

APPARITION

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ISSUE 23:
CREATURE

Louis Inglis Hall
Briar Ripley Page
Lynn D. Jung
Taylor Rae
Elis Montgomery
Frank Podmore
Chinedu Gospel
Nadaa Hussein
Premee Mohamed

Cover Art
Edith Silva

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A Word from our Editor

by Wen-yi Lee

I live by a nature reserve, a hill with jungle and flooded quarries. The monkeys that live there know our houses. They know our kitchens and the shelves where we keep the biscuits. Every so often, we'll find a family of them sitting outside on our balcony railing, tails flicking, waiting for one of us to forget to slide the door all the way shut.

Of all the countries in jungle Asia (affectionate), Singapore is probably the least creaturey of all. We haven't got the space for rurality. But it's always fascinated me that even in a metropolis, creatures find their way. There's otters swimming in storm drains, wild boars trundling along shopping malls, and yes, macaques in my living room stealing snacks. Singapore calls itself the City in a Garden, but I find a little more imagination in its jungle roots—more tangled, more feral, still fertile under the shiny first-world state. Something with bite, in a city that prides itself on keeping clean.

Animality, monstrosity, primitivity, nature; otherness and personhood; confrontation and coexistence. Thinking about creatures is often a circular to thinking

about humans. As Premea Mohamed's essay "How To Become A Creature" explores, 'creature' is usually defined in relation—'creature' as 'not human', rather than a thing in itself. Where do we as humans begin and end?

Creature is the instinctive part of ourselves, like grief in Elis Montgomery's "the thing that leaps". It's the uncivilised natures we're told should be chained and yet that we are compelled by and revel in: especially women, as in Briar Ripley Page's dark wolf tale "Lupus in Fabula" and Nadaa Hussein's revolutionary Sudanese queen "kan-da-ka", or queer girls of colour who aren't quite their aunties' proper Christian daughters, made eldritch by Lynn D. Jung in "The Fall of Esther Park".

The concept of creature is inextricable from structures of marginalisation, from the ways that humans categorise each other and the world around us. In "The Nigerian Nightmare", Chinedu Gospel runs creaturehood as a state conferred by oppression and being turned into prey. It's a state often upheld by patriarchy, imperialism, and military complexes, as in Louis Hall's "Unit Six: Intro to Manticores". And in Taylor Rae's "The Greenhorn", it's a shunning we can unlearn, that adventurous and ambitious children can break inherited beliefs about. Ultimately, it's a fluid, occasionally nonsensical classification even the philosophers have fought about, as Frank Podmore quips in "Love and Strife".

I'm honoured to present this issue of Apparition Lit. Four stories, four poems, and an essay, lovingly leashed together by me and the ever-wonderful editorial team, presenting a range of voices with different takes on creatures and even several debut publications.

I hope you take something away. I hope something lingers. I hope something bites.



Wen-yi Lee is a Clarion West alum from Singapore and the author of forthcoming debut novel *The Dark We Know* (Gillian Flynn Books/Zando Young Readers, 2024). She's also written about monstrous girls and creaturey outcasts in *Nightmare*, *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny* and *Tor.com*, among others, and her work has appeared in anthologies such as *Year's Best Fantasy Vol 2* and *We're Here: The Best Queer Speculative Fiction 2022*. She can be found on social media at [@wenyilee_](#) and otherwise at [wenyileewrites.com](#).



The Fall of Esther Park

by Lynn D. Jung

Isaw Esther Park dancing with the Horned Boy last night.

It was a quarter past eleven. Moonlight and fog ruled the Bay. All the good citizens were already tucked away, safe and sound in peeling Victorians and geometric apartment complexes built over the bones of slumbering gods. Esther Park should have been with them, this picture-perfect saint-in-the-making, the kind my Umma sighs at during church, starstruck, before turning around to ask when *I'll* become a nice girl like that and settle down. (In Umma's world, 'nice' is incidental—'nice' means a girl who cooks and cleans and whom men can stick their family name to like a Post-It note marking their leftovers in the fridge. 'Nice' means dutifully putting your kids in Hangul Hakgyo and SAT prep academies before they're even out of elementary school. 'Nice' doesn't mean nice at all.)

Esther was famed for her shoulder-length virgin black hair, usually kept in soft waves framing a heart-shaped face. Back in high school, I used to wonder what it would be like to touch that hair, perhaps even tug it,

before quickly shelving such perilous trains of thought. The fog rolling off the gray water bit Esther more deeply than the rest of us, for she wore a cardigan year-round. Her closet was full of them. One in every shade of spring, summer, and fall, but never winter. She wasn't a winter at all, our Esther.

Last night the cardigan was nowhere to be seen, lost or forgotten in the syrupy haze of Hennessy and tequila. Esther showed up alone at the club in five-inch stilettos and a blood red dress that clung to her hips as she swayed to the pulse of a low-rent DJ from San Jose. All of our DJs were some version of the same community college dropout, a whole compendium of tribal-tatted doppelgängers ruling over these sticky pockets of nightlife like lesser gods.

Esther must have been pregaming, because she walked straight through those swinging doors and into the thicket of the Horned Boy's worshippers. The bouncer didn't even bother to card her, recognizing the knifing look of someone driven by a singular force of will.

Those of us present, the not-so-good ones who possessed the required cocktail of guts and stupidity to wander out of their homes on a sacral Thursday night, exchanged nervous glances from our stretch of safety by the bar. The Horned Boy and his green-eyed worshippers rarely strayed there, for mortal liquor was like cola to them. Underneath their master's watchful eye, they imbibed Lethean waters and snorted powdered azoth by the bucketful. The luckiest cultists drank straight from the Horned Boy's veins, scarlet tongues lapping up every last emerald drop. We gave them a wide berth as they writhed at the center of the club, a tight knot of muscle and sin, for we'd all heard the stories of what they did to outsiders. And tonight

they welcomed Esther amongst their ranks with open arms and grins stained green around the edges.

We knew it was wrong. We knew we had to do something. But before any of us could muster up the nerve to drag Esther out of the revelers' circle, He saw her. And by then it was already too late.

The Horned Boy cupped Esther's soft cheek and leaned forward to whisper in her ear. His great antlers were draped in blackberry thorns and priceless gems that flashed beneath the cheap strobes, momentarily blinding any hapless would-be savior who came too close. Esther Park smiled, dimples flashing, and took his clawed hands in hers, pulling him into the crowd.

Nobody saw or heard from her for another week.



Josh Choi saw Esther Park kissing the Horned Boy last night.

He was stumbling home, inadvisably alone at an even more inadvisably late hour. He left this out of the story for the ajummas' sake, but he'd been smoking pot with the other youth pastors in the parking lot—I'd dealt to them enough times to know. His designated driver fell through, but the Visitacion Valley Chois don't live too far from church, so he made the journey on foot.

It was an unsettling night from the start, or so he alleged. The fog lay in thick silver ropes against the ground, and Josh swore they hissed like snakes and nipped at his Jordans. Just when he was beginning to regret his stoned decision-making, he stumbled across an abandoned playground.

Esther was there, and the Horned Boy, too. They shared a single swing, her bare ivory arms wrapped around him in an act of unmistakable tenderness. The

rusted chains creaked beneath their weight, but did not break.

The sight of those antlers beneath the moonlight sobered Josh up at once, and he remembered the rest clearly enough for the details to be coherent: how they would pause kissing to touch foreheads and laugh, how Esther's cheeks flushed pink when the Horned Boy ghosted his cherry-red lips against the hollow of her throat. How right there, at each of her temples, was the budding beginning of a horn.

They were too entangled and drunk off one another to notice Josh's presence at all. Lucky boy, the church ajummas murmured around the potluck table, long after the story was done. He was a good boy, and God had shielded him from their wickedness.

I loaded up a paper plate with stale Costco muffins as I listened. It was easier to be good in the eyes of the world, I suppose, when all you were meant to be was a boy who smoked pot in church parking lots.



Hana Suk saw Esther Park become a god last night.

Those of us lucky enough to sit near Hana during Sunday's service clung to her every word as she told the story in bits and pieces that filled the gaps of Pastor Lee's sermon, which none of us were paying attention to anyway. A few messengers disseminated the details throughout the rest of the church, each part of the story relayed as urgently as a wartime transmission. It was exciting to pretend that the pews were trenches and all of us were somehow integral in Esther's story, even if it wasn't true and Hana Suk had suffered a psychotic break during her third year of university, so she was

hardly a reliable witness. How tragic for her parents, the ajummas had said then, shaking their heads.

Esther Park's parents were nowhere to be seen. They hadn't shown their faces at church since the Horned Boy stole their daughter and turned her inside out. Mrs. Choi of the Outer Richmond Chois speculated with no small amount of glee that they might even die from the shame of it all.

I never understood the concept. How could something as toothless and clawless as shame kill a person? I clenched my fist around the memory of Esther's virgin hair and even hazier, booze-soaked visions of other girls' sweaty skin glazed in strobing lights. If nobody ever knew, could a lie transmute into the truth?

Anyway, Hana's story went like this:

She was taking the BART home from Montgomery Street because her job at a dim sum joint in Chinatown kept her later than usual. She hated the job, hated dealing with the tourists who assumed she only spoke Mandarin and never tipped enough, but it wasn't like she had a plethora of options since dropping out of Stanford. She hated it even more when she was forced to commute home late at night, because anyone could trip and fall into the liminal spaces that popped up in empty stations and train cars with alarming regularity these days. And who knew what happened after? Who knew what waited in each yawning abyss that opened up when you were only half paying attention?

Hana was alone in the last car when the lights flickered out. When they came back on, she wasn't anymore.

The Horned Boy stood at the center of his worshippers, jade blood flowing from him like wine. They were carrying him, supporting his weight with

trembling, malnourished arms. At his feet knelt Esther, horns sprouting from her skull, her hands and mouth stained in the beast's blood. She laid a breathy kiss against his wrist before licking the emerald trails clean. Around them, the green-eyed worshippers began to chant in their twisted, ancient tongue—the Horned Boy's language, which all spoke and will speak at the beginning and end of this world.

As their voices rose into a frenzy, Esther's skin glowed, like a pearl beneath the moonlight. Her horns furred outward, pink magnolia buds sprouting on the tines. Her breathing became ragged, then tore into an animal howl, the likes of which Hana had never heard before.

Hana shrank back into her seat and prayed. Perhaps God was listening, because the lights flickered out once more, and then the grisly sight of the god-making was gone. Wiped clean, as if it had never been there at all.

Hana's eyes shone as she relayed the story to us, her hands moving with an animated fervor I hadn't seen from her since high school. The ajummas who used to tsk at the sight of her watched, rapt, and in that singular moment Hana Suk was a god of her own making.

Pastor Lee ended the service with a moment of silence for Esther Park and her family. Only then did the gossip finally quiet.



I worshiped at the altar of Esther Park last night.

I ran into her at the club where she was first claimed. Antlers jutted from her temples like the proud branches of spring. Delicate magnolias bloomed along their length.

Halmeoni used to swear that all dokkaebi are ugly as anything, blue-skinned, twisted creatures with horns and fangs, but not Esther. Her skin was smooth and shell-pink and her hair was still that same virgin black. She smiled at me from the other side of the club, piquant in an ice blue dress and unnervingly steady on her stilettos.

Some might say that I should have known better. The problem was, I *did* know, but I could not have shed myself of the sudden, fierce desire which bubbled up within me any more than I could have flayed off my own skin. I bought us a round of drinks, then a second, then a third, until the tip money I picked up from waiting tables ran dry and my wallet lay flaccid and empty. Esther only laughed and trailed two fingers along the edge of my jaw. Her other hand stirred the olive in her martini without touching it.

Power thrummed from her in waves. It was intoxicating. Spellbinding. Perhaps this was the same magnetic force that drew her to the Horned Boy on that foggy night three weeks ago. It caressed me, this untapped longing not for anything as primitive as carnal pleasure, but something unspeakably *more*.

“Do you remember that time in high school?” I asked, my words slurring a little. “We had the senior prank all planned out—we were going to fill the principal’s office with expired kimchi—but you ratted us out.”

“Different girl,” she answered easily. Once she would have blushed and stammered, and I frowned a little, dizzy and confused as to why this Esther did not match the one who resided in my head. “Different time. Do you want to come home with me?”

I should have known better—

“Yes.”

Esther Park led me home with one clawed hand. Her new place was a studio apartment by a park—that was all the detail my memory would grant me, come morning. What I remembered best was the smell of her, which was layered, complex, a new experience every inch. Her skin smelled of honey and vanilla, her hair of fog and pine, her breath of blood and frost. I couldn't even tell you if we actually had sex that night, but I remembered laying there, staring at the ceiling veined with living vines.

The next morning, she was gone. I woke up at noon in my own bed to the sing-song chime of my mother's rice cooker, the worst hangover I'd ever experienced battering the contents of my skull into porridge. I picked the pieces of myself up out of the bed and stumbled to the bathroom to take the coldest shower my pipes would allow.

When I emerged, still shivering, I glanced in the mirror.

On each of my temples budded the beginnings of a horn.



Lynn D. Jung writes speculative fiction in all shades of strange. Since obtaining her B.S. in Zoology, she has bounced from one exciting location to the next in search of more adventures to put on the page. Aside from traveling and writing, her hobbies include crochet, climbing, hiking, and making silly YouTube videos.

Love and Strife

by Frank Podmore

The pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles believed that all the
Organs evolved independently, at first. So,
picture them, those lone parts:
Lungs, hearts, tongues – should we think of hands
in teams grabbing hold of ears, teeth and lips?
Or did he just say, 'Hey, hagfish. They're basically
guts, aren't they? Mouth>tube>arse.
What if that's how all of it started, and worms
and slugs and that are, sort of,
Leftovers, still looking for bodies to be a section of?' Incomplete.
And perhaps that's why it's hard to feel for them:

How'd worms end up as just
Guts? Come on, get it together, guys. There's
still a lot of crabs, spiders and similar
Which would make good hands, and bonier things,
eels and what have you: snakes and skinks
To give you some backbone and, while we're
here, I also reckon that they could make
Decent limbs, too, not just tails but arms and
legs as well. Shouldn't be too hard...
*[Me, Promethean, wiring nets of coral with molluscs and sewing lengths
Of lampreys into a patchwork of veins and nerves, until]:*

My new stitched fish

Creature heads out to blend in with the rest of us, joining in, a little
Hesitant, not sure what to make of what
it's heard, what hearing is at all,
Shocked, waving...

Now the mob's all here

to hear reports of a thing that wobbled
Horribly into the marketplace. "Wait,
lads", I say, "I know him or her
Or... you know, I didn't think to ask but, whatever it is, it's just like
Us! Haven't any of you read Empedocles?" Socrates is shaking
His head and Plato is nodding as the older man says, "The oracle — "
*(We've all heard this bit, mate, get on with
it!)* "— all I want to say is that I
Know that I know nothing, but we all know
the gods know that that thing has to
Die. And die soon." Well. The hagthing has
now staggered up to the agora
Using its weird eel legs but here it fails, cracks,
falls and splays, the animals

Taking off each way: crab hands scuttling
into the laurel trees; a snake that
Was the spine swallows whole the fluttering
bird heart as it struggles free
Of the ribs. I'm weeping, scraping and fumbling
through the mass of flesh. "Fellas,
Come on, now", I choke, as mussels and muscles
slip through my hands. Socrates
Has shut the fuck up for once and it's echoing now in the agora,
Hisses and croaks from the separating
creatures that once were one creature,
Leaving the hagfish, which ties itself in
knots, exuding pints of hagfish
Slime, which it's left squirming alone in. I was right, it is very hard

To feel for it, or what I feel is biting hate, not how I'm meant to feel
When I'm faced with Nature in its glory, its sublimity! Just this
Hideous worm — fish — thing! "I tried to help
you, man!" I say, and raise my boot.



Frank Podmore was born in London (UK) and is still there and alive at time of writing. His poetry has been performed at the Wigmore Hall as part of the Voiceworks Project and he won the Freshers' Writing Prize in 2015. His comedy writing has been broadcast on BBC Radio.

The Greenhorn

by Taylor Rae

In a village of dragon-slayers, you must be tough to survive. Our lives are carved into the rocky hide of the Boneback Mountains, where the clay earth refuses to be tamed into farmland. There's only one path to greatness in a place like this: killing dragons.

The dragons feed on us, and we feed on them. Their hollow-boned wings become our beads; their teeth become knives; their scales become armor. As my father would say, the only good dragon is a dead dragon—and they taste best when the meat is young and soft.

My earliest memories are studded with the scent of salt and dragon jerky, as my father cut flesh into strips and told me how the first dragons entered this world. How a man became so consumed with hatred, he coughed up his own burning heart, and it hardened into an egg that hatched one of every color dragon. Now those monsters haunt this mountain, carrying an evil fire, with no purpose but death and devastation.

But I intend to give the legend a new ending. I'm going to be the best damn dragon hunter to walk these ancient cliffs. I want to be extraordinary.

Today is my first hunt without my father, and my stomach hasn't stopped beetle-buzzing all morning. I'm anxious to return triumphant, a daughter worth bragging about. I want a necklace full of dragon claws, like the one my father wears, so heavy it clicks when he walks. It's bad enough that the Butthole Twins are leading this hunt. Beryn and Borin are smug, obnoxious, self-obsessed—but, dammit, they found the dragon egg first. Of course, they immediately lost it and blamed each other.

Still, tradition is tradition. They won the right to organize the season's first hunt: find the mother dragon. Those devious jerks packed our group full of youngbloods, to increase their odds of killing the dragon themselves or blame the rest of us if we just come back with dust and ash.

There are twelve of us, all armed with dragonbone swords and scaled, fire-resistant shields. I should be up front, scanning for tail-drag marks and scorched grass. But I'm a soft-hearted idiot, so I'm in the back with the village weirdo, Hana, because everyone else refused.

Nobody likes Hana. She's a chicken hatched among hawks. She even bobs her head like one. When we were kids, she was studying pond scum and waving her fingers in front of her eyes while the rest of us tore through the trees, playing dragons-and-hunters. She's useless with any weapon you give her and wastes most of her time wandering in the woods, following brambling trails and never returning with anything more useful than some feathers, shed scales, an occasional lost tooth.

Hana is extra strange today. I try to focus on crushed grass, smoke-stink, any hint the others up ahead might have missed, but Hana is dominating my attention. She clutches her satchel like it's a baby and keeps peeking

inside it, then scanning the surrounding trees. It's bizarre—and suspicious.

I wait until she does it again, then whirl around, scowling. “What are you doing?”

She blinks like I flicked water in her face, then hides the bag behind her back.

“Hm? What?” She won't meet my eyes, but that's normal.

“Everyone's way ahead of us, and you're acting weird. Not your usual weird.”

Hana's nose crinkles. I feel guilty for being mean, but I can't tell if she's upset. Her intonation always has a strange rise and fall, like an irregular mountain peak.

“I already said you can go ahead, Awa. I'm fine.” She's been telling me to go on without her ever since we left the village, but I've been resolutely ignoring her. Even if she is a chicken, she doesn't deserve some dragon roasting her into a Hana-sized snack.

But gods, it's tempting. I still remember the sting of Beryn smirking and saying, “At least the best hunters are up front.”

I look at the trail ahead, shrouded in long-fingered pines, leading up the humped spine of the mountain, then back at Hana.

And that's when her bag *chirps*. It's almost catlike.

“What was that?”

Hana shuffles backward, eyes widened in obvious panic. “Oh. Nothing. Definitely nothing.”

I don't waste time on more questions. I just lunge at her.

She spins away, her black braid whipping her face, and squeaks, “I said it’s nothing!”

“It’s clearly something!”

And it’s like we’re little girls again, Hana yelping and stumbling the few times I took pity and tried to teach her how to fight. The chase only lasts a few seconds before I out-step her and yank open her bag.

“Wait—” Hana says.

A little green head pops out. It’s scaly, with orange eyes and a fuzzy cowl of golden down feathers. Its nose has a rounded nub that will grow into a palm-sized spike.

A baby greenhorn dragon.

My hand darts for the dragon-fang knife at my belt, but Hana’s gasp stops me. We gape at each other. It’s the longest Hana has actually held my eye contact. For the first time, I see that her eyes have something magic to them. Flecks of gold in dark earth.

Then she blinks fast and does that finger-wave thing. Two fingers in front of her eye, lifting and rising, a frantic wingbeat.

“Don’t tell,” she says.

“You stole the Butthole Twins’ egg?”

“You still call them that?”

“That’s not the point. That thing is going to grow up and eat you.”

“Actually, greenhorns are herbivores. They have primarily flat teeth, and their front incisors are for ripping off leaves and—”

“I don’t want a Hana-rant.”

“Well, you were wrong.”

I scoff. “If plant-eating dragons were real, my father would have already told me about it.”

“Maybe your father doesn’t know everything.”

An indignant fire sparks in my gut. “What makes you think you know better?”

“I watch them instead of trying to kill them. *I* found the egg first, but I left it alone.” Hana tugs the bag back. She coos at the dragon, and it trills, nuzzling her chin. “Beryn and Borin were going to make a stew out of him, and I couldn’t sit back and watch. I slept on his egg for two weeks to keep it warm.”

I catch myself smiling, then smother it instantly. That’s ridiculous.

“Are you trying to lure the mother out?”

Hana’s mouth opens in a horrified O. “No! I’m trying to bring him home.”

I glance around the dense walls of conifers and underbrush sprawling around us, broken only by our hunting party’s narrow trail. The others have already left us behind, seeking open sky, smoke, skeletons—telltale signs of a dragon’s path. Maybe they’re glad to move faster without Hana.

An idea gathers within me.

“You know which way to go?” I say.

“You mean you’re going to help me?”

My hand itches for the bow on my back. I can already imagine the outrage on the Butthole Twins’ butthole faces when they reach the dragon’s nest and find me waiting beside its corpse. My father would belly-laugh and slap my back and tell that story for years to come. A surefire, foolproof plan.

Nobody becomes extraordinary by listening to their weak and gentle heart.

I put on a fake smile. “I’ve helped you before, haven’t I?”



Hana calls the dragonling Stubs. It gazes from the bag in wonder, which is admittedly a little cute. But even the most brutal predators start out cute—and then they grow up.

The entire time we walk, Hana tells me nonstop greenhorn facts.

“Greenhorns are shy and polite. They bury their feces and cover it with pine needles. Their horn looks fearsome, but it’s actually used to dig for insects, roots, and vegetables. I know people say that dragons live among boulders and caves, but I’ve observed that they actually lay their eggs on rocks for insulation from the sun, and then relocate their babies to permanent nests after hatching. Baby greenhorns prefer soft foods like berries, slugs, worms—”

I interrupt her. I can’t help it. We’re halfway up the mountain, climbing at a steep, near-vertical angle, using shrubs to pull ourselves along.

“You hate touching slugs. And worms.”

Hana pauses. She and the dragonling give me the same surprised, wide-eyed stare.

“You remember that?”

“Yeah. Everyone made fun of you.” And then mocked me for baiting her fishhook while she flapped her hands and cried. I felt bad for her, but I felt worse when my father told me, his voice soft and grim, *You don’t help her by letting her stay weak, Awa.*

“Everyone always makes fun of me.” She pushes back a juniper bough and gestures at the three-toed gouges in the clay, an unmistakable greenhorn track, hidden in vegetation. “This is how I found her nest. Do you see how the base of the branch bends down lower than normal?”

I snort-laugh. “No. How do you see that?”

“It’s a pattern. Well, it breaks the pattern. We should be quiet. We’re getting close.”

We climb for a few more minutes. Every time she reaches for a new grip, Hanna swipes her palm along the juniper bristles. I try it, just to feel what she feels. It’s as ticklish and shivery as the dragon claws on my father’s necklace.

Finally, we reach a plateau in the mountain, still densely clustered with brush. It’s nothing like the caves, strewn with bones and rot, that my father described. Still, I can see the break in the foliage, narrow but unmissable: a dragon trail, with a thin curving line of pine needles disturbed by its tail.

Hana and I trade grins. She kisses the top of Stubs’s head. “Almost home.”

I follow her, my stomach twisting.

Beyond the brush, we find it. A crushed circle of sedge grass, big enough for a cow to rest in. I expect human bones in a dragon’s nest, but there’s nothing except the trampled grass and horn-gouges on the trees. Oddly similar to an elk or a stag. Doubt stormclouds across my mind, but I hide it well. I always hide it well.

Hana steps into the nest and sets the dragonling down. It’s pudgy, round-bodied, with comically oversized wings, like a puppy’s ears. It tilts its head and chirps.

“Bye, Stubs,” she whispers. “Stay here. Mama’s coming.”

“I don’t even hear anything.”

“She’ll come. It’s her baby. She’ll come.”

Then Hana tugs on my sleeve, and I follow her. We keep going, up an embankment, and crouch down above the nest to watch.

Hana presses her shoulder against mine. “I don’t usually like to touch people.”

“Me either.”

Neither one of us moves.

Below us, Stubs snuffles around a little, unsteady on its chubby legs. In the sunlight, its downy head looks like a dandelion, about to lose its seeds. But the grass is too tall, and it stops to look around, feathers flopping. Its wings twitch. And then it cries, low and bleating. Anyone close enough could hear it. Even the other dragon-hunters.

We’re still shoulder-to-shoulder when the trees begin to tremble, the *thudthud* of its footsteps like low thunder. My whole body tenses as a huge head emerges from the brush. A massive chipped horn on the snout, intelligent orange eyes, mottled green-and-brown scales.

The mother. And I have a perfect shot. Already, I can imagine my father’s smile, the way he will palm the back of my head and tell me, *I knew you would be the one to bring home its claw.*

I reach for my bow.

Hana gasps, entirely focused on the dragon circling the nest. “She’s amazing.”

I look over. Hana's waving her fingers in front of her dewy eyes. She's crying and smiling. The mother greenhorn snuffles her baby, then nuzzles it, wraps her tail around it, and pulls it tight to her body. She tears up a cluster of grass and holds it for Stubs to gnaw at.

"We did it," Hana whispers.

My hand slips off my bow. "No. You did it."

All this time, I've hunted for the monsters from my father's stories. And here I am, with our village's greatest dragon hunter, who will never wear a dragon-claw necklace, who can't make eye contact, who can't touch worms, who can't possibly know she's given me a new story to tell.

I offer my hand to Hana. She looks at it, puzzled, the gold glinting in her brown eyes. There really is something magic in them.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Why?"

"For everything. For not standing up for you. I'm sorry."

Hana hesitates, then slips her fingers into mine. "Help me lie to the Butthole Twins, and I'll forgive you."

I stifle my laugh, so it doesn't scare the dragons. The mother is already prodding her horn into the dirt, and Stubs watches, hungry-eyed, tiny teeth peeping over its upper lip, learning how to hunt. I think of my own father. My chest aches with memory and guilt, and I hope his heart is not too hardened to understand.

We climb down together, breathless and whispering over our new secret, when we find our hunting troupe, headed our way. I wave and call, "Nothing up here. We checked all over."

The twins scowl up at us. They're sweaty, filthy, the entire hunting party wilting like old grass.

One of them hollers, "What were you weirdos doing up there?"

Beside me, Hana flinches back, flicking her fingers in front of her eye.

"Looking for dragons, idiot," I snap back. "And stop calling her weird."

Hana covers her ears when I yell, but she's smiling. Really smiling.

The others scoff but turn back to keep searching. Hana and I take up the rear, our fingers hooked together, and she tells me all about greenhorns.

I drink up every word.



Taylor Rae is a professional mountain troll, hidden away in the wilds of North Idaho. She does most of her writing in a refurbished chicken coop, surrounded by cats. Her autistic hyperfocuses include dinosaurs, semiotics, and (of course) books. She edits *Space Fantasy Magazine*, and her work appears in *Flash Fiction Online*, *PseudoPod*, and *Fit for the Gods* from Vintage Books. More at www.mostlytaylor.com

The Nigerian Nightmare

by Chinedu Gospel

I am doctored to resemble harm, to attract the eye of a pistol. I am molding my body into bricks. This is the only way to bear witness to the bullet & live. I am always prying into the national anthem for a threshold, a room I can enter & feel safe. My fear is bold & pantagruelian. I am a witness of blood & unjustness. There's a wave in my eyes, a storm in my veins. Is this how my body nurses itself into prey? For trigger-happy cops? For a system damned to covetousness? As I write, there's a boy at the mouth of a river begging to be swallowed whole, & given a seat at the right hand of God. Is it not irony enough to grope for life in the sky only for death to offer you paradise? On every election's eve, we look up to heaven, prise it open with tongues that cannot be uttered, we lift up the wilting green of our land & summon the waters upon it. We declare—*our men will not wither. & our women will not harvest grief. & our*

children will molt into new creatures chasing dreams, chasing wonders. But, in the end, our garden blossoms into a wilderness.



Chinedu Gospel is an emerging poet & a member of the Frontiers Collective. He stays at Ozubulu & studies at Awka, in Anambra, Nigeria. He plays chess when he's not writing. & tweets @gonspoetry. He is a 2x Best of the Net nominee.

Unit Six: Intro to Manticores

by Louis Inglis Hall

Good morning boys—although, yes, it's a fair point, well made—good afternoon then. I was unavoidably detained. Do forgive me. Lunch ran on, and before that breakfast, and in between those Sicily was helping me with...have you met Sicily, by the way? Lovely girl.

I should say for the future that you really should stand when a superior officer enters the room, and there's not many more superior than me, I'm at the top of the tree, as it were, throwing down fruits and morsels to you boys. But you'll know for next time. What a day we are having! First you forgave me, then I forgave you, and now here we are, in this classroom, with nothing but a...you know, the things from roofs. Thank you. A clean slate.

Oh boys, my beaming boys. It is good to be here. You are young and strong, and I am old and wise, and also strong. What a team we will be. Look at your fine wooden desks. In time, you too will carve your names there. In time, you too will carve charmingly disproportionate genitalia, as I drone on about tactics,

or bear-traps, oh yes you will! Because I did too, boys, I did too. I too looked up at these faded maps, I too looked upon...well there was a chalkboard there, in that corner, but we got rid of it when they brought in PowerPoint. Progress, boys! Can you feel the progress in the air? And it is progress that wins wars, just as much as guns and ships and boys like you.

I congratulate you, I really must. You've reached Unit Six, all of you. You've learnt how to shine your shoes and iron your uniforms—although I note that while your shoes do shine like smart black suns, your uniforms! They are *creased*, my boys, they are creased and they are baggy, and something must be done next time. Aha. I have very sadly lost my train of thought. But I believe the nit and the grit of it is that you have now mastered the fundamentals of war, and so they have sent you to me, to learn how to kill the manticores.

We can't go straight to the killing, of course, we need some understanding first. I know that's no fun, I really do, but understanding is all that stands between you and a chest full of manticore quills. I should think it would be weeks before you kill your first manticore, and an old one at that, a feeble one, something sleepy and unaware of your formidable weaponry. We can't waste any more boys. All of that is ahead of you, all of that is a far and twinkling future. Today is day one; it's tea and biscuits, not yet the time to put on our gloves and rummage around their gizzards for treats. We'll get there, we will, I can promise you that. But we mustn't run before we can walk, or else we will trip on some errant log and be devoured by our enemies. I've seen it happen, boys, you mustn't laugh, and very unfortunate it was too.

Let me see, now. About this PowerPoint. My assistant sets them up for me. Sicily, did you see her on your way

in? Nice girl, streaky hair, wears those glasses with the tortoiseshell rim. Not real tortoise, of course, although I did offer; if anyone's earned real tortoise on their glasses it's her. I hope you'll be friends with her, boys, I do hope you will. You could ask her to go dancing, she'd like that, she loves to dance! Oho! That made you laugh, you wicked boys, that made you snort! Maybe one of you already has. No need to tell.

Sicily! Sicily! Could you crane your necks, perhaps, and tell me if she is coming down the corridor? No? I have the PowerPoint, you see, I have it quite exactly, as so. Slide one. What I lack is the red dot, the red dot on my little pen that shines out and illuminates, that points you to the most salient of salient facts. Between us, boys, strictly in the confidence we have built between ourselves, I don't think I am going to find it without her. I shall simply tell you where I would be pointing, had I the capacity, I'll tell you where that red dot would be and you can imagine it.

We should start, I think, with the basics. You've never seen a manticore, have you, my boys? I should think not, not within our jasper walls. You are civilised boys, and the purpose of civilisation is to keep the manticores on the outside. Things change! I can assure you of that. Perhaps I wrestled too long in the thickets and the thorns: my eyes are full of manticores now. Their human heads, their feline bodies, their thick-quilled tails. I look through crowded streets and all I see is a wreckage of cats. People, even boys like you, are all the same. I mean that as no insult—only that in a year you will be gone and I will be here, dreaming of lions long dead.

The first thing you ought to know of the manticore, dear boys, is that they are clever. Not clever like a man, but a devilish intelligence, one that drives them

ever onwards, and regulates their many stomachs. They have a mastery over knots. They always know which way they are pointing. And they bury their dead, although of course we do what we can to prevent that. It is fair to say—and so I shall duly say it—that they are a worthy opponent. There is a good reason that we fight manticores and not goats, and it is not down to the goats' chivalry of spirit.

We owe them, my boys. That is the second thing worth knowing. Without the manticore we would not have classrooms, or tortoiseshell glasses, or little pens with red dots. I know, boys, there is no need to say it out loud—even with the manticores, I am without my little pen. I assure you I am working on it. In the meantime, I am quite bereft. What I mean to say is that my grandfather fought them with his hands and fists, and died not quite three days into the attempt. I had a bayonet, a smart long stick to poke and gut them with. Now you have your manticore-pulping tanks, and your anti-manticore aircraft, and your manticore-seeking death rays. It's almost not fair on them, the poor cats! But they keep coming; it's a horde, even when it's a trickle, like it is now, never forget it's still really a horde, but in disguise. That's why it's so vital, dear boys, that you are here, now, in this classroom, and that soon you will be on the front lines, protecting the crystal colonnades of our civilisation. It's a public service, what you do, and on the other side, in three little years—homes, and positions! And young boys fighting for you and your wives in turn.

Do you know, I've quite forgotten to start the PowerPoint? In honesty, boys, I'm not even sure what was on it in the first place. Graphs, I expect. They're usually graphs. Sicily says they...well, she says something about them. Never mind, eh?

The third thing, I suppose, would be the teeth. Their triple smiles, their mouths like typewriters, row after row of flat little teeth folding back into their heads. I imagine being eaten by a manticore is a little like ascending a long staircase, tapering away into darkness, but only a very little.

After the teeth, it would be logical to consider the face. It would be a smart choice, and we are very smart indeed. And yet, my boys, for all your smartness, you have not asked me the question, the singular question. Don't be down about it, don't be glum! Boys like you never do. I have already told you that the manticore has the face of a man. They taught you that in school, in nursery, in the womb itself. In all that time, boys, in all the eighteen years you've lived, did you never stop, and ask yourselves who exactly the man was? It's true. You have to be told. Every one of them, the same face. Square-jawed, and smooth-cheeked, with grins on their lips, and thick black quiffs, hair greased up over their heads, oiled by some private secretion, some alien gland. Such is the fashion. I don't need to tell you that! There won't be a thing about pomade you don't know. And yes, they are good looking, I can admit it—almost as pretty as you boys! Steady on. If this was a war of looks it might go quite differently—and we did look into that, I think, it was passed up the chain of command, and the answer came back no, it will be a war of killing them with hands and muskets and bayonets instead.

There is a twinge in my leg, a full-flowing pain, which neatly brings me on to my next point, although I have lost count. Five, thank you. We must not neglect the manticore tail, that limber club, heavy with quill and venom. It was one of those spurs that consigned me to my present glory, of being here with you now. There was a nest of manticore kittens—this was some time

ago, and far away—and I had heard them, across the battlefield. I heard them weeping and I ran to them. I found the nest, woven fast into the scar of a crater, and within! Such tender little cubs.

Barely had I finished stamping on each one when I turned and beheld their progenitor. It raised its tail above its head, and poison dripped down onto the black stiffness of its hair, and a marvellous stillness suffused its muscled jaguar limbs. And then the tail flickered out, and it skewered me, boys, right in my leg, straight through the pork! That was to be its final act, of course, but how close it came, before it was exploded! I fell, and where I lay I was hardly cheered at all by the noisy sounds of its destruction, it hardly brought any joy compared to the immense pain of my leg.

I wonder, my boys, if you have ever cored an apple? The field surgeon came, and he held what looked like an apple corer in his hand, but larger. For a moment, in my infirmity, I contemplated the monstrous fruit that would inspire such a tool, and in the next I knew. They held me down and they cored it out right there, in the mud, a neat flute of flesh with a spine running through it. Ah! Do not be downcast, I beg you. This is a happy story! The toxin would have killed me, you can be sure of that. If I am only fit to be with you now, in this little room, that is fit enough for me.

My boys, how pale you have become. Do not fret. You can see from my epaulettes, the striped manticore fur on my right shoulder, the spotted manticore fur on my left, that I have lived a good life. I killed many manticores in my time, perhaps more than anyone ever has. And back then I was only half the size I am now, perhaps less, if you can imagine that, perhaps two-thirds removed from my present magnificence! I was a boy, and I did my duty. I was there that day at the great

grey cliffs, that day of liberation that will live forever in my mind. We piled their bodies high and made a bonfire, a light that lit our way to this very day. And I will tell you something, my boys, a secret between the very best of friends. We stacked them outside the city walls and we burned them, and do you know what happened next? We were starving. We hadn't eaten in such a time, even our pets had run away lest we made a start on them. But you could smell the meat a mile away, emanating from that inferno of dead tigers with human faces. It wasn't that it smelled good; it smelled worse than anything ever smelled. But that didn't stop us, it barely held us back for a moment. And out they came, our lost pets, our hungrier citizens. I'd like to tell you the cats only ate the human part, and the humans only ate the cat part. Oh, but the truth is that everyone ate everything. We even tracked down some of the cats afterwards and ate them too.

You are weeping! This is boldness, this is valour! All this lies ahead of you, and I promise you, you will glory in it. Come now, that's better. Who will show me a smile?

Oh boys, your beaming smiles! Lined up...in neat triple rows. And your eager faces, looking up at me. The same eager face, the exact same. And your uniforms, that bulge so strangely.

No, never mind me. What a fool I am. Not quite all the same, thank goodness! One of you is wearing glasses, with a tortoiseshell rim. Just like—aha. Poor girl. Poor Sicily.

Get to it, then, boys, with your bright eyes and bushy tails. Let's get it over with.



Louis Inglis Hall is a civil servant living in Scotland. He was shortlisted for the Through The Mill playwriting prize in 2021 and has a peer-reviewed article forthcoming in Vergilius. His favourite architectural movement is the henge.

the thing that leaps

by Elis Montgomery

1.

when my husband dies,
the thing that leaps from his chest cavity
forgets its voice.

other markers of beasthood are
easier to remember:

it pricks up gut-covered fur like needles,
bares bloody gums and teeth as it crouches low,
nipping the air around my ankles.

some would prefer a quiet houseguest,
but when the sound finally comes,
when the shriek bubbles up from its distended belly
and tears at the living room wallpaper,
i find some small relief.
born things may scream.

2.

i can't let the thing walk around my house dripping,
so i'm still shaking when i have to rinse it off.
the gore of him sluices down the bathtub drain
and parts of me go with it.
of course it riots at being wrangled.

of course i'm losing parts too.

3.

the thing won't eat the dog food i
borrow from the neighbor
or the lasagnas people are bringing,
but it seems happy enough chewing
bits of me and anyone
who's taking tissues.

it takes weeks to get back in that bed,
but when i do it comes with me and
takes up space.
i wake up shivering.
see it curled in the covers.

4.

one morning i find it cleaning
itself on the front porch.
with all that musk licked away
it smells like breakfast.
i sit in his chair
and it brings its prickly chin to my lap,
blinking watery eyes the colour of coffee beans
like it wants something from me.
my hand is hesitant
but i find its furless head is pocked like
a strawberry, flecked through
with sesame seeds.

i go back inside for something to eat.

5.

the thing and i have been living
together for months.
it has found its places:

little spots it likes to hide and rest in
or else scream until the both of us
are again bloodied.

my husband's corpse is long gone
but the thing has learned tricks like *play dead*
and it remembers where it was born.

6.
the thing and i have been living.
we have both learned new tricks.
the best is when it puts a rotted hoof in mine
and when i close my eyes all i feel is the
weight of a palm,
warm and large and soft.

it's this weight that reminds me
of how a born thing might grow.



Elis Montgomery is a speculative fiction writer from Vancouver, Canada. She is a member of SFWA and Codex. When she's not writing, she's usually hanging upside down in an aerial arts class or a murky cave. Find her there or on Twitter @elismontgomery.

Lupus In Fabula

by Briar Ripley Page

It's the smell that wakes me up: iron, wet earth, fur. Not raw, twisting bodies. Not smoke and hot fat. My eyes open. I'm lying on my back. I hear breathing beside my ear. I turn over to see a wolf looking at me with bright yellow eyes, panting as it lies beside my head on a bed of leaves and pine needles. Its black lips are pulled back in a kind of smile; teeth bared. It's not growling or snarling, just staring at me. It looks more like an animal than a person now, but it still has those yellow eyes, like headlights caught in the dark night sky; they're glowing starrily and they're so very sharp; they're cutting into my brain.

I feel trapped under this wolf's gaze. I can't move. My heart pounds even harder than before—it seems to be shaking the ground beneath us both—and then everything gets very slow and sticky but super-clear. It's hard to be surprised when the wolf rises and, gently, starts to bite my clothes off. Cotton and cheap windbreaker fabric tear and I watch my summerdark skin with its blackheads and cellulite emerging from their woven ruin, a neglected and pitiful landscape. The wolf's nose leaves a cold, moist trail between my ribs. I wait for its mouth to bite down.



I shouldn't have gone out tonight. Everyone knows not to go out tonight. You're supposed to stay inside your house once it's dark and not even think of the woods. The beach. The moon. No matter what scents and sounds filter through your walls and windows, you don't go outside. You don't even step out on your porch for a smoke. You make yourself a cup of tea and you watch something anodyne on TV. You put in earplugs and go to bed early, and you make a point of not remembering your dreams.

I'm not a child, or some thrill-seeking teenager. I'm not a fool. I don't have a death wish. But something seized me, I knew I could not rest until I found out what happened on the beach each year. Now I know. I'm falling out of my own head, out of my cowardly body, into a gray pit, and I still can't bring myself to regret the knowledge.



We run: my sibling & I down the sand for sheer joy, splashing in nightfoam, singing to the big moon. Sibling's eyes gold fire. The smell of ashes swirling over our shoulders.



Time breaks like a wave or a smashed glass. This story is happening all at once, all within each moment of itself. There is no order of events where I'm going, in the shape my wolf will lick out of me.



When its tongue starts tugging the pink tissue of my inner mouth, I gag. My teeth grow, and they itch. I

worry the roots will be exposed. For a few years, I had recurring dreams that my gums peeled away from each of my teeth until they dropped into my bathroom sink like ripe, tiny fruit. Those dreams made me unsettled. No one I spoke to about the dreams could tell me what they really meant.

My girlfriend at the time said the dreams were probably about feeling I had no control over my life, but that wasn't true. I was already planning to cut her loose.

I haven't been touched this way since the aftermath of our last argument. I haven't had parts of someone else's body inside mine. I haven't been inside anyone but myself. Now, with the lather of saliva spread over my naked chest like ointment, I can get outside my head. I can see through wolf eyes. I can see this scene playing out from above, like I'm floating near the ceiling of the cave.



It isn't hard to find the secret ceremony. I haven't had to be clever, or sneaky, or even all that careful. It's on one of the beaches, the one that's a little dark sand valley surrounded by humble hills instead of high cliffs. Super convenient; it means I just have to keep low to the ground on top of my chosen hill, and I'm invisible. It's night, of course. The sea whooshes and the cicadas whir, and I'm not really that far from the action.

There are about twenty of them, I think, gathered around a big pyramidal driftwood bonfire. Different shapes and sizes. Different skin colors. All adults. All naked, or almost naked, though some of their bodies confuse me. Slowly, I realize each person is wearing a cloak made from the skin of a single animal.

I stare and stare, looking for a distinctive tattoo or a familiar pattern of moles, but I can't recognize anyone from town. I've lived here since I was thirteen, so I know pretty much everybody. Still, I can't say for sure any of them aren't my friends or neighbors or co-workers, either.

The cloaks are made of all different hairy mammals, not just the deer that live around here. Wild beasts, no dogs or horses. Mostly carnivores. But there's an anteater, its huge claws wrapped around the waist of an androgynous figure, its boneless, narrow head dripping between the person's small nipples. Its fanlike tail sways from their hip, brushes the sand like a broom. There's an ape — an orangutan, I think. There is one deer, antlers spreading like bleached branches. The man beneath the antlers is arm in arm with someone wearing the pelt of a gray wolf.

Their skins have ragged, still-wet edges. I can smell them from up here. I don't doubt for a moment that they're the real thing.

Their skins under their skins glisten with milky drops of sweat, or maybe some kind of ointment.

In the shadows farther from the fire, a hulking, shaggy shape pounds its hands on a large, simple drum. A woman with the sleek, babyish face of a seal or sea lion pulled over her human eyes and nose blows into a woodwind instrument that looks carved from bone. The sound is reeds and tumbling stones, whistling wind and thunder, the sea and some lonely bird.



In this town we have a saying: “the wolf in the story comes when he's called”. Same idea as speaking of the devil, but I've never heard our version anywhere else. I

was admonished with wolves a lot when I was younger and nosy, gossipy. I outgrew the gossip, but not, I suppose, the nosiness. My nostrils are always twitching at spoor in the air.



Underpaw, soft granules of earthstuff. The hunt in my nose I run to catch warm grasseater the game we dance we chase — my howl & the howl of my sibling a holy braid of sound. Leap through a tangle of moonsoaked smell brambles clutching fur claws splash and we chase chase chase. Foaming the prey's mouth. Smile and circle. A high, thready bleat.



The moon watches with a ruined stone face from the mouth of the cave, and I think I'll be stuck here forever, entwined with a wolf, not quite one thing and not quite another. We are in the center of a story. I have always been circling this moment. I have always felt this way, joints pulled out of their sockets, back arched high in pain and ecstasy. Snout gone sharp and crowded and long.



Tear the body, belly, fat muscle organ meat slipping down my throat, wet bursting salt and iron in the mouth, swallow, gulp, play. Throw into the air; catch between teeth. Shake hard, growl. Intestines spilling on the soft ground smelling good — shitsmell bloodsmell sweetsmell. Roll around in it all. Prey smiling beneath fanged off hair skin flesh, new face moonwhite, licked clean.



Slick stalactites drip and glimmer with dim moonlight on the high dark ceiling of the cave. I can't see them well, but I know they're there: dozens of swords hanging above me as my body. But the wolf doesn't bite, doesn't rip me open, doesn't eat me. Instead, it starts licking my belly. Not the way a dog licks, to show submission, but with slow, deliberate purpose. Its tongue is long and smooth, and it makes me itch. My skin feels like it's crawling with insects or bubbling with hives. I'm hot and goosebumped. I'm inside and outside my body as the wolf draws its tongue across my navel and darts between my thighs. It lathes me and molds me. My flesh shifts like a viscous liquid beneath it. Ripples and recedes and remakes me through wolf spit and sweat.



Mom said it was a local myth. She told me people tied any gruesome or mysterious or disruptive thing that happened at the right time of year back to an imaginary cult ritual. My manager once described it as “a bunch of delinquent kids setting off fireworks and mutilating small animals”. My best friend in ninth grade said it was a select few matriarchs and patriarchs of old backwoods families in the area, handing down a tradition from time immemorial, hexing newcomers and interlopers and anybody they just don't like.



After the dreams of my teeth falling out, after I broke up with my last girlfriend, I started to have dreams of dancing. I danced on the beach as the tide came in, and I danced through mud in the woods. I danced on a long board studded with needles and pins until my feet looked like strawberries, and I loved it.



In the morning, my wolf helps me tear off my new pelt. It hurts, though I'm able to do the last part with my own teeth, tasting my own blood and raw red flesh. Underneath my skin I'm human again, with the same body I had yesterday. I look like I've been baptized in a slaughterhouse. I look newly born.

I roll up my skin and look around. I know I'll need it next year. Probably the safest thing is to take it home with me. I've lived alone since Mom died last autumn. I see I'm in a strand of oaks that's a little way inland, but not more than a mile from my house. I recognize it from hiking, from playing truant in these woods when I was in high school.

My wolf regards me with that yellow stare. Its bushy tail wags slowly, and its tongue lolls. Then it turns and sprints off through the trees.

"Wait!" I call, but I don't follow it. I don't move. The air is pleasantly warm and salty on my naked skin. The early light and leaf shadows turn the world a mellow, calming greenish gold.

My wolf darts between trees until I can't see it anymore, even though I feel like I should still be able to. It's lost somewhere between the oaks, the low dark bushes, the tumbled piles of gray rock.



The people in skin cloaks are dancing in a wobbly, seething circle. The erratic firelight makes a confusion of all their limbs, all their faces, all the empty, hollow faces of the skins. I feel like they're all looking straight at me, even though I can't see any of their eyes. The men and the women and the strange ones in between. The leopard and the wolf and the bear. The others. I can feel

them gazing at me from their frolic down in the sandy valley, beside the soft black sea, sight cutting through the darkness and spotlighting my small body in the tall grass, behind the crooked tree. My legs are dead, numb, asleep from all the not-moving I've been doing. For how long now? I don't dare stir.

At first, when the dancers start changing, I think it's just the firelight. Dirty brightness and unstable shadows can turn an overbite into a long snout, can turn a man's freely swinging member into a barbed club or give a woman a hairy devil's tail. Then I hear the crunch of bone reshaping itself, the screams, the groaning and crying. They overwhelm the drums and that terrible little flute or recorder or whatever.

I see flashes of exposed living meat in the glow of those unsteady flames. I see and smell flashes of dripping fat and spilled bowels and veins braiding themselves wildly through the air, oily-wet tendrils, steaming and smoking. The veins dive back under the beast-skins, which flow over each dancer like something more than clothes. Like empty but living creatures swallowing their innards back up. Taking their revenge on humanity. You wore us; now we'll devour you.

Teeth shine white and wet as pearls. Red, yellow, silver, gold. The screams are dying down, crushed into an array of grunts and growls and snarls by new throat shapes. I see yellow eyes, fire-eyes, looking right at me with dilated pupils. Not down in the valley, but near, more than halfway up the hill. I smell salt and blood. I smell urine as it rivers through my jeans, into the sandy dirt beneath my numb legs. My heart races ahead of my ribcage, ahead of my frozen muscles.



Next year, next year. I have to pick the lock of my own back door. I lost the keys with my clothes. Next year, I'll find out who all the rest really are. I'll get to the bonfire early.

I wash both my skins off in the shower and blood goes down the gurgling drain like chocolate syrup in an old black and white horror movie. Next year I'll dance, and maybe none of it will hurt so much.

I throw up in the shower, and there are chunks of raw meat in the vomit, there are small or shattered bones, there's some kind of animal eyeball with a sideways ungulate pupil. My throat burns, the way it burned the first time I tried smoking. I wipe my mouth, thinking of how nothing ever ends, thinking of things I can get used to. Next year, I'll ask my wolf some questions. I'll get the anteater's phone number.

When I'm dry, I put the meat chunks and the eyeball down the garbage disposal one by one. I bury the bones in the garden, under my mother's long-neglected roses.



My sweat glands are vanishing. Coarse hair is erupting from tender places on my palms. We move together in the close, salted dark of a full moon midsummer night.



Briar Ripley Page is the author of several novellas and short stories. His books include *Corrupted Vessels* and *The False Sister*. Originally from Appalachia, Briar currently lives in London with his spouse and two horrible cats. Find Briar online at briarripleypage.xyz

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by Nadaa Hussein

kan·da·ka

noun

1. birther of nations, blade twice the length of her body; she takes the throne not mother daughter sister but prayer rite; stitches this ragged sand with her sinew.
2. amaurosis prayer god with tribal marred cheek cuts her own umbilical cord; frees the ravenous women inside her.
3. loves the land dry to cull off false prophets and their sons calls it slash and burn agriculture names herself
4. lord of two lands, the Nile a catch in her skirt
5. locust bringer; devours hearts of British colonists in the sun; womanhood all fanged and drooling
6. a force never for sale
7. modern monocular prophetess; reads fortunes with crushed cowry shells, pitted pothole finger tips, melted tarry teeth, binging on rickshaw fumes, rolling east with the horizon.
8. say thank you when she comes to your town

9. barefoot overthrewer of dictators' trills to stand attention white tobe thobe trailing river water; her dances cauterize the vocal cords of soldiers
10. gold earrings singing in the wind out the window into the night
11. jabal marra former oasis of the black doved sibyl, blade twice the length of her body
12. I beg her come back split me in two



Nadaa is a poet, creative non-fiction writer and visual artist who focuses on documenting pop-culture, diasporic aesthetics and current socio-political cultural commentary with rapid-fire detail and urgency. Her work creating hybrid and experimental forms draws inspiration from the disciplines of linguistics, cultural and performance studies. This multidisciplinary approach allows her to jump through a variety of forms with an aim to transcend genre. She is currently attending UC Davis for an MFA in Creative Writing.

How To Become A Creature

by Premea Mohamed

Iwant you to imagine you're me. It's 2004, and you're hard at work in Alberta's boreal forest, surveying vegetation and hunting for rare species of wildlife and plants. In the distance, someone's black labrador leaps into the river and starts paddling excitedly towards you. "Aww," you say.

Your coworker squints as it swims closer. "Oh," he says, his tone unreadable. "That's not a dog."

He's right. Suddenly you are exquisitely aware of yourself as an *animal*: no fangs, no claws, no horns. No protective scales, no bristly hide, no venom, toxins, or sting. Your mental categorization of yourself—running in your subconscious at all times—moves to the forefront and informs you that you need to delete the tags denoting you as a worker, scientist, human. You are none of those things now. Possibly, you are a meal. You have abruptly lost a certain sense of yourself.

You see how fast the current is moving. What kind of creature can you become in the next thirty seconds?

This isn't part of a Voight-Kampff test; it isn't meant to gauge compassion or empathy. The answer won't distinguish a human from a manufactured thing. But whatever the answer is, it tells us the most important thing about ourselves: What makes a creature? Or, put another way: What makes us not a creature?

Creatures live in a liminal landscape of the mind. The fluid, porous borders are composed of culture, habit, history, semiotics, language, and, yes, stories. A creature is an animal, yes? No, not an animal; it has qualities that no animal has. Then a creature is a human? No, not strictly a human, either. A creature exists between animal and human, defined by the qualities we assign to both. Those qualities can shift at any second.

A human being is a human—a precious, valuable being unlike any other, whose life must be unquestioningly preserved—until bitten by a zombie, at which point they become a creature and can be killed at once without hesitation or guilt. A human being is a human until several dead individuals are disassembled and rearranged into Frankenstein's very much alive monster, something that everyone wants to flee or kill on sight.

It seems axiomatic that losing one's status as a human is enough to become a creature (or monster). We are supposed to fear and loathe the loss of it, as we would fear and loathe giving up any part of our privilege or identity. Because how could it be better to be a creature than a human? Why should we desire that transformation?

Let's look at it another way—let's enter that liminal space from the other direction, from animal or monster gaining qualities of humanity. Is a mermaid a fish or a human? Can we call a mermaid a creature? What about other things in stories that are partly human and partly animal? The minotaur is meant to be a cautionary tale

about hubris and respecting the gods; but a sphinx is just a sphinx, as a mermaid is a mermaid. The animal-headed gods of ancient Egypt possessed human bodies. Why? Can a god be a creature too? Does divinity exempt them?

To be a creature, it seems we must lose humanity if we have it, or gain it if we don't. And now we find we're getting into those uncomfortable spaces where art often takes us—into another strange, twilight space next to the land of creatures. A creature story explores humanity as all stories explore humanity. But here it is a transitive property, almost fungible.

In the dim light we study the coins cupped in our hands, wondering nervously who will take them from us, or give them to us: is intelligence what makes us human? What kind of intelligence? There are so many. Animals have most of them too. The ability to remember, problem-solve, predict, adapt, calculate, navigate, master and administer our instincts—those are found everywhere. Intelligibility, communication? Not necessarily; we can talk to the sphinx, but not to the zombie. And we're not even sure whether Mothman *can* talk. Behaviour? Adherence to social norms? If we stop acting human, will we suddenly be declared creature? What about the medieval travelers who returned to Europe hysterically referring to real human beings as creatures? Or making up humanoids that didn't exist—the cynocephali, blemmyae, sciopods, astomats. Who gets to say who's human? Does the question make us squirm? It should.

My sense (unscientific, vaguely defined) is that we want creatures in our stories to tell us what we are, to shine a light on our responses to creaturely traits, to make us hold those feelings in our palms and feel the edges and weight. In *Planet of the Apes*, what did we feel when Caesar started talking—when he transitioned from

animal to creature? I don't know about you, but even though I knew it was coming—I'd seen the trailers, I knew the gist of the movie—I felt a deep thrill of discomfort, unease, anticipation. What does it mean if an animal can talk—if it takes one of those coins out of our hands? Why does it feel so different from the charming, humanistic talking animals of Disney movies? When King Louis talks in *The Jungle Book*, we laugh, because the animals are one-to-one proxies for humans, not really creatures. When the wizard Howl transforms into a black-feathered monster, meanwhile, we feel a strange mix of things: pity, fear, curiosity, hope. He is not a creature that will threaten us, despite his appearance. We knew him as a human; his changed status has not fundamentally changed who he is to us.

In fiction, we must deliberately ask what we want creatures to be—and how we respond when they are, fundamentally, uncontrollable by human standards. I think of Ed Yong's recent book *An Immense World*, in which we learn just how incomprehensible, how unknowable the senses of many animals are. Their world is different from ours in a way we will never be able to perceive; we cannot approximate it, substitute it, come up with our own version. Our physical and mental limitations cannot be overcome. We can change our behaviour, but we cannot change our nerves, our brains, our proteins. We will never be able to perceive the world *like a creature*. The best we can do is imagine it—reading about becoming one, or encountering one, or seeing through one's eyes in a story.

And that's my hope —that we will understand why we are not creatures, why we could become creatures, what it might be like, how we will be treated if we do. How we can look one another straight in the eye and say “You're not human any more” and what happens when we do

that, since history shows that we do it all the time. How we can, perhaps, find joy and wonder and fascination when we encounter creatures, as well as fear and revulsion, friendship and community, horror and grace.

You all know that the thing that jumped into the river and came towards me that day was a bear, and the worst kind of bear, too (wet, fast, curious). It fully transformed me and my coworker into creatures. We retained just enough humanity to remember that we had to remove ourselves from the presence of the safety hazard as per our work plan, but otherwise we turned into frantic chipmunks: snatching up our equipment, scuttling over the rocks and roots to jump into the work truck and flee. For a minute there we were in a strange new world—not the human one where we had paperwork to fill out, not the animal one where we could relate to the bear as prey, but that place in between. The place where creatures live.



Premeemohamed is a Nebula, World Fantasy, and Aurora award-winning Indo-Caribbean scientist and speculative fiction author based in Edmonton, Alberta. She has also been a finalist for the Hugo, Ignyte, British Fantasy, and Crawford awards. She is an Assistant Editor at the short fiction audio venue Escape Pod and the author of the ‘Beneath the Rising’ series of novels as well as several novellas. Her short fiction has appeared in many venues and she can be found on Twitter at @premeesaurus and on her website at www.premeemohamed.com.

Creatures Big and Small Under the Desert Sun

by Maria Schrater

Ifeel that Creature is the most ‘straightforward’ theme we have this year, almost deceptively so. Everyone has a creature story! Even we humans are ultimately creatures – when I think of humans-as-creatures, I become extra aware of my limbs, how silly spine formations are and how bad our knees are, how we evolved from fish, how it feels to interact with the world and feel its textures. I think of the spider crawling on my ceiling.

A lot of Edith’s art centers on animals – skeletons, wreaths of newts, gold-leafed goats – so I wanted to let her run wild on this theme. My only certainty was the desire for it to have a Western, red-rock desert flare. I sent Edith a moodboard of what I felt were underutilized desert animals: when we Americans think of the desert, we might think of rattlers, vultures, maybe the odd mountain goat. But there are hundreds of tiny species who have adapted, sometimes bizarrely, to the desert’s climes: tiny burrowing owls, lizards, quails, tarantula hawks – the list goes on.

She sent me back over a dozen sketches! We had 3 main directions: gigantic creature, centaur, or cryptid cowboy. Look online to see some of those amazing sketches!

Ultimately, I felt that the gigantic creature would be a better fit with our previous covers this year, and I really wanted to include red-rock desert arches. Edith took inspiration from boars, roadrunners, lizards and more to add depth and detail on the final cover. Take a look and see how many you can spot!



Edith Silva is our Artist-In-Residence for 2023. You can find Edith on Instagram @bearensembles.

Find the sketches from Edith on our website.

Thank You

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