candle in one hand and a lighter in the other. A craft you have just discovered, ideograms traced in red thread

across the counter's plastic laminate, and soon your eyes will be wide and blue enough for the girls in choir to look *at* instead of *past*.

Then your reflection flickers, fractures, and cold burrows through your not-cheese skin into your bones.

Why, she demands in English, *why*?

As well as *nei na me gao cuo*, and a torrent of Cantonese and Hokkien you do not understand.

As her voice crescendoes—as she slaps the counter, leans so close her breath fogs the mirror's other side—you think: she sounds like your mother. A temper you've never had. You tell her to leave you alone—though you cannot quite form your lips around *fuck off*, which will take another ten years—and she does.

But then, she was never *from* here. And she has never tried very hard to stay.

You light the candle. Anchor the thread with drips of pale wax. Recite words overheard from the girls in choir—who are not your friends, for you are not bold enough, but at least they smile and tuck their legs beneath their chairs when you shuffle past them to your seat. You are not sure if you have gotten the spell right, but your face begins to burn, and your tongue clings to the roof of your mouth, and when you open your eyes again, the person in the mirror is someone else entirely.



Later you imagine her more patient, a softness to her eyes that was alien to you at that age. An offhand *nǐ yǐ jīng hén měi*—*you are already beautiful*—and the raw embryonic monster that was you at the time—clawing out of yourself, out of that house with its mirrors and your parents building you up in their image—bursting

into tears. Finally, you would think, here was someone who understood.

But she was fifteen, too. And even later you will marvel at her temper—the way she could explode at the world, knowing it would listen. How beautiful to be loud: to raise your voice in five different tongues and take for granted that someone, anyone, might bend to your desires.



Eighteen: college. Dining halls and classes in different buildings, hallmates who think you are one of them. A clean start, a white page. Ocean-dark eyes and you are afraid to look in the bathroom mirror—afraid to get another telling-off, from her or from yourself.

And yet. You enroll in a Chinese class; laugh with your parents over the phone at the Americans botching their zh's and ch's and q's, the squawk of their voices as they attempt the five tones. In your sophomore year, one of the worst offenders will spend a semester in China and return more fluent than you, and you will writhe with jealousy and drop out of the course sequence as soon as you've fulfilled the foreign language requirement.



Twenty-two. Later, you will wonder what you would have seen in the mirror, if you'd tried to look: imagine her dimple-cheeked, hair still long despite the heat; imagine her, if not happy, at least single-minded in her studies, a pencil tip stabbed into a map of Australia or America or Germany, where her staying will be contingent on how useful she makes herself, how valuable she proves to the keepers of the castle.

If you'd stayed, you tell your parents whenever they argue with you about the spell, *I wouldn't have grown up*

thinking I looked like an alien. But maybe your family was built for leaving. Maybe if your parents hadn't, you'd feel as trapped as they did—would claw yourself out of Malaysia's lush green forests and long smooth highways if it destroyed you, and it would be your children who blamed you for stripping them of their native tongues.



Twenty-five: you go *back* for the first time since you were a child (*back* being what your parents still call it, and you think perhaps it can be, too, for you—a reverse movement in years, in possibility). Your body closer to yours now, you think: a new city and a new exercise routine and no one who knows what you used to be.

Yet you see her in every press of relatives, exclaiming at your appearance in rapid-fire Hokkien; in the groups of schoolgirls walking past a stand of palm trees, dark hair clinging to their necks from the humidity. And it is not just that she chose a different major, or lacks the rigidity in her shoulders and spine from years of looking different from anyone else in the room: her thoughts and yours do not even overlap. They cannot be translated.

You imagine her sometimes lonely, but WhatsApp-ing a cousin to drive her home from college on the weekends she misses her mum's cooking. You imagine friends she's gone up through elementary school with, and aunts exclaiming *hou lang* even when all she does is walk into a room and smile. You imagine a fullness beneath her breastbone, one you never knew you lacked.

And you realize you do not know her, more than ever—that the pane of glass which separates you is a million universes wide.



You are twenty-five when you break.

It is a narrative arc of your own making: *she was sick and now she's well. She was unloved but now she loves herself.* You have no other story to fit yourself into—are not daring or selfless enough for the fantasy novels you snuck out of your high school library, nor sufficiently quick-witted or lovable for the romances you read in college. But damn, you can be sad. And according to some books, that gives you just enough permission to see yourself.

Right before you snap the candle, snip the red thread—both stowed, until now, in a wooden box in your underwear drawer, slowly wearing your soul thin from the inside—you take a quick selfie of the sharp line of your nose, the piercing blue of your eyes.



Afterward, there are some days you sneak looks in the mirror, some days you cannot bear to. In a few months, you will switch phones and the photos will slip into the craft of data—along with the chunky digital cameras stashed under your parents' bed, the burned-out laptops in the age before the cloud—that you will never find again. *Just a phase*, you imagine your parents telling the other members of their Bible study. *You know how kids are these days.* But when you visit for the holidays, you are greeted by the same cold silence as before—a negative space where your arguments used to be. And as you sort through your closet, clearing out try-hard Polaroids and thrift-store clothes that no longer bring out your eyes, there is a moment, heartbeat-brief, that you almost want the fighting back.



Twenty-seven: three cubed, you think on the day

you turn. She might be an engineer by now—a software developer like your father, or an architect, perhaps her own little girl bouncing from one hip, her childhood friends constantly pinging her WeChat. No less of a person for having been bound to more.

You have been learning, these past couple years. Language apps and college courses and books, so many books—searching for echoes, images, to tell you where you're from. You have been studying your face in the mirror, trying to piece together the fragments of what you want and what you are meant to be.

It will never be enough, of course. It will never bridge the glass—and perhaps it is not such a loss, for there to be two of you instead of one. But it matters, that you are reaching for her. That you are shuffling your tiny steps, fumbling through the dark. Because—despite ownership being a concept championed by those who have ruled and ruined you—you want, somehow, to belong to her, and her to you. Because your pulse still quickens every time you pass a reflective surface.

Because you want to believe her life was not just some tangent, a brief commonality before curving off into ether; that you were, in those strange, upside-down moments, somehow worthy of being seen.

In the bathroom of your parents' house—your mouth still sweet with mango cake, your family's laughter and fork-clinks leaking through the crack in the door—you flatten your palm against the mirror, and it ripples beneath your touch.

She is waiting for you, wearing a button-down shirt you suspect is the same brand you are wearing, and you greet her haltingly in each of the languages you've been learning—minding your tones, the vowels, all slightly different from Mandarin.

Hou lang, she says, and motions at your shirt. *Uniqlo?*
Yeah.

She grins and presses her own hand to the glass, and you feel a brief warmth—as if, for half a heartbeat, someone has held a candle to its sea-green edge.



P. H. Low is a Locus- and Rhysling-nominated Malaysian American writer and poet whose debut novel, *These Deathless Shores*, is forthcoming from Orbit Books in 2024. Their shorter work is published or forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Tor.com*, and *Diabolical Plots*, among others. P. H. can be found on Twitter and Instagram @_lowpH and online at ph-low.com.

Helen after Helen

by Rasha Abdulhadi

Muse of the million,
I am made Helen again,
devourable and sexless entire
surely she (know-nothing of desire)
couldn't comprehend the carnal filigree
in the eyes of Paris after Paris
Helen after Helen, I've been through
incarnations of her face many
times too many, the masquerade
ages explosively, corks pop
from the lips of celebration bottles.
Broken sabres by which, finally,
Helen is etched in an edifice
one more hard myth memorialized.

And her successor is Shaharazad
that ruthless expert, virgin
to every experience
adept of a thousand and one ages
ageless night after mortal night,
besting king and father, and farther
than that—outliving even herself
so her life survives still suspended in the margins,
a frame for the stories she told at the knife's edge.



Rasha Abdulhadi is a queer Palestinian Southerner disabled by Long Covid. Rasha's writing has appeared in *Kweli*, *Poem-a-Day*, *Anathema*, *Shade Journal*, *FIYAH*, *Mizna*, and *Strange Horizons* and is anthologized in *Essential Voices: A COVID-19 Anthology* (forthcoming), *Snaring New Suns*, *Unfettered Hexes*, *Halal if You Hear Me*, and *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler*. A poet, fiber artist, speculative fiction writer, and editor, Rasha is a member of Muslims for Just Futures, the Radius of Arab American Writers, and Alternate ROOTS. Their new chapbook is *who is owed springtime*.

Paper Teeth

by Mare Knaupp

Her teeth were sharp, and her patience long. She did not hold grudges, but she did not forget. She spoke to aged river rocks, and even if you wandered close enough to hear, your ears would fill with something like a good, thick soap, and you would only see her mouthing fervent words to the water-smoothed stones.

They say she was a witch. They say she was not. They say that whatever she was, it was a pity.

She was the only one who ever spoke to the bird. Her kin knew better, or perhaps she knew something they did not. Her kin said she was a fool, but they said it in hushed tones.

No one else ever got close enough to speak to it, let alone touch it. Because it flew, the people called it a bird, but they knew it was not. They could not have said what it looked like beyond that it flew, and it gleamed. This was why they feared it so.

When the bird came to take someone away, the people bowed their heads and prayed. Some prayed to gods they and their ancestors invented over centuries. Some prayed to the bird itself, pleading for mercy.

Some prayed to nothing at all—their neighbors prayed; it seemed the thing to do.

It was curious that no one thought of the fact that praying had not worked once. That was how things were, in those days, in that place.

Even she prayed. Even she had sense enough not to question prayer aloud, although she wondered at it many times.

She did not bow her head.

They wonder if that was why she turned out so peculiar: when she was a babe, instead of huddling close to her mother's breast, she opened her eyes wide and drank in the sight of the creature. Perhaps that was why the child's teeth grew in pointed. The image of the bird lived in her bones.

Some shied away from her, of course. Closed their shutters and made protective signs across their hearts. Drew symbols by their windows, threw salt in their doorways. There are always mutters of witchcraft, curses, devilry.

But some of them were sturdy, sensible folk. She was of the same blood as they, and not even a child, not yet. And even if she were cursed, it was hardly her fault, they said. They loved her as one of their own, because she was.

Of course she knew she was strange. The children did not fear her at first, but her teeth did not look like theirs. Children, taught by their parents to hunt down anomaly, learn quickly what a girl with different teeth means. And she was always a bright thing, brighter even than most youth.

Bright, but odd.

They say they caught her in the act, although no one

was sure it was exactly a sin. She had such wide eyes, it was hard to imagine her sinning at all—or perhaps it was quite easy. None of them wished their thoughts to dwell on her for long enough to decide.

They found her kneeling, black ink staining her tongue. Still just a child. She was voracious. The binding was all that was left, aside from a few scraps of paper fluttering to the ground. There were thin red lines about her mouth. She looked up at them. They wondered if this was what the bird had seen—those dark eyes, the irises nearly invisible, and her mouth open in something that might have been awe and might have been shame and might have been an innocent question.

They did not give her time to speak. She did not know what they would have done to her, had she not cried the bird's arrival just as they jerked her to her feet. It took one of their grandfathers, that time.

That is the other thing they say about her. They say she knew the bird was going to take someone before it took them. Some of them even say she knew whom it was going to take, but if she did, she kept that to herself.

It did not always take someone when it flew by. Those times, she could not predict. Those times, she ran to the window, mouthing her prayers and staring reverently at the creature no one else dared see.

They did not trust her prayers. They were not sure she was praying it would leave.

They say she mourned, when one of them was taken, but her mourning was not the same as theirs. When they mourned, they murmured solemn, ancient words and sang songs in forgotten languages. They had no bodies to burn, so they would set a boat alight, piled with sturdy tools and honeyed almonds and things they loved. They sent it down the river, down the river

to the unknown lands, down the river to the speaking stones (though few believed her when she said the stones spoke). They sent it with weeping and singing and praying, always praying.

She did not weep. She could not sing. She dared not pray. Not when the bird was too far to hear. She had her own ritual, performed alone.

When the last of the procession left the river, she went with silent steps to an eddy she knew well. It thought her a friend, or if not a friend, at least a companion. She thought it somewhat dull, but there was comfort in that. She spoke to the eddy and she spoke to the rocks beneath, and she lay a leather book at the riverbank, its pages still fluttering in the breeze. She tilted her head back to the sky, gave thanks, and fell to.

This was her sacred daily bread. She ate alone, or with the dead.

When she had finished, she took the binding and placed it in the river with reverence, in the center of the eddy, which knew its duty. It swirled the cover around and sent it down the river, borne by the voices of the stones.

They say she did this long before they started to cast mistrustful glances. She knew, perhaps, the inevitability of their mistrust.

The elders had known she was strange. She did not grow stranger as she aged. Rather, they discovered more of her strangeness with time. First the stories, then the death rites, then the river rocks. She went gray early. They said her wispy silver hair was a sign of devils. She was always tilting her head, as if listening for something. She gave a wild-eyed shout when she knew the bird would arrive; they had only moments to

prepare. They feared her for this, and as their numbers dwindled, their fear surged.

It was impossible, after all, for them to go on this way. Each year the bird came more often, and left with empty talons less. And they were slow to change, slow to realize their need.

She grew older, wizened. She watched their grandmothers and grandfathers fly away, then their mothers and fathers, and she grew nervous. She still cried out her warnings, for the sake of those who had grown used to them, but she saw the narrowed eyes, heard the anxious whispers. Witchcraft, curses, devilry.

The story of her power faded. It might have been written, but if it had, she had consumed it.

Her supply of bread grew thin. She suspected they were hiding it. She sorrowed but did not blame them. Those who had spoken up for her when she was a babe were long since taken. Those who had been babes when she was a babe were withered and mistrustful, even of their own memories. Their children muttered. She herself had no children to defend her, and even if they had existed, they might not have spoken kindly.

They would not drive her out, she thought. But she heard them, wondering why she could tell of its arrival, wondering whether she called it. Wondering that she had been gray as long as they had been alive.

They did not see her mourn anymore. That she chose to do in secret. They would say what they would. She had no desire to prove her grief to them. She knew there was only so much time, only so many people the bird could take.

The bird took the other old ones, the ones who had known her from childhood. Then it took their children,

those who wondered. Soon there were only babes left. Still she prayed, still watched the skies. Still she heralded the bird's descent.

They shied away when she tried to bring them offerings of berries, nuts, roots, things that were foreign to her. They called her witch and fiend. She let them be.

She swallowed all the stories.

She asked the stones, and the eddy, how she would eat. They said to wait. She had a century of practice.

She searched while the babes slept. She found paper that had come loose from its binding, thin volumes she had missed. She savored them. She had once been able to stomach two, three in a day, but she was starving now, her belly shriveling. She ate little, but she lived.

They say the bird came weekly, while she starved. She prayed each day—she still feared to pray when it was gone, but she feared more that it would not hear her. Her clothing turned to rags. Her voice grew hoarse. Still it took the younglings, whom she still called to warn. She was ravenous. She could not mourn for them the way she wished.

The day came, as it must—the last babe gone, the last page in her hand. The river rocks urged her to drink of their cool, running water. The eddy bade her wait once more.

She flung her arms wide, turned her palms upward to display countless paper's edge white scars, threw her old, rasping voice to the sky. She ate. She prayed.

It flew, and it gleamed.

They say it was a griffin; they say it was a phoenix. They say it was beautiful. Its feathers were of silver, like her hair. Its eyes were dark, devoid of irises.

It was not a bird.

She cried out, and this time there was no one left, she did not have to conceal her joy. She ran toward it as it descended in a long, slow spiral. Her bones were old and brittle; still she ran. She ran, stones tearing at her bare feet, jagged gashes in her filthy clothing, paper scraps falling from her mouth like baby teeth. *Finally, finally*, she howled, *you have come to take me away*.

And then it landed, and she saw by its talons a squirming, squalling creature, their thin arms struggling to wave. The babe could not even roll onto their stomach; they must have been starving for days. The final child, the last of them.

It had not come for her.

The babe's mouth was open. They had not the strength to wail.

The silver animal did not turn its head. She saw its left eye blink once, twice. A drop of something blue and glimmering fell from the eye and ran into the feathers. It might have been a trick of the sun, the reflection off the dazzling creature.

She closed her eyes. She prayed for the child.

Its beak tore into her flesh like leather, like ink, like paper. Her blood was blue, her insides black. Her bones were feathered. Its talons ripped her stomach open; there was writing in the lining. It flayed her, licked up the words inside her skin. Carved her into ink blot pieces, ate her in four bites. The last page, still undigested in her gut, sliced its tongue. It was voracious.

When it had had its fill, a lock of silver hair remained. It cocked its head as if deciding. Her blood still about its mouth, it plucked the hair from the ground and placed it upon the chest of the babe. It flew.

The child gasped, blue upon his clothing. His eyes were open. He had seen the creature.



Mare Knaupp is a senior Creative Writing BFA student at Stony Brook University. They primarily work in fantasy with themes of queer and Asian American experiences. They love iced oat milk lattes, Neil Gaiman, spreadsheets, nineteenth-century British history, and Tchaikovsky (not necessarily in that order). This is their first publication.

Invertebrate Gazebo

by Angela Acosta

The vast Terran desert has always teemed
with slow life emerging from burrows,
muddling through as mammals do.

Front paws dig into sand, a dance of muscles
and bones reaching millennia into
the remains of an ancient silica sea.

When deep space explorers tired
of the pull of gravity they sank,
sending bubbles up through ocean depths.

The incandescent glow of invertebrate life,
swimming untethered across vast chasms
shuddered spines designed for bipedal locomotion.

Jealous they were of watery realms
full of tentacle propulsion and free movement
down in frozen Europa and the Mariana Trench.

The invertebrates sailed in gas giants
and bounced in boiling seas,
slowing metabolism to endure the centuries
and excel in free-range evolution.

They gathered in rock formations like gazebos,
from tidal pools to murky depths
cocooned by pressure,
a garden of life that confounded
the vertebrate sentients.



Angela Acosta is a bilingual Latina poet and Ph.D. Candidate in Iberian Studies at The Ohio State University. She is a 2022 Dream Foundry Contest for Emerging Writers Finalist, 2022 Somos en Escrito Extra-Fiction Contest Honorable Mention, Rhysling nominee, and Best of the Net nominee. Her speculative poetry has appeared in *Eye to the Telescope*, *Radon Journal*, *Space & Time*, and *Shoreline of Infinity*. She is author of *Summoning Space Travelers* (Hiraeth Books, 2023) and *Fourth Generation Chicana Unicorn* (Dancing Girl Press, 2023).

The Sea-Hare

by Wailana Kalama

Content notes: gun violence, body horror

At first, Hannele's shots were wild, erratic, like pebbles hopping along the surface of a puddle. They'd hit the deserters square in the stomach, with a puff of obliterated fabric—or else, shatter their spines and leave them bleeding for hours, immobile, sweating their lives out and staining the sphagnum moss yellow with bile and other unsavory secrets. And as they fell, the bog would burst into spore-clouds at these moments, stink the air with sulfur.

As time wore on, she sharpened her instincts, learned when to exhale and when to ball her fist. Her favorite spot was the neck, because when it went quick through the artery, the red would spray out like fireworks, paint the sky, the conifers. Her rifle was an M/28-30 fashioned out of Arctic birch, more rocket than anything else. And the deserters, they came almost daily, stragglers all, shambling across the fenland in their tattered, field-gray greatcoats, with a special kind of gleam in their eyes. Hunting for stray voles, half-eaten tin cans, for a roof over their heads. For an escape from their fates, from dogging guilt. She always saw them before they

saw her, as she sat for all hours of the day on the little roof of her little shack, in the middle of that gray-green bog, camouflaged with overrun moss. Usually, they came alone. On hot, clear days when the air was free of gasses, they came in dangerous numbers.

The villagers at the edge of the bog had taken to calling it No Man's Land lately, but there was no way of Hannele knowing that, isolated as she was. What she knew about the war could be summed up in the heavy explosions that occasionally ripped the night sky like an electric storm. Sometimes to the west, sometimes to the south. She knew the war was especially bad on those days when she'd lift her hand from the bolt on her rifle and it came away hot, each reload a decision, a split-second friction that left her palm burning and the morass in all kinds of messy colors.

She'd been there for months, years maybe, she'd forgotten how long. However long it was, it was enough to make her sinistral eye twitch from the many hours squinting through the telescopic sight, like a scientist through a microscope, at the deserters as they slunk their boots through the marsh-water nearly two hundred meters away. And when she let the bullet fly, she imagined each as a word—*surreptitiously* for example, or *estuary*, or *hirsute*, all weightless words—tearing through the air like a raptor in flight.



One day, through her looking-glass, she spotted the sea-hare.

It is not a sea-hare, she thought as she wiped her sweaty palms on her trousers and reassessed through the rifle scope.

Not here, near three legions from the ocean. But

the way the creature shifted in a continual motion, undulating this way and that with a strange luminescent shimmer in the noonday sun, was undeniable. It was a tiny thing, so small she wouldn't have seen it had she not scanned the marshlands day in and day out. Pink, and vibrantly so, it slunk toward her shack with a gasping mouth.

It sidled over to her bog-girted hut, little by little, and it was nearly three days before it reached her doorstep. When she opened the tin door, the sea-hare's ears bobbed as if in greeting, and in answer, she scooped it up in her palm, caressed it with one starved finger. It rippled soundlessly, much like a slug. She felt a gentle sucking, like a starfish when it sticks to your skin. When she pulled away, her index finger was marked with a red grid of nine tiny pricks, squares all, as if the sea-hare was trying to slurp up blood through her membranes.

Maybe I love it, she thought, without knowing quite what that meant. She just knew that the sea-hare smelled vaguely of gunpowder, and that on days when her rifle burst and the gunpowder smell hit her just right, the sun was always shining.

Hannele took the creature inside and set it on her bed. If coral was made out of gelatin, instead of ossified polyps, and shocked with neon light? That's what this sea-hare looked like. And she could tell, from the way its ears pricked this way and that, that it was hungry.

She foraged for moss, for twigs, for sedges and cattails, but the sea-hare wasn't interested. Probably, she deduced, it was missing salts, seawater rabbit that it was. So she hiked out farther and cut off scraps from the bodies of the deserters that still remained there, in parts: thigh-meat, and shin-meat, torso, globes of buttock, snippets of scapula.

The sea-hare lapped up everything greedily.

And every time it ate, something about the creature changed. It wobbled and molded its shape. When it ate a cheek, it turned blood-pink, and veiny; when it devoured a tendon, it lengthened, hardened. Each new piece seemed to give it a new identity. It grew in bursts, so before long it seemed the size of an infant, then a child, then a man. And the more it ate, the more it took on the likeness of a deserter. Or, rather, like a jigsaw of many deserters where each piece is from a different puzzle. At one point, it was caught halfway in between sea-hare and deserter, so that it struggled to keep shape, lengthening along its tibia, hardening the curves of its skull, while the rest of it bobbed up and down on her bed like a bowl of meat jelly.

Fingers, noses, and ears were harder to find, as they were delicacies among the foxes. She had to wait a week before she shot a man with the biggest ears she ever saw. He was missing a thumb, though, so it was another day before she found that last digit, too. The sea-hare-thing gobbled them all up.

Before too long, it was almost indistinguishable from a man, with arms, legs, chest—except its upper lip rippled whenever it got wet, and each time it stood up, it stood not arboreal like a man, but mucilaginous like a bowl of stiff custard, as if it were just waiting for permission to fall down.

And the sea-deserter-hare gaped open-mouthed at Hannele from her bed, hardly moving except for its wet, gelatinous eyes. Wheezes, half-damp and gasping, pattered out from its pores.

It needs a spark to talk, she thought. Remembering the stories about princesses and frogs she'd heard once, she kissed the creature, but the saliva that dribbled down

her shirt was snow-white and she backed off, slathering the liquid away with the back of her hand.

But it worked. The sea-deserter-hare started speaking.

And how it spoke.

Disgust is the only truth.

She shivered, because in the depths of herself she had long thought the same thing, but never put it to words.

Disgust is the mirror on the wall, it said, and kept saying things like that.

Disgust is the bedfellow you wake up to each morning.

The only theorem that comforts in the hollowest of nights.

The only part of you that will never die.

Then it leaned forward and vomited sourmilk all over the tin cans of beans hidden beneath the bed, and Hannele spent the afternoon mopping it up with a shredded rag.



The sea-deserter-hare liked to watch her. It wove her a doll out of reeds. When she tied a dried salamander up with sawgrass and hung it from the ceiling, to stink out that wet matchbox smell in the shack, the sea-deserter-hare took it down and burnt it to cinders. The thing went out hunting and brought back minks and muskrats for them to eat. She cooked them a stew and while she did, it jeered at her from the bed and threatened to break her in half.

Sometimes, it spoke tenderly to her.



One day, as she was cleaning her rifle, the sea-

deserter-hare caught her by the braid. It gnawed on the strands of hair, and its pink upper lip quivered, making her shudder.

It snatched the rifle from her hands, and with her hunting knife, carved initials on it. So, it had a name? It did not tell her what it was. The knife made small scratches on the rifle, back and forth, back and forth, like a raspy tongue, and all the while a sickening wheezing sound emanated from the sea-deserter-hare's pores. Hannele did not like the way it was handling her rifle, but wasn't sure if this wasn't the way things should be, because what she felt was a lot like disgust.

The sea-deserter-hare smiled at her.

And fired with a crack, slicing the air with deserter blood two hundred meters away.

And when the bullets flew out this time, the words were *gnathic*, *bilboes*, *furuncle*, sticky words that clung to the air like cellophane.

The sea-deserter-hare embraced her with its two arm-like arms and warm gelatin excreted from its pores, flooding the sockets of her skin, then withdrew, leaving her trembling and bleeding in grids. Then it came again, poured into her and she felt warmth, and again, and again, regular like an inhale and an exhale, until it became less a learned act and more an instinct that dwelled in her body, nested there, had always been there, in the crevices she wasn't sure were hers.

And the worst of it all, Hannele thought, was she didn't know if it was right or wrong, if she was happy or sad, if it was good or bad, or good or bad, or good, or bad.

And Hannele, she started wheezing.

Wheezing,
wheezing,

wheezing.
Wheezing.



Wailana Kalama is a dark fiction writer from Hawaii, with credits in *Weird Little World's Mother: Tales of Love and Terror*, *Pseudopod*, Dark Matter INK's *Monstrous Futures and Monster Lairs*.

Marriage

by Yee Heng Yeh

I met two old giants of wind
out in the mountains
where the air was green, velvet, glass.

By then they had bled
into each other: watercolours
on the sky's blank paper,
fingers entwined as a whirlwind,
limbs of liquid light
grafted like two boughs
unsplitting into a single trunk.

Joy or fury, bubbling in one heart
would spill through both
like a breath shared between faces.
The scope of constellations they scanned
spread only as far as two adjacent points
on a compass.

Each entered the other's self
like a house, taking and leaving
whatever they wished

until they could scarcely tell
where his memory ended and hers began,
which worry she set down that he then took up,
whose words braided whose
to slither out as a single sentence
that told the story of their life.

This is the only way to be immortal—
to give yourself up so generously
there is nothing left that is yours alone,
nothing that could truly die.

So they divided the heft
of suffering by exactly half;
so the first step into the next world
they would take together.

I watched them pass through the trees
or the trees pass through them,
birds still beating in their chests,
their skin flushed dusk-pink,
the sun as her eye, the moon as his,

the difference between both as unassuming
as a strand of sky.



Yee Heng Yeh is a writer and translator from Malaysia. His poetry has been featured in *The KITA! Podcast*, *adda*, *Strange Horizons*, a few local anthologies, and was shortlisted in the Malaysian Poetry Writing

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A Catalog of Gifts from a Crow

by Jo Miles

A pocket watch, broken

At the top of the world, staring down at the endless clouds, loneliness swamped me.

I set aside my broom and hugged my elbows, though it was warm enough inside the lounge, separated from the cold by ceiling-high windows. At the altitude of our research station the morning was bright, with sky a perfect blue and air crisp enough to cut, but below, it'd be a dreary day. We occupied a snowy island in a sea of puffy white, broken only by a few other mountains tall enough to peek through.

The rest of the world might be gone, and I wouldn't even know.

The solitude hadn't felt so brutal until these past few months, since the avalanche blocked the train tracks up the mountain. That railway had been not only a major tourist attraction, but our main link to the world, and

it would take ages to repair. I used to wish the gawking flocks of tourists would leave us in peace up here amid the alpine beauty. Now that they were gone, I wished they'd come back.

A squawk made me jump, and I turned toward the observation terrace, away from the absence of view. The crows were gathering again, and that cry had started up a lively debate. The feeling of wrongness receded.

I shook my head at them. "Filling up the tourists' absence, are we? Nice try.?"

"Christine? Are you quite well, duckling?" asked Leora, coming over to join me. She often watched the view here on her breaks.

"I was lost in thought, and the birds startled me." I made an effort to sound less melancholy. "Look, that one's got something. Can't tell what..."

I pointed at the crow who'd hopped right up to the window and looked at me with bright, curious eyes. At his feet, something glimmered in the aggressive sunlight.

"Corbies love their shiny things. I do wonder how long they'll keep on hanging around with no tourists left to feed them. It'd make an interesting study."

Leora—properly Dr. Darrow, though I had called her Leora since I was a girl—was director of the research station. With her white hair and a knitted shawl around her shoulders, visitors often assumed she was the custodian and I, young and energetic, was one of the scientists, instead of the other way around.

"Maybe they're keeping us company," I said, then felt silly. "Probably not."

"Interesting hypothesis. Maybe you should study them."

“Oh, stop. You know I’ve got no training.”

“Why should that keep you from giving it a go? It’s a shame, this notion that you can’t do science without a decade at university. Anyone can study a thing systematically, and you’ve been around scientists since you were a wee one. You’ve picked up more than you know.”

“Maybe.”

She turned to go, and the panic surged again. I blurted: “Do you ever worry...? When the clouds are in, like today, do you feel cut off?”

The old scientist studied me as if gathering evidence, analyzing for cause and effect. “This isn’t the first time the train’s been shut down. Hans will keep flying up weekly with supplies, and in a pinch, we’ve got enough stockpiled to keep us for a good while.”

“That’s a scientist’s answer. Don’t you ever *feel* it?”

“Of course I do.” Leora cupped my cheek in her cool, dry hand. “We’re all here together, dear. You’re not alone.”

After she left, I stood a while, watching the crows. They were fouling up the terrace again, and I’d have to mop up their mess when the temperature rose above freezing, but there was something heartening about their presence.

“If you can wait for more tourists to come feed you,” I told the nearest, “then I can wait, too.”

He opened his wings—one was ragged, missing a couple larger feathers—and prodded his shiny rubbish again.

“All right, what have you found, then?”

He fled to the nearest railing as I opened the door.

Not rubbish at all, but an old-fashioned pocket-watch, beautifully etched with a scene of sailing ships. A bit scuffed, but a work of art. Inside, instead of numbers and hands, it had three circles in different sizes. Moons, I thought, because they seemed to fall into orbits.

It was broken, though. When I tried to wind it, the gears ground, and grit fell out when I shook it. What a shame. It must have been someone's treasure.

"Where did you get this?" I asked the crow. He preened, playing coy. "If you stole this from one of the researchers, you'll be in trouble."

I turned to go, but he cawed a protest. His beak gaped, expectant.

"All right, all right." I hunted my apron pockets for something to give him in exchange. Coins, paper-clips, a couple wrapped chocolates...

He snatched a chocolate from my hand. "Hey!" I cried, but the cheeky thing flapped away. I hoped he wouldn't try to eat it. Maybe he just liked the wrapper; it was the shiniest thing I'd had...

"Fine, thief, but only this once."



A firestarter

At dinner, I passed the pocket-watch around the table. The researchers admired its beauty, but none recognized it, and no one seemed curious about where it came from. They were more interested in debating some odd results that Ranjit, the climatologist, was getting from his atmospheric studies, something about fluctuating carbon dioxide levels and an unexplained spike in particulate matter. I gathered there might be

a problem with his sensors, and I offered to help clean them.

I half-listened, fiddling with the watch in my lap. It was too strange and wonderful not to have a story.

That was my imagination running wild, though. When I was little, I'd explored every crevice of the research station, convinced that if only I looked hard enough, I'd find a cave or secret passage or magical door like in stories. I'd opened every cabinet, and got in trouble for it, but never found anything.

When the meal ended, I said, "I suppose I'll put the watch in the lost and found..."

"I think it's yours now, Christine," said Ranjit.

"Indeed. Finders keepers," said Leora. "Maybe you can repair it."

So I kept it, feeling like I'd been given a gift. I toyed with it during idle moments between restocking soap in the bathrooms and placing supply orders. Each time I started to wallow in loneliness, I noticed some new detail to distract me, like the three faded moons etched in three spots above the ships—or one moon, moving across the sky, which made more sense.

It became my moon, always tugging at my thoughts.

The next morning, I trudged along the ridge with Ranjit to check his sensors, wipe them down, and replace their filters. When we returned, the crows were out, including the one I'd begun thinking of as Pirate, for his scruffy look and his habit of stealing things. He flapped over and pecked at a bright buckle on my rucksack.

He'd brought me another gift.

This one was a palm-sized contraption of metal and

a flat bit of blue-white stone, scratched black in spots. Not pretty, but no less mysterious than the watch.

“Wow!” Ranjit looked over my shoulder. “I haven’t seen one of those since I was a boy.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a firestarter, the old-fashioned kind. My uncle used one when he took us camping. You strike the steel arm against the flint—or whatever stone, I don’t recognize this one—to make sparks. This one won’t be starting any fires, though.” I saw what he meant: the metal arm was bent, useless.

How odd. Where would a crow find such a thing?

Pirate looked up at me, head tilting this way and that, giving an impression of irrepressible curiosity.

“Hold on,” I told him. I tossed a handful of sunflower seeds, hoping that would keep him for a minute, and hurried inside.

He was still waiting when I got back. I set down a small matchbox and stepped back. “Here you go. Fire for fire, a fair trade.”

I didn’t quite know why I was doing this; it was illogical at best, even unhealthy if he tried to eat it. The chocolate had done no harm, though, and it felt right to replace the broken thing with a working alternative.

Pirate pecked at it, shot me a look that I would have sworn was skepticism (fair enough, for it was neither shiny nor tasty), and flew off with it.

I returned to my work with a smile.



A portrait in charcoal

On delivery day, the station was an alpine island again,

but clouds wouldn't stop Hans and his heli. I'd arranged my schedule so I'd be cleaning the observation lounge around mid-day, when he arrived. I loved hearing those blades, beating the air like the wings of angels.

It wasn't easy being the caretaker in such an isolated spot—harder than I'd expected when I took over the job. Growing up, I'd been the darling of the station, a princess in my own magic kingdom, doted on by scientists from all over the world. Not until I went away for secondary school did I realize how strange my upbringing was.

I'd planned to settle down there (even at the time, I'd thought of it as *down there*, which should have been a sign), maybe open an inn. But then my parents got sick, one after the other, so I came back to help. It was natural to slip into their roles, natural to accept when the board offered me a permanent position. As natural as giving in to destiny.

Yet I felt out of place here as an adult, the only non-scientist among so many brilliant scientific minds. The research station was my home more than any place else, but it felt smaller now that I was grown, and smaller still with the tourists gone.

That's why I gravitated toward the sunlight and life of the observation terrace, and especially to Hans's visits. It felt silly to get so excited over the grocery delivery, but this had become the steady heartbeat of my weeks.

The crows were out in force today, perched on the railing and chattering, and I watched them as I worked. A caw drew my attention closer, and I found Pirate right by the window at my feet. He'd dropped a long, light-colored object that I couldn't make out through the soapy glass. I wrung out the rag and made myself finish washing the window before escaping outside.

On the terrace, I sucked in the chill air, which smelled

like wildness and joy and not at all of citrus cleaner, and basked in the crows' cacophony before stooping to retrieve Pirate's latest gift. He watched me, black eyes a gleam.

He'd brought a flat piece of wood, larger than anything I'd seen him carry before. Its surface was satiny smooth. Driftwood? How would driftwood get onto a mountain? None of his gifts made sense.

On it was a sketch in rough charcoal: a woman's round face, strong nose, a puff of curly hair. Those few dark lines created eyes that seemed to look straight out from the lifeless wood and capture mine. There was something pleading about her expression, something sad. *She's alone, too*, I thought.

A gust sent snowflakes swirling around me, and I shivered. I set my treasure inside to keep it dry, then donned my heavy coat before going back out to sit with my crows.

At Leora's urging, I'd started taking notes on the birds' behavior, as well as the things Pirate brought me. Just a journal, really, not science—it held as many fancies as observations—but it gave me an excuse to watch the crows regularly. I scattered a handful of seeds (see, no real scientist would bias her research by feeding her wild subjects) and took notes while they ate.

I started sketching Pirate, who looked dashing perched on the railing, and I fancied I'd captured his mischievousness. Just for fun, I added an eye-patch, then tore the page from my notebook and held it up. "What do you think?"

To my surprise, Pirate flapped over and inspected the picture, studying it from different angles like an art critic. Then he snatched it in his beak and took off, disappearing against the sun's brightness.

Apparently he liked it. I felt oddly touched.

A great whoosh filled the air as all the remaining crows took off at once. A moment later, I heard what had disturbed them: a rhythmic sound, unmistakable and getting louder.

Hans! I hadn't realized how anxious I'd been, how I always harbored a deep worry that *this* time he might forget us, but the sudden relief set me floating. I took shelter inside and waited. The helicopter kicked up waves of snow and dirt as it touched down, then its roar subsided, and I hurried back out.

Hans greeted me with a grin. "How is my guardian spirit of the mountain today?"

"Waiting for her tribute. I hope you've brought something good," I answered, as always.

"Oh? Seeing me isn't enough? You want gifts, too?"

I laughed at his fake indignation. It made a surprising difference, knowing that someone from down there looked forward to seeing me.

I peeked in the topmost boxes. Hans always sneaked something extra into our grocery order, whatever was special that week. Sure enough... "Oh, my heart! Bananas!" I swooned dramatically.

He chuckled. "I don't understand you getting so excited over fruit, when you have all this." He swept his arm across the view.

"Well, I'll never understand why you think living in a cold concrete box is more exciting than flying a helicopter."

"Maybe someday, I'll fly you away from here and we'll have a wild adventure together."

“Maybe we should,” I said, then blinked. I hadn’t meant to say that.

I was happy here. Really. The idea of someone carrying me away on a shining airborne steed shouldn’t fill me with longing.

He cocked his head. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” I smiled unconvincingly.

We chatted while he unloaded boxes and I carried them inside, where I could sort through them at my leisure.

“You’ve brought a lot this week.”

“There’s extra, in case this storm is worse than we think.”

I’d seen the storm in the forecast, but had told myself it wouldn’t hit us. Realizing it was real enough to require extra supplies felt like a giant hand squeezing my chest. How could I feel so trapped, up here in the most open spot in the world?

“Hey. You’ll be fine.” Hans touched my shoulder, breaking my spiral of quiet panic. “What’s this, now?” He picked up the driftwood portrait and shot me a sidelong glance. “You have a secret girlfriend hiding somewhere?”

“I wish.” To my surprise, I found myself blushing.

“Oh no, you do! Who is she? When’s the wedding?”

“You’re so funny.” I swatted him. “I don’t know who she is, actually. I found it this morning. There’s this crow that brings me presents...”

“So now you’re making friends with birds. Cool, cool. Does he bring you better stuff than me?”

“Hey, he’s a smart bird!”

“Smart devil. Crows are terrible thieves. Be careful he doesn’t steal from you!” He looked around. “Okay, this is all the boxes. See you in a week, weather permitting.”

He gave me a hug, and I squeezed him extra tightly.

I watched through the windows as he took off, helicopter blades pulsing in my breastbone. The heli got smaller and smaller, and by the time it disappeared into the clouds below, that awful emptiness was back. With a storm coming, it would only get worse.

I picked up the portrait again, trailing my fingers over the smooth wood and studying the gaze of that sad, lovely stranger. I knew, with a certainty, she would understand how I felt. “I would help you, if I knew how,” I murmured. “But in that case, I’d probably know how to help myself, too.”



Nothing

The blizzard rolled in. The world outside the observation windows became a wash of white and a ceaseless soft hiss, like the gentlest static muffling all else.

The crows disappeared to wherever crows go in bad weather. I missed Pirate dearly, and hoped he was safe.

I missed the gifts, too, selfish as that was. Despite what Hans said, I did think of these strange deliveries as gifts, not thefts. Pirate was obviously giving them to me, waiting for me to accept each one. It added a bit of brightness to my days, one shiny thing to look forward to. Without that, I felt lonelier than ever.

The storm got to all of us, not just me. The scientists lingered at meals, debating endlessly about Ranjit’s still-unexplained atmospheric readings, which had

persisted after we cleaned the sensors. He analyzed the data again and again, but still had no good theories.

I had less work than usual to keep me busy. I couldn't watch the crows, and didn't feel like drawing. I tried to read, but my mind kept wandering to the mysterious woman who must be mutual friends with my crow.

At night, I dreamed of snow piling up and up, collapsing the thick concrete walls. Burying us so completely that even Hans couldn't find us.

To distract myself, I decided to fix the pocket-watch. Carefully, I cleaned the insides and cataloged the bits that seemed damaged. Sand in the works had ground down the tiny gears. Knowing nothing about clockwork, there was plenty of research to occupy me, and Leora set me on the right track to learn modeling software and print my own replacement parts.

The charcoal woman watched my progress from her place on my desk. I hoped she'd be pleased to see her pocket-watch working again. There was no reason to assume the watch belonged to the woman in the picture, or that any of Pirate's gifts came from the same person, but I couldn't help thinking it. Were my gifts to Pirate making their way to her, wherever she was?



A ripe fruit

The storm passed, as storms always do. The hiss of snowfall gave way to an impenetrable quiet that suffused the station.

The valley was snowed in. By radio, Hans reported that he'd be grounded for days. Just as well: it would take me that long to clear the landing pad. Until then, hearing his voice was reassurance that, though I might

be trapped here above the world, this wasn't the end of the world. The world was still there.

The drifts came up to my neck in places, and making a path outside was daunting. Someone had to dig out the instruments, though, so I bundled up, grabbed a shovel, and got to work.

The evening sun stained the landscape pink, and I'd utterly worn myself out, when Pirate squawked behind me. I jumped. For hours, I'd heard nothing but the sound of my own breath.

This time, he dropped a lumpy, misshapen... fruit? It was blue-purple, as large as my fist, with a three-lobed body. The flesh felt soft and smelled like heaven.

On my way to find a gift for him—could he carry a banana?—I ran into Alisha, the botanist. “Do you know what this is? I've never seen anything like it before.”

She'd never seen one either, and the fruit got passed around like a challenge. We had people from all over the world, and no one could identify it, neither from personal experience or from searching online.

“Where did you get this?” Alisha asked, and I brought her and Leora outside to meet my crow.

Pirate flapped his ragged wings as we emerged, squawking loudly. Was it my imagination, or was he looking even more ragged of late? Before I could approach, he flew away.

He flapped up, up, a black silhouette against the vivid blue sky. I shaded my eyes, watching him swoop and turn, and then he...

Disappeared.

He disappeared. Not fading into the clouds, because

there were none, nor shrinking to a distant speck. One moment I saw him clearly. The next, he was gone.

“Did you see that?” I glanced at the others, afraid they’d give me an embarrassingly obvious explanation, but they were staring, too, at the spot where he’d vanished.

“What just happened?” said Alisha.

“I’ve got no notion,” said Leora. “But I want to find out.”



A piece of fabric, torn

If you want to solve a mystery fast, get a group of bored scientists involved. Between the unknown fruit and the vanishing bird (confirmed by three witnesses), everyone mobilized to find an explanation.

The terrace became a mess of tools: cameras and infrared monitors, directional microphones, telescopes with various filters, and more. There was nothing to see with human eyes, but Ranjit pulled up an infrared display. Against a black background, our bodies formed warm red shapes in the foreground, with the corner of the building a yellow-blue triangle behind us. And above, where I saw cloudless blue sky, the sensors showed a red-and-yellow gash filled half the frame, fluttering like a tear across the heavens.

A gateway.

The terrace exploded, everyone talking at once, grasping for any explanation but the obvious one. Someone started disassembling the infrared camera and cleaning it, because surely their instruments must be wrong. Ranjit was electrified, theorizing about connections between this and the airborne particulates

he'd been measuring. Leora stood there agape, and as the commotion died down, she quietly spoke aloud what I felt in my heart.

Perhaps, she said, impossible though it seemed, this was something new and wonderful. It would be wrong to rationalize it away.

I leaned on the railing, gazing up into the sky. Up there was a passageway to another place, and in that place was...

On my mobile, I pulled up a photo of the charcoal portrait. The rawness of it made me think it was a self-portrait. If Pirate's gifts had come through that portal, then this woman was on the other side, and she was alone. At first, I'd returned these gifts with things Pirate might like, but gradually, I'd started sending presents to this stranger instead. A foolish leap of intuition, maybe, but without even knowing her, I felt I understood her.

"Hello out there," I murmured. "I'm thinking of you."

Was she lost? In trouble? The damaged watch and firestarter suddenly felt ominous.

A dot appeared in the sky, flying out from the tear and heading straight for us. Pirate landed in a flurry of feathers, beak clutching a red-and-white cloth.

No, not red cloth. A white cloth drenched with crimson, staining the snow.

I didn't realize I was shaking until Leora touched my shoulder.

I whispered, "She needs our help."



Despair

"Please, Hans. I know we joke a lot, and I *know* it

sounds insane, but this is real. I've never asked you for anything..."

"That's not the problem." His voice, grainy over the radio, sounded impossibly far away. "I'm iced in. I can't take off." There was a long silence. "I would help if I could, but it's impossible. I'm sorry."

I closed the line, sick to my stomach. How long could the charcoal woman wait? There was a lot of blood on that rag.

I'd sent Pirate back with bandages, plus a photo of myself. A silly gift to send someone who probably needed urgent medical care. But I thought of the loneliness in her portrait and considered that maybe she also needed to know she had a friend.

She needed more than Pirate could carry, though. Nobody argued when I brought out the surveying drone and rigged a net beneath it to carry supplies.

More accurately, there was considerable argument about what would happen when we sent the drone through, but no one argued against the attempt. I loaded it with antiseptic, painkillers, energy bars, and bottled water. Alisha piloted it, and we gathered round the screen to watch its cameras as it neared the tear.

At first there was only white snow and blue sky. The whiteness turned fuzzy, then gave way to a textured darkness. It wasn't until someone murmured "Ocean!" that I understood what I was seeing. Those were waves, and there, an island. Alisha steered the drone toward it...

The picture went to static, then nothing.

"What happened?"

"Was it destroyed? Maybe it can't exist in a parallel dimension..." Words like *portal* and *parallel dimension*,

spoken sarcastically a mere hour ago, were now fully serious.

“We lost the signal, that’s all. It got too far away,” said Alisha.

“We can try again,” I said. “We can set up a... a signal booster, that’s a thing, isn’t it? Or, or...”

I trailed off, helpless.

“Not with the equipment we’ve got. I’m sorry, duckling.” Leora put an arm around my shoulders, but I shook it off. It felt too much like comforting someone grieving, and damn it, I was not grieving yet.

But I didn’t know what else to do.

The others went inside. I stared at the sky as if I could shorten the distance between me and the charcoal woman through willpower alone. As if by caring enough, I could grow wings and fly after Pirate.

“Come, Christine. You’re not coming up with any new plans if you freeze to death out here.”

My heart throbbed so hard it hurt. “In a minute. I just need...”

It wasn’t just my heart throbbing. The pulsing of the air resolved into the steady beat of propellers.

“Hans!”

It felt like hours, waiting for him to land. I raced over, crouched, before the blades had fully stopped. “I thought you were grounded!”

“I called in favors. Told them it was urgent, got moved to the front of the queue for deicing.” His grin was like the sunshine after the storm.

“I didn’t think you’d take me seriously. Not enough to risk your heli. We don’t know what will happen...”

“You’re not the type to make something of nothing. And hey, I talk plenty about wanting adventure. How can I turn down the chance to see another world?” He punched my arm. “Let’s go find your friend.”



You

The helicopter lurched, and my stomach with it. I’d never liked flying, but I’d fly through a blizzard today if I had to.

Leora squeezed my hand. “Christine. Look.”

Straight ahead, a shimmering broke up the crisp blue sky, like heat rising off concrete. Two worlds, holding hands.

Everything went hazy, then the brightness of sunshine returned. Not the same sun, though: this light was redder, the sky pale indigo. Below, tiny islands dotted a wine-dark sea.

Hans whooped. “Wow, wow, wow! We did it!”

Leora and I could only stare in silent awe.

“Which one?” I said. There were so many islands.

Leora peered through her binoculars and pointed. “I imagine we should follow the crows.”

“Super.” Hans headed toward the crescent-shaped island with birds circling above it.

As we flew over (much higher than the crows, he was careful about that), I spotted what looked like a sailboat on its side. Wrecked.

“There!”

The moment he landed, I was out and running, shielding my eyes from the stinging sand thrown up by

the heli's blades, my feet slipping on the beach. I was out of breath by the time I drew near the overturned boat.

From its shelter, someone watched me.

I slowed, feeling... Shy? Nervous? Afraid? I called out in greeting, trying to sound friendly.

The woman rose gingerly, in obvious pain. Her self-portrait had captured her round, expressive face, her dark-yet-bright eyes. It hadn't shown her deep golden-brown skin, or the disarray of her curly hair, or the bandage across her temple—our bandages. Pirate must have gotten them to her, and thank goodness, because there was no sign of the drone we lost contact with. She stared at me, eyes wide, as if I might not be real.

A raucous caw startled us. Pirate sat on the tilted mast of the sailboat, looking rightfully smug. We both laughed, and the tension melted away.

She held up my photograph. She pointed from it to me, eyes full of hope, and said something.

"Yes, that's me." I pointed to myself. "Christine."

"Yboa." She pointed to herself with a goofy grin. Then she took two steps and fell into my arms.

I shouted for help, terrified she was dying, until her arms came around me. Oh. A hug. We held onto each other, rocking gently, and I basked in the warm, soft solidity of her. She smelled like salt water and earthy musk, a world away from the research station with its fake citrus smell.

Yboa held onto my arm while Leora examined her, and I broke off bits of energy bar for her to eat, urged her to sip water. Under the bandage, her head wound looked swollen and awful, but wasn't bleeding much, which seemed to reassure Leora.

While Leora stepped away to prepare fresh bandages, Yboa gestured around her shelter. All my gifts were neatly arranged: my sketch of Pirate, the matchbox, even the candy wrapper. She spoke again. I couldn't understand her language, but I could guess her meaning easily enough.

"I see. I'm glad." The concept must have carried across our cultures: these gifts meant something to her, the way hers did to me. They'd helped her.

I'd helped her.

"You helped me, too." I took out the watch and showed her how it ticked, no longer broken. Yboa seized it eagerly, looked skyward, and turned the crank to wind it. Following her gaze, I saw three moons in the sky, just like the watch. She handed it back and closed my fingers around it. That meaning was clear, too.

"Thank you, so much." I said, then turned to Pirate, petting his feathers. "Thank you, too, little thief."

"She'll recover, though she's lost quite a bit of blood," Leora said, gently applying antibiotic and a fresh bandage. "She'll need rest, and hydration, and someone to look after her."

"That won't be a problem."

"I thought not." Leora exchanged a sidelong look with Hans. They were both smiling.

My future had been a snowfield, a vast and unchanging blankness, and I felt in my bones that Yboa was the avalanche come to shake me up. I'd just be nursing her back to health, I told myself. Once she recovered, there was nothing to stop her from going her own way. I didn't know her, couldn't even speak with her. But I wanted to.

My world had just doubled, and barely understood what that meant, but I wouldn't let it shrink again.

She seemed to feel the same. Even now, she held onto me, as if to say: You're here now, and I'm not letting go of you. Pirate settled on her arm, and together, we walked forward into something new.



Jo Miles writes optimistic science fiction and fantasy, and has stories in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed*, and more. You can find them online at www.jomiles.com. Jo lives in Maryland, where they help nonprofits use the internet to save the world, but mostly serve the whims of their two cats.

I, Hunger

by Nnadi Samuel

A lighter to your skin is cremation enough.
the next burn becomes arson.
stardust: coal-red with rage, charring the loose soil.
tomb, mud-breaking to a fine smithereen.

from the freshly bombed cave,
a skyline chases colors to my lips—
stifling the rainbow's moment of lack.

I hunger in the accent of wildfire,
of a country's name wading through gunshots:
the sound—a vowel in motion scolding heaven.

each winter licks a relative from our grip.
& with each dying summer, a storm
uproots a rotten corpse
that blossoms in green pasture—
town of my arrival:
Minnesota, with all its shiver.

all of my belonging splayed wide
open beneath cruel hands,
smearing my innocence across the embassy.

time slackens as the hounds
sniffs out my grievance.
when I lodge into an apartment
I lay down in mischief—deboning
the blank pages of my
green card, till it wears out.

this coat of arm shaped like a teenage body.
the unbuttoned cadaver underbridge.

at the riverbank, a SWAT team
exhumes a truckload of carcass.
here, body parts are tucked in the lips of earth
—cemented shut the way a jaw
bites down on red meat.

won't you pardon me when I say,
I lack the animal stink to attract relatives.

at midday, I awake fast-paced as a
fang lifting from menace.
my fingerprints on the dying shape of a
scarecrow: motionless & blood-ready.
my fur—all hair and nothing else.

in the wake of my exit, I wear white upon
white to ghost my shadow into shudder,
surrender sawdust from my
tongue. end with vanishing.
so, when I enter each lifetime—barefaced,
I merit a blindness,
ransack the welkins to claw a skyline.



Nnadi Samuel (he/him/his) holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. Author of *'Nature knows a little about Slave Trade'* selected by Tate.N.Oquendo (Sundress Publication, 2023). A 3x Best of the Net, and 7x Pushcart Nominee. He tweets @Samuelsamba10.

I Know Too Much About Scurvy

by Maria Schrater

Symmetry appears in many forms in nature, but I think of snowflakes, which was enough justification for my directions for Edith. I asked for an icy shipwreck with fractal symmetry. Part of the difficulty of vertical or single-axis symmetry, I feel, is that it can look a bit simple. Mirrors and reflections are a too-obvious choice. Edith excels at pieces of great visual breadth, and I adore fractals—part of the fun of art direction this year is trying to challenge her.

I'm weirdly fascinated by the era of "Arctic exploration." Maybe it's because I grew up with Minnesota winters, so the long, panning shots of Antarctic documentaries felt familiar yet terrifying. I knew what frostbite felt like, but then I was eight and reading about frostbite so bad fingers and toes turned black and had to be amputated. I learned about all the ways to die in the cold, fast or slow (not counting lead poisoning, rotten canned food, scurvy, eating each other...)

There's a visual poetry coded into the old tallships, and the riggings and shapes of them make for more

appealing symmetry than smooth steamships. The sea monsters were an added bonus—it wouldn't be an Edith Silva piece without creatures! I absolutely love this cover and its intense, monochromatic palette, and I'm thrilled with the pieces we picked to fill it.

You can find Edith on Instagram @bearenssembles – her gold leaf work is exquisite!



Edith Silva is our Artist-In-Residence for 2023.
Find the sketches from Edith on our website.

Symmetry, Horror and Identity

by Tania Chen

For all of those who struggle with identity, the lack of symmetry implies a personal failing. In my case, all my life has been a struggle of ‘you are not enough x, y, z.’ I often struggled to define myself with what I could mimic in order to pass. Just enough to blend-in. Or try, because there were parts of me that would give me away: my accent, the shade of my hair, my ignorance over cultural nuances, my sudden relapse into feeling romance. All of these felt like a betrayal of what should be a clear line.

To me, identity and horror are inextricably linked; whether our struggle with identity colours our writing or we look for ourselves when reading other’s works to connect, horror gifts us with a realm of exploration and possibilities in which trauma may be recontextualized. And within that comes the realisation that identities are not clear-cut. They are permeable, they overlap, they shift with time and become a guide and lens with which we view ourselves.

Intersectionality comes with its own challenges as we repress or highlight parts of ourselves depending on our surroundings. It usually isn't significant things, they're tiny details but make one mistake too many and people are sure to pick up on it. For example, I make sure to use my chopsticks properly when eating with Asian friends, but I hide how well I know how to use them during meals with non-Asian friends. We become octopi, trying to blend into environments seamlessly, then as we are fished out we shift once more: we want to belong, we want to feel safe, we want to find common ground with our friends and colleagues and family.

For the longest of times I thought my identity had to be divisible: a perfect line bisecting me in half to delineate where one part of my identity ended and the other began. Both parts equal, differentiated only by separate shades. This was a subconscious thought, an assumption of how things were supposed to be. Something that I, and I am sure many others, think about at least in passing. Balance, as a concept, is present everywhere. It is meant to be attractive, to draw you in.

So what rises to the forefront of the mind when you realise parts of you are not equally divided as they should be? No 50% asexual, 50% allosexual. No 50% Latinx, 50% Asian. Unlike with mitosis, which splits our personal nuances into neat packages distributed into equal parts. Each of us is a unique print in this world. There has never been a neat split, and it may be our reaction to seek out a way to force there to be when you realise there is none. Thoughts of inadequacy may become an ongoing plague.

There are no clear lines, and the beauty of those nuances should be embraced, in ourselves but also in our writing. A daunting prospect, if writing is an act of vulnerability and putting parts of yourself you keep hiding from

particular people out there feels, for a lack of better word, complicated. I struggle with the question all the time: is this enough? Not just in terms of identity but in my choice of genre, horror.

A lot of horror writers are always asking the question, what is horror? All with a variety of valid answers and interpretations. Horror often asks the question of identity, of otherness and its place. A common misused trope is the 'other' as the monster, with implications that cannot be overlooked, but in recent years that 'otherness' in horror has given marginalised identities a home for expression, exploration and discovery. It certainly was what appealed to me about horror.

The secrecy, the layers, the discovery of the horror appeals to me. Just like the team in *Annihilation* slowly peeling back the mystery of Area X only to be met with more questions and non-answers, my intersectional identity feels like an ongoing investigation. Should I be afraid of what I may find? Yes, perhaps. There is anxiety, fear of rejection, confusion—but ultimately, I continue to unravel pieces of myself the more I explore writing.

The wrongness, the minor asymmetry that makes that primal instinct go on guard is one of the ways in which tension can be achieved. But symmetry can be used to create horror too. The example that always comes to mind here is Kubrick's *The Shining*, in which the Overlook's perfect symmetry is a breeding ground for anxiety and tension; and in King's book, it is the Overlook's perfectly manicured topiary that gave me nightmares for weeks. I love perfection as a device to build tension; give me those clean, shiny surfaces that reflect everything so clearly under the light of the sun, construct something so immaculate that it haunts me for weeks.

With identity, symmetry can be just as disturbing. Is

this perfect split not as eerie as the Overlook's haunted hallways? Why then do we struggle to put ourselves into perfectly labelled boxes? Why do we focus on bisecting ourselves to make sure we are just the right amount of x, y or z?

Just like horror can utilise symmetry and asymmetry, identity has breathing room, malleability that makes each individual unique. There is no such thing as 'not enough'.



Tania Chen is a Chinese-Mexican queer writer. Their work was selected for *Brave New Weird Anthology* by Tenebrous Press, and has also appeared in *Unfettered Hexes* by Neon Hemlock, *Apparition Lit*, *Strange Horizons*, *Pleiades Magazine*, *Baffling Magazine*, *The Dread Machine* and *Longleaf Review*, among others. They are a graduate of the Clarion West Novella Bootcamp workshop of January/Feb 2021 and assistant editor for *Uncanny Magazine*.

Thank You

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