

APPARITION

Literary Magazine



ISSUE 25:
BLIGHT

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Apparition Lit

Issue 25: Blight, January 2024

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Fonts used: ITC Avant Garde, Merriweather,

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A Word from our Editor

by Brandon O'Brien

My poet-brain lights up when words do multiple things at once. They don't have to always be overtly connected or inherently semantically complicated. I can make that stretch all on my own—it's what makes us poets, if you ask me.

So the thing that delights me about the word 'blight' is that it describes both an object and an action. It is both the affliction and the act of spreading it; a thing is blighted, and a creature blights it. I also adore that, in the colloquial sense, when referring to flora, 'blight' is a fluid category—it can include actual infections that spread from the root and rot a plant, or the byproduct of simply being eaten by the wrong bug or being prime fodder for an invasive species. A thing need not be sick, so much as be uniquely and distinctively destroyed; when we see a thing be overpowered, lose itself to a patient predator, or slowly fall away into its softest self, that thing is blighted even when we don't know what's wrong with it.

It's also poetic that, just like my mother's starfruits, a blight can be the product of an excess just as much as it can be of a lack. A thing can be so overgrown that

its very mass is a threat to itself and its neighbours. Whether it's weeds conquering the land around desired plants, or simply vines becoming so powerful that they claim their surrounding territories, too much life can be just as much of a curse as a thing that dwindles life.

Seeing the stories that came through for this period's submission call has been a delight, not only because so many of you are equally fascinated by these connections, but because you have found so many novel and radical stories and poems with these lenses. From the viscerally powerful encroaching of dark growths in Gretchen Tessmer's '*Silt and Soot*' and the glowing fungus of Jessica Peter's '*In The Urban Darkness, Something*' to the throbbing, meaty life in Sara Omer's '*Moonflower*' and the far-future unfreezing of Casey Aimer's '*Collective Cryo Dream*', the verse here has been rich with that same kind of excess—strong images that seem to keep coming, getting bigger, and thrusting through the lines for your attention.

The prose has been equally engaging. Bernard McGhee imagines both the natural and social overgrowths that can claim a community in '*Bringing Down The Neighbourhood*'. The heroine of Ash Huang's '*A Proper Vessel, A Perfect House*' in searching for means to save their land from pestilence; in Tom Okafor's '*The Plague Collector*', you watch another land find its own tragic answer to that fear. We get to follow the growth of some plucky younglings in more ways than one in Rebecca E. Treasure's '*Everything, Nothing At All, and All That's In Between*', and watch nature take new forms to live in Mar Vincent's '*The City and the Styrofoam Sea*'.

I think what comes through all of them more so than the initial connecting images is that same wavering sense I see in my mother's backyard garden—the struggle between too much and too little, of ourselves

or of others, of our fears or of our hopes, of nature or of our dominion over it. Each story and poem is, in its own way, about people and worlds searching for balance, and asking not only how to get it, but what it will look like when it happens. From our real suburban backyards to the future outside our globe and the fantasy worlds beyond our universe, each question and the answers they may find are just as revolutionary as they are intriguing.

Being a part of this issue has been remarkable—so many of you are telling so many great stories, and I'm glad to have been the most minor part in helping them find their home in this issue. Thank you again to the amazing Apparition team for being such a kickass crew of word-gardeners—watching the Blight issue come together has confirmed what I have already learned reading their previous issues, namely that their sense of story and their desire to steward a wonderful community shine through in every piece they curate and edit. And of course, thank you to you for reading this issue and supporting Apparition through twenty-five issues and counting.

May all your trees bear so much that you complain about whether they will ever stop.

A humble seedling,

Brandon



Brandon O'Brien is a writer, performance poet, teaching artist, and game designer from Trinidad and Tobago. His work has been shortlisted for the 2014 and 2015 Small Axe Literary Competitions and the 2020 Ignyte Award for Best in Speculative Poetry, and is published in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean*, among others. He is the former Poetry editor of *FIYAH: A Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction*. His debut poetry collection, *Can You Sign My Tentacle?*, available from Interstellar Flight Press, is the winner of the 2022 Elgin Award.

Everything, Nothing At All, and All That's In Between

by Rebecca E. Treasure

Patty Sue has the prettiest dirt around her ankles. Smooth and rich brown, with proper root-green beneath the clumps of soil and up her legs, palest peach, the skin more plant than person. When they feed her, she swallows, obedient and meek. She doesn't complain about the smell, even though my gorge rises whenever they water her and the rot-sweet funk wafts with clouds of gnats from where her feet are. Or were.

Not me. My dirt is uneven, disturbed. I can't seem to hold still long enough for the moss to grow, for water to smooth clumps into something nicer to behold. I never can be what is needed. I gag on the thick gruel they feed us morning, noon, and night, more fat than grain. When they water me, the only smell is dirt and water. No gnats, and though I shouldn't be, I'm grateful.

Missus Jenny knows I've been moving. "Girl, you need to stick your feet deep in the earth where they

belong,” she snaps. “You’re never gonna grow the way we need this way.” Our feet for the dirt, the misters and missuses say. Our feet to grow and transform us into a harvest, so we’re not their daughters, sons, grandchildren, family.

I know she’s right, but I just can’t hold still. Every night when the stars come out, I get a restless tingle just above my knees, buried in my muscles. *Move*, it whispers. *Run free*. And I do. I slip my sore feet from holes made just for them and even though Patty Sue hisses at me that I oughta stay put, and even though the other planted look at me and look away in fear, I run away into the woods.

When the moon is harvesting full, I ask Patty Sue to come with me. “There’s moths that glow like ghosts,” I tell her. “There’s an old pine tree that howls in the wind, and there’s a crick that sparkles with starlight, like the sky curled into itself and splashed into the forest moss. All that stuff about curses is just to scare us. Don’t you wanna see something other than this ruddy old field? What if it’s you tomorrow?” We’re among the ripest. It could be either of us.

But she shakes her head. “We’re supposed to stay put,” she says. “You’re gonna get in trouble.” She glances at the woods and a shiver bunches her shoulders. “Besides, what if it isn’t just to scare us?”

I know she’s right, like she’s always been right, but I go anyway. What could a curse do to me? And I’m not running away, I’m just running. I wouldn’t ever leave Patty Sue behind. A boy at the end of a row smiles shyly at me when I pass, but I don’t slow, don’t offer to bring him with me. He wants to run free, he can do it himself.

I dip my sore feet into that starry water and it sparkles on my skin, cold and prickling. I spread my fingers out

in the moonlight, picking at the black threads sprouting from my nail beds. They sting like a nail cut to the quick when I yank them free.

Beneath my nails the skin is turning black, and I wonder if it's the transformation, but that can't be because that's supposed to start with feet. I chase moths until sweat drips through my snarled hair and my thighs ache. The tree sings into the night, dueting with the wind.

And then just before dawn, I slip back into my foot holes, oh so careful, trying to slide in so no one but Patty Sue and the others know what I've been about. But a toe bumps some earth, the edge of my foot disturbs the slop, and the dirt shifts. When they come down the rows just after sunrise, pinching and poking, Missus Jenny frowns at my ankles but it's harvest day, so she doesn't have time to scold.

The harvest is poor. The boy they picked doesn't go quietly; too much meat left in him, and the essence is tainted. Smut, I hear muttered, smut and rot. Blackened fingertips wisping away to dirty dust, rotten insides unfit for preserving. Discarded hands are tossed, *thwap*, into the compost. I hide my own hands, black under the fingernails.

Missus Jenny shakes a finger at me. "It's you, girl. Disturbing the field."

The other missuses and misters narrow their eyes at me, wrinkles on their skin, shadows in their faces. They might not wait for another harvesting moon this time. I look down, ashamed, though I can't see how my nighttime wanderings could possibly have harmed some boy three rows away. I didn't even talk to him. There's no way Missus Jenny or anybody else knows he smiled at me in the dark.

They decide it's me, anyway.

"It's for your own good, girl," Missus Jenny assures me. "You don't want to smut the harvest, do you?"

I don't think I do. They need us, need proteins and fats they can't get from weak potatoes, shriveled apples, beans that barely ripen. Again and again, we were told how important we were, how necessary to the survival of a people who claimed to be great, once. I want to be what is needed, just one time, but I'm not.

They bring switches made of river reeds, with sharp edges. They slap them against my legs, cutting-biting-slicing-stinging. Blood runs from flesh far too meaty to be what they need. Gnats gather around my ankles, nibbling away at me while they still can get their share. Patty Sue watches, eyes quiet, body still.

Once, they let me run, let me wander in the confines of the village walls. We ate better than any of the misters and missuses, rich brown bread and the freshest apples and fried potatoes and the best vegetables. They gave us steaks ribboned with fat seared to a glistening brown. They gave us livers, hearts, and kidneys rich with blood. They let us eat whenever we wanted, and they gave us sweets and rich drinks and cupped our cheeks and told us how precious we were.

After the bad harvest, I stay put for a few days. Patty Sue even smiles, sings in a voice that softened the dark when we were small. I always needed her more than she needed me. My legs twitch uncontrollably during the nights, spasming like lightning bolts run up and down my bones. So though I'm not running, the dirt is disturbed anyway. Missus Jenny switches me every dawn now, but they don't set a watch, don't dare get caught outside the walls of the village after dark. They

believe their own lies about curses, I figure, because I never see anything cursed. Not outside the village.

“You’re a bad seed, girl. We should just throw you into compost and be done with it.”

But they don’t. Instead they leave me, ripening in the sunshine, legs rubbery and rot-sore, with all the other planted. My fingertips are blackened, tangled moss. A few nights later, I figure I’m getting switched anyway, might as well run, so I take off into the brambles. Patty Sue barely sighs. The movement pulls my scabs apart, but it’s better than holding still.

There’s a rustling in the brush behind me and for a moment I’m certain I’m done for, doomed for the compost, but it’s a girl, newly planted, her hair still braided from the ceremony and her legs still thick and tan from years of running free. Her feet are still rough and brown, her fingertips curved keratin.

I glare at her. “What you doing here?”

She glares back. “What about you?”

I shrug, and even though there’s no reason to answer her, I do. “My legs twitch. I gotta run. Don’t matter anyhow, they’ll harvest us just the same.” Might be that they harvest me later, though, cuz I’m gonna be tough and gristly, keep running the fat off. But I don’t tell her that.

She nods. “Feels good to run. Curses don’t bug you?”

I snort. “Curse? Only curse is inside those walls.”

But then I wonder, wonder about the smut, about the boy’s bad harvest and my running. What if the monster isn’t something big and scary, but little and mean? Little things can be mean--missuses and harvests, switches and gnats.

The reason they need to plant us, grow us, was little. A tiny thing that made all the things people used to eat sick, til they all died and the planted were all that was left.

But the girl is running and I run after her because I haven't had someone to chase in ages and it feels good to not be alone in the woods. We run to the crick and instead of just dipping her toes, she jumps in, wetting herself up to her butt, washing the filth and the soil from her. She shivers and I can see little sparkles all over her skin, little bumps of cold.

"I haven't been clean since the planting," she sighs, scrubbing.

And then I'm in the water, too, ducking my head and gasping from the cold. A sound comes from her mouth, as sparkling as the water. It's so bright it frightens me, and I gasp again, which seems to encourage her. It's contagious, though, and soon I'm laughing too, and it hurts, oh it hurts, but we splash and laugh until the sun is almost on the horizon because I think neither of us wants to go back, replant ourselves, dry off, stop laughing. But we do, because they need us, and, besides, where else would we go? What are we if not the rooted foundation of our people?

The soil around my ankles is wet, little craters where droplets fell *splat* into the soil. Patty Sue refuses to look at me, won't acknowledge my teasing that she's just jealous I have clean hair. Before the planting, Patty Sue had the prettiest hair, long and golden and always brushed til it shined. Now, of course, it's still long and golden, but it's caked with dirt and tangled from the wind. She flushes. I realize she is jealous, and then I feel bad because she's never been anything but good to me.

“You can come,” I start to say, but they’re here with their gruel and their poking and their switches.

Missus Jenny stops in front of me, her breath coming out from between her long teeth in a hiss. “What did you do, fool?”

As I hide my wispy fingers behind my back, I look past her, at the walls of the village where she cowers at night. I imagine I can hear the joyful, innocent, stupid laughter of the children not yet planted. “It rained.” The lie shivers from my lips, mean and obvious, but I don’t care. What else can they do to me?

After the switching, which is somehow more painful after the cold ice water in the crick bed, Missus Jenny moves on down the rows. She stops dead in front of the little girl, the new girl, who just wanted clean hair. Even though I am careful not to look that way, I can feel eyes on me, burning away the last of the wetness. I’m not sure if it’s the girl or the missus. A switching, I figure, just a few cuts and bruises. She’ll endure.

But instead, they harvest her, right then and there. She’s still raw, still blood and bone, but they pick her anyway. Bound for the compost, wasted, but she’ll grow no more. I almost ask them to pick me instead-- I’m much riper, I’d be of use--but I can’t face it, can’t bring myself to do it. I remember what it was to not feel so alone in the dark and I am ashamed, but I still don’t move, and I keep my eyes down. I tell myself it’s because Patty Sue needs me and I focus on a gnat crawling up Patty Sue’s shin. I imagine the screams are from the tiny black body, skittering around the fibrous calf. I stare so hard I almost believe my own lies.

As soon as the gates of the village close, I’m off. I spare one glance for Patty Sue, but I can see she’s never moving again in the way she holds herself, and I vanish

into the woods. I try for a splashing bath but it's not the same alone, so I end up in the clearing beneath the old pine, staring up at the stars and listening to the wind sing. A ghostly moth flutters over and I lie to myself that it's the girl, released and free to seek the horizon, unafraid. Where would I go if I had wings? Is there anywhere but here?

I think I'm imagining the noise in the brambles until two boys and a girl topple out, almost on top of one another. They aren't young, not new planted. Their feet are rotten, foul things, with bone and pus glistening white in the moonlight, their toes rooty, tapering to stringy tails. Their legs don't work right, but they stumble on, standing in a row in front of me.

"What do you want?" I say, even though I know. They want the stars, and to run, and they want to be clean, and they want all the things they dream about when the sun beats down on us and we wait to transform, to grow and be harvested. They want everything, nothing at all, and all that's in between.

"They're gonna take us all," says one of the boys. His hair might have been black, once, before the dirt and the sun got into it and turned it gray. "Not like staying put is gonna change that."

The girl nods. "Might as well move a little." Her voice is low and mellow, like a dream.

"Besides," says the last boy, his skin so sunburned it almost crackles when he talks. "You keep coming back. We figured you knew how to stop the curses."

I almost laugh, but it hurts too much. I don't know how to stop the curses. I'm not even sure if the curse is me, or the misters and missuses, or these three children being fattened up for slaughter. Four, I guess.

But I take them to the crick, and we wash each other's backs with handfuls of moss, and we comb blackened fingertips through our hair. I don't know if their fingertips were black when they came. I think they were.

The sunburned boy tells a story. I'd forgotten stories, or probably just didn't think of them, and I hold my breath until it's over so I can remember every word. Before dawn, now, we squeeze water from our hair and we rub dirt into our cheeks, shins, ankles, and we slip back into our holes. Better a few hours of pretending, we don't have to say, than nothing at all. The missuses don't seem to realize, and no one is harvested. I tell Patty Sue the story.

The next night there are two more in the woods and the night after that, another three. We laugh and tell stories, we hold hands and lay beneath the stars, listening to the wind and the moths, we rub dirt from our backs and dust into our cheeks. When we are together, there's something whole in me where a hole used to be. I am needed and needful.

It's another harvesting moon and we are more restless than ever. We cling to fingers with nails like overripe corn silk, scuff rotten bony feet into the dirt, avoid eye contact. What if it's me, we don't say. What if it's you. When the sky turns from black to gray, the stars winking out one by one, the first three who came after me shake their heads.

"We should stay here," says once-black-hair.

"Run further. Run away." The girl holds out her hands to me.

"Come with us," says the boy.

Fools. “To where? What will we eat? There’s nothing out there.”

“Food grows in the village,” she argues, stubborn. “It must grow elsewhere.”

But it won’t be enough, or they wouldn’t need us. I shake my head. “You’ll starve to death.” But they, who have never been hungry, cannot picture such a thing, and they slip away into the gathering shadows. Two more follow. I can’t leave, though, can’t leave Patty Sue alone because she didn’t leave me alone even when she could have, and what if I’m right, and there are no curses but nothing else either?

So I slip back into the holes, the sure things, and they cocoon my feet and Patty Sue shakes her head but seems to lean toward me a bit.

Missus Jenny stops in front of me, pulling my hands out and clucking her tongue. “Rot, through and through. Look at these things.” And she shakes my fingers in front of my eyes like they’re not my own hands, like I don’t feel them pulling apart into tiny, fleshy threads, as if somehow I missed the tips of my fingers trailing away into wisps. “Started with you. This smut will be hard to eradicate.”

Up and down the rows, other planted have fingers like mine. Fingers that are reaching, growing, fraying, searching. Did it start with me or was it here in the soil all along? I couldn’t have been the first who wanted to run, wanted to be more than they planted us to be.

Missus Jenny is turning to Patty Sue, and a breath of relief heaves out of her. “This one is clean, all. At least this one is pure.”

And they pick her.

I am going to rip my feet from their holes without any care. I'm going to make them take me instead. For just a moment, I savor it like they'll savor me, embracing the choice. They will take me and strip me bare and flay me open and slice me into little strips for the little children. But the sight of her feet pulling from the earth stops me, stops time, stops everything.

They are not feet. Instead, roots have formed where her bones and meat once were, pale gray and rough, fading imperceptibly into flesh somewhere above her ankles. A rich, earthy smell rises from her as they drag her from her hole, and for a moment my mouth swims with greedy hunger. Then it sours and I retch.

I open my mouth to protest, to demand they take me in her place, but Patty Sue's gaze meets mine and she smiles like this is all she's ever wanted in the world. She is so at peace, so calm; she doesn't need me at all. My shout turns into something hard and choking, and though part of me is shrieking, it's trapped inside. There are no screams, only the sound of a blade slicing through thick roots, at first, and then softer, wetter things. I stare at her holes, obscenely disturbed, gaping hollow, empty, hungry for the next.

I water my own soil, tears streaming down my cheeks, my arms, my body. I weep, wishing I could curl around the screaming hole just below my ribs, wishing I dared run, wishing I'd said something to Patty Sue before they took her, wishing, wishing, wishing. I wish I could plant Missus Jenny in the dirt and hold her there until her old skin burns away and she's nothing but a fibrous husk. The hollow wishes fill me up until they burst in a shout from my lips and I rip my feet from the dirt.

"No more!" The shout falls on a silent field, because I waited too long, and they're all back inside the walls eating their fill of Patty Sue.

One of the other good girls snorts at me, stretching her back. “You sure told them.”

“Shut up,” I say. “You wanna end up like that? We stand here all day wishing to transform, letting them tell us what we’re supposed to be, when we’re something else entire.”

“Don’t matter what we want, silly girl,” she says. “Where’d you get ideas like that?”

From the moths, I want to tell her. From the wind and the crick water. From Patty Sue’s songs. But she won’t understand. Not like she is. She’s happy to be nothing to herself, everything to someone else. I stomp over to her. I failed Patty Sue, but I am not gonna fail again. It’s easier, somehow, now that the need driving me is the failure I can’t correct. I reach out to her, my corn silk fingers black in the moonlight. She cringes away but I wait, hands outstretched.

“We don’t have to be what they need.” She blinks and one tentative finger raises to meet mine. I stroke her arms, hold her hands in mine. I whisper, “Come with us.”

She gasps, hesitant, not quite believing. The fingertip of her pinky splits, a little black hair poking out. Fear comes into her eyes and I’m sorry for that, but now they won’t want her--she’s free to want for herself. Up and down the rows, we who would run are freeing the rest.

“You cursed me,” she whispers, but her hand comes up to meet mine.

I nod, helping her from her holes. “Pass it on,” I say.

We are unrooted, cursed, the ruination of their plans. We need only ourselves.



Rebecca's short fiction has been published by or is forthcoming from *Flame Tree*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Air & Nothingness Press*, and others. She is the managing editor at *Apex Magazine*. Rebecca is fueled by cheese-covered starch and corgi fur.



Collective Cryo Dream

by Casey Aimer

The broke and poor were stuffed into cryosleep
their bodies stored segmented on freezer floors.

Only clumps of vitrified cells to the ruling class,
blood swapped for antifreeze, dreams detached.

Adult humans awoken as convenient labor, flesh
always cheaper than spawning construction bots.

Thawed out in 400-year labor cycles, humans are
recycled as cheap work and then deposited back

without wage, only chances to see futures made
by them, not for, raising edifices they can't need.

Families are defunct. Mother and son never held
together out of sleep prevents added distractions

and any bond forming except one between bricks.
There is no communication out into the universe,

years meaningless—6763 or 2079 both identical.
Social progress turned illusion when the wealthy

altered into immortal effigies of endless appetites.
The only slog forward came from awakened fury

of those repeatedly roused from suspended death.
But revolt is easy to stifle when life is abbreviated,

clandestine plots opposing cryo guns and ice filling
cells until sealed and subdued to be awoken in 400.

The workers rise each reset to no innovation, only
hollow buildings with no one left to haunt any halls.

The ruling class constructs measureless shell cities
to one-up a fading population with empty prestige.

Inequal immortality breeds cynicism and resilience
bristling deep-coded in frozen and defrosted cells.

Someone sneaks in an infinitesimal system error,
every cryopod cycle accruing a minute sabotage

slowly modifying to let sleeping minds connect,
dream as one shared transmitted consciousness.

But revolution still remains 10,000 years distant
because hope, we find, takes the longest to build.



Casey Aimer holds master's degrees in both poetry and publishing and works for a non-profit publishing science research articles. He is co-founder of *Radon Journal*, an anarchist science fiction publisher. His work has been featured in *Star*Line*, *Ars Medica*, *The Fictional Café*, and he is a Pushcart Prize nominated poet. An active SFPA member, he was a 2023 Rhysling Award juror.



The Plague Collector

by Tom Okafor

The first time you take the plague into yourself, the wind is present, but it stands unbreathing, still, as Oke Ala takes form and shows herself. All things on earth, as such as those under her rule, cease their affairs; even time stutters to a halt.

The moment the heft of your thumb and index finger presses against the wilted, yellowed ugu stalk in the garden behind your mother's house, you draw Oke Ala's curse into yourself, and it doesn't consume you.

Ala kindles from her rest, hews a body for herself from the earth's crust and appears before you. Your mother's garden is a sickly tale, void of form, void of hope. Its colors blur into a waning song sung by a fading voice, and that voice pleads a lost freshness. It is not heard, and it doesn't need to be heard, for its desolation is evident. The locusts in the garden do not know death, the canker reproduces unrestrainedly, and the caterpillars never blossom into butterflies. The smell of rot and disease swell into your nose, but it doesn't nauseate you. You were born into this disease, and you do not know any other fragrance but that of decay.

In that moment, the sky wears dusk. The garden freezes, unhearing the buzzes of wild insects with which it is swathed. You look into the garden, chills carve crisscrosses into your skin, and your eyes glint with a salient light as they behold Oke Ala standing fifteen meters away from you in the center of the garden. Your fingers clutch the stalk. She is mighty, tall, and thick; her skin is the black of rich loam; her hair is full, darker than the silence of the night, braided at both sides of her head; innumerable golden rings occupy her earlobes, gleaming with hues alien to your eyes; and her lips shine red like a bleeding dream. You marvel at her greatness, but no speckle of fear is found in you.

You break a twig, your lips curling upwards into a quarter moon, and you stretch out the twig to her. You do not see the twig turn green and moist, nor the stalk, which you still hold in your left hand. But, Ala sees it. She sees you take the curse from the stalk you touched, but her anger is not aroused. She takes pleasure in you, for she knows you and the history of your birth. She does not take the twig from you, but she marks you as hers and calls you Nkem.

You cry when she disappears. The buzzes return to the garden, time breaths back into motion, the skies doff the dark veil, your outstretched arm clasps the twig still, and you long to see her again. Your cries heighten and your mother runs out to meet you. She stumbles when she sees the shoot of dark green leaves gleaming adjacent to browned leaves. She creeps to you, bewildered, and wraps her arms around your shoulders. Your cries still. You look up at her; there is something in her gaze: a joy of sorts laced with fear and blended into uncertainty. She takes the restored stalk from your hand, breaks it off from the wilted vine, and leads you back into the house through the zinc door in the backyard.

The mud walls glare at you, your mother glares at you, and the heat circulating in the room glares at you. You look out into the garden, but Ala is still gone.

Your mother asks you what happened to the leaves—why they turned green. You gasp at the sight of the green leaves and lift your hands to your face. Your hands are yellow, like the plague. You scream. Your mother retreats, pointing to your hands. You try to scrub the yellow away. Your mother doesn't help; she doesn't even touch you. She keeps away from you all day. The yellow stays, and you are alone. Loneliness whispers in your ears for the first time. That night, the fever comes, and you are still alone.

When the morning comes, you've sweat the curse away. The fever breaks, and the yellow leaves your hands. You call for your mother, but she isn't in sight. You slump on the raffia mat, exhausted and worn. Your mother appears with a basin on her head. She lowers the basin; full of wilted leaves. Your eyes meet hers, and you shake your head.

"No, mama. No," you say. But her gaze is firm, rigid with mischief. You crawl back onto the wall, but she lifts a branch of leaves, drags you forward, and forces the branch into your hand.

You cry; your hands burn and turn yellow as the plant turns green again. Your mother sings softly and sways her hips in a dance. You curl up in a corner. The walls scorch you, and the fever returns, but the earth doesn't come to a halt; time carries on with its business, and Ala is silent. You reach for her with your heart. You feel nothing, you hear nothing; Ala remains silent. The first strands of hair fall from your head, you scream, and your mother dances on.



The days blur into months, and months trickle into years. It doesn't take long for you to become a wonder. An impoverished wonder. The skeins of your life—frayed—are tethered to death more than they are to life. The yellow is resident on your skin now; the fever wears your flesh like fitted clothes; and the sight of hair is a mockery to you. Mother has taken you from house to compound to settlement to community. You've taken the plague from herbs, vegetables, roots, tubers, and even trees. Wherever you go, you bring life; you give color, but you lose yourself bit by bit. Slowly, you are morphing into a carcass.

You watch your mother blossom into royalty at the expense of your life. In a previous lifetime, she meant the world to you, and you to her. She waited awhile before you were conceived. It was a bitter wait. She married her childhood heartthrob, but years passed and she bore him no children. In those days, the rain fell in its season, the sun blushed the skies each rising day, and the harmattan winds crept in when they were called forth. The bougainvillea snaked up the walls and bloomed with flowers; the trees towered above the ground, and the leaves were soft and green. Everything was fair.

In those days, the people—prosperous, their bellies full, and their bodies supple—grew complacent in their worship of Oke Ala. They turned to Onwa for she was fair and shone brightly against the night sky. They poured libations to her when her form was complete and her beauty was at its peak. They painted their bodies white with clay and sang her songs made for Ala, named her names meant for the goddess of the earth. The stench of their sin reached Ala, and she spilled venom from her pores and poisoned the crops. Yet, the people did not turn; they did not repent; rather, they hated her.

Ọnwa challenged Oke Ala to a brawl for smiting her worshippers. Ala grew enraged and crushed Ọnwa's jaw, and her beauty was lost. Ọnwa's light waned and quenched, to return after a hundred seasons when her healing was full.

The people's mouths were filled with dust and their bellies with ash. The grasses, too, were plagued. Food was made out of rotten livestock, dead from starvation. Hunger and desperation pervaded the earth. Cows and goats went wild and devoured their owners.

Fearful things happened, yet Ala's wrath was not assuaged. Hence, she held back the rain and drank the streams. A land once replete with streams and sweet rivers was dried of all water. Deep wells were dug, and sick children were meat for algae soup.

Your mother, overwhelmed with much distress and sorrow, bore herself to Ala's deserted shrine. Ala's seats were broken, her treasures were looted, and the golden cauldron raised up on the roof had no fire. Your mother tore her clothes and pleaded her case. She begged for a child to soothe her sorrows and bring comfort like rain for her parched heart. Ala took pity on her for Ala is merciful, and she molded you into mother's womb and breathed into you.

Your father passed away five days after holding you for the first time. He was overcome with much illness, and he would not seek Ala for healing. His kin took his body away and, after a while, returned with a portion of his torso for your mother.

Her strength was weak, and she knew hunger: its breath, its height, and its depths. She took the meat, boiled the body of the love of her life, and blessed his cadaver with heat, old spice, and charred oil. She ate him and had her fill. It hurt her, what she'd done, but

she reckoned herself sensible for what use was his body beneath the earth?

Thus, her soul found pleasure in you; her sighs morphed into songs, and every sound you made was more pleasant than the twittering of oscine birds. You brought the zest of life with you, and inside your home—within those mud walls, roof covered with fire-thirsty thatch, floors glazed with stones hewn from obsidian and held together with clay—a light shined that was much more than rays of sunlight; that light was the very breath of the sun, and that light was you. So, she called you Anwü. But your mother forgot Ala’s kindness and would not offer praise. Ala held her peace, waiting for the set time to reveal herself to you.

So you grew before your mother, and she loved you until you became something more than a child, something of an enterprise, something usable. Indeed “something”. As she loaded you from place to place, her coffers ever increasing in weight, the image of the woman she once was became more elusive.

Three years pass, time and labor stitch you into an echo, a label of nothingness. You look at your mother’s face—painted, plump, pretty—but the woman you’re staring at is no one you’ve ever known, so much so that if you hold her in place and whip time backwards until it gets to the point before you turned the first stalk green, the woman before you will dissipate, for she never existed.



The second time Oke Ala appears to you, Mmüð brings his cup for you to drink from. The stench of death oozes from his cup, but his tongue drips with honey, and he bids you drink of his cup, boasting of the lightness of

his yoke and the weightlessness of his burden. He will usher you into your rest; all you need to do is drink.

Your mother's ambition leads her to the king. She reckons that if you can take the plague from the crops, then you should be able to take the plague from the flesh too.

She searches for the number of times she felt an ailment as little as a headache since you were born but can think of none. It must have been your touch! Keeping the disease and sickness at bay.

Thus, she brings you to the king with a promise of renewed vigor and prolonged life. News of your wonders spread abroad. It doesn't take much to bring you to the king. Persuasion is as easy as a desperate, dying king.

You behold the king's state, and you see your destiny. It has been death all along. You know this will be the end. You've slipped away piece by piece, green by green, since that day.

You want to speak a word—to say thirsty; to say water—but you've spent the last three years unspeaking, and you've forgotten the shape of words against your lips. But you need water for your chafed throat, and you need the wind, a calm touch, rain clouds emptying themselves, something warm against your skin, something to make you feel again; you need the chirps of locusts, the shuffling of roaches in the dark, the stillness of a virgin dawn; you need a hymn of liberty, a dance of belongingness, an ovation of victory, and shouts of healing. But the wind is dull, the air is stiff, and music is a dream, and the locusts are home, and home is gone.

The king's throne is unoccupied. He sits on a mat, his back resting against the wall on the right side of his mahogany throne. His crown sits on the left arm of the

throne, bespangled with brown cowries and iridescent stones. The palace is wide, and the white walls are covered with symbols, engravings, and drawings of the stories of your history. Ala's statue stands eight feet high on the left side of the throne. Her statue has no head, and a cracked vase packed with dried grass is in its place.

The palace is sparsely populated with guards, servants, and nurses. The guards are bare-chested, clothed with lion hide skirts, and machetes in their hands. The servants and nurses are in long white robes, their bodies covered from neck to feet.

The stench in the room is alive and haughty. The king's legs are spread out on the mat. The soles of his feet drip dark brown fluid crawling with maggots. A large, wide gash runs across his stomach from side to side; his bowels are exposed, and two nurses pull worms as thick as adult lizards out of his bowels with wooden tweezers. Maggots stick out of the entirety of his scalp; his head is full with a semblance of ripe age, and the strands of maggots shake and snake.

The king's plague is heavy, and you've been brought to take it away.

Your mother leads you to the king. She pays obeisance and retreats. It is impossible for the stench in the room to get worse, but closer to the king, the smell worsens. One of the nurses whispers to the king, making known your presence. The king blinks his eyes open, and yellow mucus pours. He shuts them and groans in response. You wonder if he saw you. You place your hands around his chin, silence strolls into the room, and the air stiffens—expectant.

Your mother did not know the extent of the king's rot; did she know, she'd have never brought you here,

and that, not for your salvation but, for the preservation of her legacy.

You draw corrupted air into your lungs, your hands on the king's chin, and in an instant, the maggots are drawn from his head.

Gasps break the silence, and a lash of pain slices your spine. Your knees buckle, your hands slip from the king's head, and you fall.

Finally, you drink from Mmuṣo's cup. The light fades from your sight, and the world rolls away.



Ala lays you beside a brook. She's cleansed you of the plague, and your strength has returned. You behold her, and your joy is full. She speaks to you, not in the tongues of men but with the voice of the earth. You hear her, and you understand, for you hold her zeal in you. She calls you daughter, and you called her mother.

She washes your eyes with milk, and the intricacies of the earth are revealed to you. You see every atom, every molecule, every excited ion. The world bares itself to you, and you master the wind, the light, and the seas.

Ala tells you her names and shows you her might upon the earth. She calls forth food, it appears, and you eat. She fashions new mountains and hills and names them after you. She gives you new names, teaches you songs, and shows you the poetry of the gods.

No darkness resides with Ala for her love is light and it burns brighter than hate, and her light casts no shadows.

Your soul seeks no vengeance for the wrongs that befell you, and you dwell with Ala. She gives you a seat beside her throne, and while the world of men

languishes, you blossom and shine. She blesses you with a light greater than the sun's, and you shine before her. And your light is perfect.



Tom Okafor is a Pushcart-nominated daydreamer who bends dreams into stories. You can find some of these dreams at *A Coup of Owls Press*, *Ibua Journal*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *Metachrosis Literary Magazine*, and elsewhere.

In the Urban Darkness, Something

by Jessica Peter

We hold hands against the dark,
as this city crumbles.
Two lost souls against the
city as cemetery, cemetery as city.

Rotting low-rise tombstones dot the horizon,
slashed by skyscraper obelisks marking the spots
where others had fallen.

Others,
 and others,
 and others.

So many,
 until maybe now it's just us left.

It's goodbye to all that.

Two perfect fly agarics sprout from the stained rug,
mirroring us across the motel room,
they red skirts and white polka dots,
us begrimed in whatever we had left.

Her nails bite into my palm, and I spin to see
across the room in the broken mirror,
green foxfire shining from my own shattered gaze,
a bioluminescent stare.

We hold hands against the end,
as one fleshy mushroom cap drops
out of her parted lips,
her lapis lazuli eyes round with shock.

Another drops,
and another,
and another,
falling like fat raindrops
on a May-showers kind of day.

I grip her and kiss her chapped lips as
the mycelium takes over,
more mushroom than human.

With the fungi and petrichor on my mouth,
we let go, we succumb.
We give in.



Jessica Peter writes dark, haunted, and sometimes absurd short stories, novels, and poems. She's a social worker and health researcher who lives in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada with her partner and their two black cats. You can find her writing in venues such as *The NoSleep Podcast*, *Haven Speculative*, and *Brigid's Gate* anthologies, among other places. You can find her on Twitter @jessicapeter1.



Bringing Down The Neighborhood

by Bernard McGhee

As the rest of the neighborhood became more vibrant and upscale, the owner of the old house at 6272 Hill Street let it get uglier and uglier. At least, that's what the owner of the coffee shop a block away told Cameron Whittles as she handed him an artisan bagel and a soy latte.

"The more we do to bring things up around here, the worse that one house gets," she declared, wrinkling her nose in disapproval. "We clear out the litter, the owner lets the paint on that house start peeling and the wood rot. We scrub the graffiti off all the walls around here, he lets ivy take over the yard. We organize a neighborhood watch to keep the thugs away, he starts letting derelicts hang out in front of his house. And the *smell*. What is he doing in there? But he won't sell the place. He turns down every single offer. It's just a shame."

Cameron nodded and dropped \$2 in the tip jar. He had merely asked if she happened to know the man who lived there. He decided against telling her he grew up in that house and the neglectful owner was his father.

He wasn't even hungry. Cameron realized stopping at the coffee shop was just a form of stalling. He never thought he'd be back here. But he couldn't stop thinking about the text his father sent him the week before.

"Come home and watch me undo it all," was all the text said.

Cameron had sent a flurry of follow-up texts asking if he was all right, but got no response. Sitting at the small table in the shop, he glanced at the text again and scowled. This was so like his father. Throwing out scraps of information and then giving no other details.

Cameron was going to move on and forget about it when Denise had wondered aloud if it might be some type of suicide note. Cameron couldn't let that go, so here he was. Back in the neighborhood he'd spent most of his teenage years trying to get out of.

Except it wasn't really that neighborhood anymore. Walking out of the coffee shop and down the sidewalk, Cameron barely recognized Albert Park. Across the street, five e-bikes stood in a row on the sidewalk in the same spot where Rontez and his cousins sold jewelry and electronics out of the trunk of his car. Everyone knew not to ask how he got them. The trash-strewn field where kids played baseball and soccer was now a neighborhood garden. The corner store that sold over-priced cigarettes, beer and junk food was now a pet daycare.

The neighborhood had supposedly come up, except for 6272 Hill Street.

Cameron stopped walking when he was in front of the house and stared at it for a long moment. The woman at the coffee shop wasn't exaggerating. The dilapidated, three-story house made of faded bricks looked so out of place among the newly renovated boutiques and

duplexes, as if it had been teleported in from some war-torn country. He shook his head as he took in the house he and his older brother had once called home.

Past the rusted chain-link fence, ivy covered the yard and much of the house, wrapping it in thick, brown vines like blood vessels. Faint wisps of smoke drifted up from the opening of a charred tin barrel in the middle of the yard. The windows were boarded up with strange symbols spray-painted onto the wood.

Near the steps leading to the front door, Cameron could barely make out the shape of someone sleeping in the ivy. At least, he hoped it was just someone sleeping. The air was thick with the odor of dirt, rotting eggs, and burnt paper.

“It’s just a shame,” the coffee shop owner had said. There was nothing like hearing your childhood home being talked about as if it was a nuisance that refused to be hidden or sent away. A cloud passed over and a day that had been bright suddenly became gray, even the sunlight didn’t want to come near the house.

Cameron took a deep breath and walked through the fence’s open gate. Gravel and bits of broken glass crunched underfoot as he crossed the walkway leading to the door.

The person sleeping by the front steps was wrapped in dingy blankets that covered their whole body. Cameron looked at them just long enough to see the slight rise and fall of breathing. Whoever they were, they were still alive. Denise would say he should check on them to make sure they were all right. But he didn’t even know yet if his own father was still alive. One problem at a time. He stared at the sleeper again to double check that they were still breathing, sighed with relief and walked up the concrete steps to the door.

The front door was slightly ajar. Cool, rancid air wafted from the darkness inside.

“I’m not paying to air condition the whole damn neighborhood,” his father used to bellow through the house when one of them left the door open.

James Whittles III would never suffer a door being left open like this. Something had to be wrong. Cameron pushed it open wider and stepped into the cold gloom. Waves of black grime crept up the walls around the front foyer. Darkness hid everything beyond.

Cameron turned on his cellphone flashlight. To the left, a staircase went up to a second floor shrouded in more darkness. The walls of the staircase showed the outlines where family pictures hung for as long as Cameron could remember. Why had they been taken down?

In the living room to the right, dirt-encrusted sheets covered all the furniture. It was once the room he and his brother Karl rushed to on Christmas morning to open presents under the tree. It didn’t look like anyone had been in there in a long time.

Shining his flashlight forward, Cameron took a few steps down the hallway when the light landed on a figure standing in the middle of the hallway. Cameron yelped and took a quick step back, but the person just stood there, facing him but giving no indication they even noticed him. Long, matted dreadlocks covered most of the man’s face. His clothes hung from him in ragged tatters. Twisted brown vines poked out from oozing sores that dotted his skin.

“Hello? Are you okay?” Cameron asked, taking another step back in case the man charged at him.

The man said nothing, standing deathly still in the light of Cameron's cellphone. Cameron couldn't even tell if he was breathing or not. And he couldn't take his eyes off the vines sprouting from his skin. What kind of infection could make something like that happen?

"Is that you, Cameron?" a voice called from somewhere below. "Come down and see this."

"Dad? Are you in the basement? There's someone standing up here," Cameron said.

The man in front of him moaned and a rapid clicking sound came from his mouth for a moment. Then he stepped to the side and pressed his back to the wall, giving Cameron room to walk by him.

Cameron inched by the man, holding his breath and keeping his eyes locked onto him until he was a few feet past him. He panned the light around the hallway. Here too, all the pictures had been taken down.

The hallway led into the kitchen, where the smell of mildew and the buzzing of flies greeted Cameron as he walked in. At the table where he used to eat cereal before school, four people sat in rusted metal chairs, wraiths in torn clothes, with their heads bent down. Strands of hair twitched and rustled on one of them, as if something was crawling around underneath. Cameron crept past, afraid to shine the light directly onto them.

The door to the basement was on the other side of the kitchen. Cameron peered down the basement stairs. More strange symbols were drawn on the walls of the staircase. Something down there was giving off a soft light.

"I'm coming down there," Cameron called out before glancing over his shoulder at the people sitting around the table. None of them moved. Satisfied that no one

would rush up behind him and push him down the stairs, Cameron put a careful foot down on the first step.

“Come on down. You have to see this,” a voice called up from the basement. It sounded like his father but something was off. The voice was hoarse and labored.

Cameron took another step down and another. The smell of dirt and rot got stronger with each step, making him put his hands over his nose and mouth.

The first thing he noticed at the bottom of the steps was the dirt that completely covered the once-carpeted floor. The shelves stacked with boxes and old toys were gone, too. A cluster of melting white candles in the middle of the floor illuminated the basement.

At the other end of the room, a large gray mass that looked like a lumpy pyramid sat against the wall. Dozens of brown vines extended from its midsection, connecting to the floor and more vines stretched into tiny holes in the cinderblock wall behind it. The mass quivered and pulsed, sometimes shaking the taut vines connected to it.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it,” said a voice from the shadows to the right.

Something shaped like Cameron’s father shambled into the candlelight. His hair was a tangled nest of vines. One eye was missing and the other was bright yellow and pupil-less. His naked body was covered in patches where the skin had fallen away, showing tissue and muscle underneath.

“Jesus, Dad! What happened to you?” Cameron yelled. All he wanted to do was run up the stairs as fast as he could and out of the house, never looking back. He wanted to lie to himself and decide this had all been

a hallucination or a bad dream. But what kind of son would he be if he left his father like this?

“Don’t be so dramatic,” James said, his voice sounding like it was hard to talk. “It’s not that bad.”

“It looks pretty bad to me,” Cameron said. “What’s going on here? What happened to our house? Who are those people up there? And what is that ... thing over there?”

James’s ruined face twisted into a frown of disapproval. “That ‘thing,’ as you so rudely put it, is a visitor and it’s here to help put things right,” he said. “And you should already know ‘those people’ you passed on the way in. You grew up with most of them. If you came in through the front door, then you had to have walked past Mr. Lester. He used to drive the ice cream truck through the neighborhood, if you care enough to remember.”

“That was him?! Then what happened to him?” Cameron said, ignoring his father’s last remark. “He looks like a damn zombie.”

James turned his head and coughed, sending a puff of glowing orange spores into the air. He turned back to Cameron. “Yeah, that was him,” he said. “He and some of the others have been staying here since they started raising the rents everywhere. No place else to go. Some of the ones in the kitchen are people you used to know, too. Maybe you’d have recognized them if you came back to visit once in a while.”

Cameron closed his mouth and ground his teeth. It always came back to this. Even when it defied all logic and common sense, it always came back to this. He closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. He opened his eyes and felt a flash of pride that he was able to keep himself from screaming.

“I don’t think how often I visit has anything to do with what’s going on here right now,” he said, forcing himself to keep his voice calm. “So, can you please tell me what’s happened to our home?”

“You mean all this?” James asked, waving his hand toward the room around them. “Transposer says it’s temporary. It just needs to pull all the bad stuff in before it can push it back out. The others upstairs all understand what’s happening.”

“The Transposer? What are you talking about?” Cameron asked. “Is this about the text you sent me? How are you going to ‘undo it all?’”

“You haven’t been around much these last 15 years, so you don’t know what it’s been like,” James said. “They all say they want to make the neighborhood better. But they never seem to notice all the people they’re pushing out while they do it. Calling us a ‘blighted neighborhood’ as if that’s something that just happens and now we’re all a disease. Like the people who lived here chose to have the funding cut to the school and the police station; chose to have BunleeCorp close down the warehouse and move all those jobs to Wyoming. But it’s ok. It’s ok.” He pointed to the gray pyramid. “Our friend here came all the way from the Helix Nebula to help us turn it all around. Watch now. You’ll like this part.”

Before Cameron could say anything else, James walked over to the candles on the floor and dropped to his hands and knees. He rearranged the candles and drew curving lines in the dirt between them, forming an arcane pattern with the candles sitting at the lines’ intersections.

The naked man drawing in the dirt looked more to Cameron like a half-crazy forest gnome than his father. A lump formed in his throat. He had his reasons for

leaving. But he never should have gotten so far away that he didn't notice how far his father was falling. This had to stop.

After a few moments, James stood up and brushed the dirt off himself. He didn't seem to notice the bits of skin and flecks of blood that came off with the dirt. Cameron had no idea what about "this part" he was supposed to like.

"We're almost set now. Just one last thing," James said and turned back to Cameron. "After I'm gone, I need you to promise me you won't sell the house, no matter how much they offer. And some of them upstairs may still need to stay here for a little while until they can get back on their feet."

"Wait. What are you about to do?" Cameron cried.

But James was already walking toward the pyramid at the other end of the basement. He was holding a long shard of broken glass Cameron hadn't noticed before.

James stood in front of the pyramid with his back to Cameron and slid the glass shard down his arms and legs and across his torso. Blood was dripping from the shard when James brought his hand back down to his side.

"Stop!" Cameron yelled. "You're the one who told me to come here. So tell me what the hell is happening here."

James turned to face his son, showing bleeding red lines where he'd cut himself with the glass. "I know how this looks, but you need to understand this isn't magic or anything like that," he said. "The universe is a big place and there's a lot of science out there people don't understand. But you still can never make something out of nothing. Sometimes, to make something happen, you need what you would call ... a sacrifice."

The words hit Cameron like a slap to the face. Denise was right. The cryptic text had been a suicide note.

“Goddammit, why don’t you just sell the house and move on?” Cameron said. “What are you holding onto here? Mom’s dead and everyone’s gone. It’s not even our home anymore. It’s just ... It’s just a dump now.”

James stared at him with his one yellow eye as blood from his fresh cuts dripped into the dirt and then shook his head.

“You’re my son and I’ll always love you. But you’re just like all the rest of them,” he said. “You walk away from something, abandon it. Then you turn around and call it a dump. Is that fair? Is that fair to all of us who’ve been left behind?”

“But you don’t have to be left behind,” Cameron said. “You’re choosing that. You can sell the place and use the money to move near us or near Karl. The old neighborhood is gone. You don’t owe it anything.”

“You just don’t understand,” James said and turned back toward the pyramid that seemed bigger than it was a few seconds ago. “The old neighborhood isn’t gone as long as the people are still here. It’s where I met your mother. It’s where we raised our children. It’s where everyone I ever cared about lived. I owe it everything. Everything.”

Taking another step toward the pyramid, James said a long string of words Cameron couldn’t understand, words that sounded like they came from an ancient language he’d never heard.

Then came the clicking sounds. At first they were coming from James’s wide open mouth. But after a few seconds, a second set of clicks filled the basement, coming from the pyramid that was now growing in

size as it convulsed against the wall. From inside the pyramid, a booming chorus of voices screamed another series of strange words. A large, vertical opening appeared in the pyramid's center and James took a final step toward it.

Several vines shot out from the opening in the pyramid like reaching arms and attached themselves to the cuts James had made on himself. James grunted in pain but made no attempt to pull them out or get away.

"Hold on, Dad," Cameron cried. But the vines had already lifted James off his feet.

"It's okay, son," James croaked. "Just help Karl understand."

"But I don't even understand," Cameron said as tears ran down his face.

A folded up piece of paper slipped from James's hand and fell to the floor. He nodded at the pyramid and, in a movement so fast Cameron's eyes could barely follow it, the vines pulled James into the vertical opening, his entire body disappearing as the opening snapped shut.

The ground beneath him trembled and the pyramid began glowing a dull purple. One by the one, the vines attaching it to the wall and floor disconnected and retracted back into the pyramid. The voices inside the pyramid yelled out more alien words in unison. But this time, one of those voices sounded like Cameron's father. Behind the pyramid, a vast, night-black field of stars opened up where the basement wall had been. Then the trembling stopped and everything went silent.

"Dad?" Cameron said, taking a nervous step toward it. "Are you in there?"

A cold wave of purple light exploded outward, so bright Cameron closed his eyes and then pressed his

hands over them. The ground shook again, and he lost his balance and fell to his knees. The air around him pulsed with energy, vibrating his whole body until he thought it would make his bones rattle out of their sockets. He opened his mouth and let out a scream he couldn't hear.



Cameron woke up on the floor, a few loose strands of carpet tickling his nose. He pushed himself up to his knees, keeping his eyes half open against the stinging fluorescent light overhead. Then his eyes went wide, and he looked down at the carpet on the floor and the glowing light above.

The pyramid was gone. The vines were gone. The dirt on the floor was gone. The candles were gone. Cameron was alone in a clean, empty basement.

His eye landed on the folded up piece of paper his father dropped. It was sitting on the floor just a foot away from him. He picked it up with a shaking hand and was about to open it when a noise caught his attention.

From upstairs came the sound of voices and chair legs pushed across the kitchen floor. Cameron dashed up the stairs as images of him fighting his way past desiccated vagrants swirled through his mind. But he came to a wide-eyed stop when he got to the top of the stairs and sprang into the clean, well-lit kitchen.

He recognized two of the four people standing around the table.

“Hi Ms. Nora,” he said to the woman standing closest to him. She looked older than Cameron remembered. But when she smiled at him, Cameron knew she was definitely still the same person who babysat him and Karl when they were little.

Behind her was Mr. Charlie. Cameron used to be best friends with his son.

“What just happened?” Cameron asked.

“I think what happened is your daddy finally did it,” Ms. Nora said. Then a look of sadness crossed her face, and she put a hand on Cameron’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry about your father. We can never repay what he’s done for us.”

“But what did he actually do?” Cameron asked.

Before anyone could answer, shouting erupted from outside. Sirens wailed in the distance, getting louder as they got closer.

“Maybe you should go out and see for yourself,” Ms. Nora said.

The others just stared at him, waiting for him to do something. Cameron stepped past them and out of the kitchen. The hallway walls looked as clean and bright as the day they were first painted. Light streamed in through windows that had been boarded up. Everything looked like it was just waiting for a family to move in.

The front door was ajar and Cameron stepped through it to see Mr. Lester standing on the front walkway, staring in wonder at what had become of the surrounding neighborhood. The air was thick with panic and confusion and decay. Dogs ran free, dragging their leashes behind them while mottled-skin wretches that used to be their owners lurched down the sidewalk or screamed to the sky, demanding to know what had happened.

The new coffee shop a few doors down was a dirty, vine-covered ruin now. A pale, ragged woman who might have once been the person who owned the shop

stumbled out, her cloudy eyes darting around in search of something.

“How did this happen?” she shouted as brown vines snaked from her hair and from under her clothes.

The e-bikes were scattered across the streets in rusted scraps. The neighborhood garden was a wasteland of withered plants and strewn trash. It was just a shame.

But Cameron’s old home stood new and restored. The graffiti and trash and vines were everywhere except at 6272 Hill Street.

In the grass near the front steps, a young woman woke up and blinked at the new world around her.

“Did it finally happen?” she asked.

“It did indeed,” Mr. Lester said, staring up in awe at the house. “The old man actually pulled it off.”

“So what happens now?” Cameron asked.

“I think that part’s up to you,” Lester said and pointed at the folded paper in Cameron’s hand. “That note there should get you started.”

Cameron had forgotten he was still holding it. He unfolded it to find a note in his father’s handwriting.

“Thank you for coming back,” it read. “The new people will all want to leave now and that will bring the prices back down. The people who are actually from the neighborhood will be able to afford it again. Below is the address of the storage unit where all the other furniture is. Nora should still have the key to it. The bank account has some money in it. I added your name to it. Use it to help them rebuild. The next part can’t happen without you now. I know you’ll make me proud.”

Below the note was an address and a bank account number.

“So what now?” Lester asked.

Cameron gazed at the widening chaos and disorder raging around them. It was a neighborhood gentrified no more. His father was right. They probably wouldn’t want to stick around now. They’d spend years telling their friends at the country clubs and private schools about how they thought they could restore this rundown old neighborhood but how it blew up in their faces. Then he looked up at his own house. Restored. But what if it was just the first one to be restored?

He turned back to Lester.

“Now, I think we have a lot of work to do,” he said.



When not writing fiction, **Bernard McGhee** works on the editing desk of a busy newsroom, which provides a constant source of inspiration for stories of unusual mayhem. His work has appeared in “*Cosmic Horror Monthly*,” the anthology “*Nightmare Sky: Stories of Astronomical Horror*,” and in the anthology “*Creepy Campfire Stories (for Grownups)*.” He was raised in the New Orleans area but has lived all around the country. He currently lives in the Atlanta area with his wife and son. You can follow him on Twitter at [@BMcGhee13](#).



Moonflower

by Sara Omer

Death unveils ivory keys, gleaming fangs
curtained behind stained lips,
wine and something thicker sipped
slow from cut-crystal glasses,
evening primroses stretching through
cracks in the cobbles, blooming at nightfall.
Quivering vibrato and spiraling soprano,
lush velvet, gauzy chiffon,
heartwood, cardinal, bloodwood, mahogany—
finer by miles than her cheap clapboard coffin.
Death seduces her, florid and frail,
gilt-edged pages of esoterica
a weary bibliothecary shields
from fingers of daylight.
River delta veins on bird wrists, *pulsing* with—

Guilt she carries for drinking too much,
leaving little scraps of memories
for the family who mourned
until their grief dried,
who catch glimpses of a ghost
on crowded thoroughfares
wearing their daughter's face,
but fuller cheeks *flushed* with life,

lustrous with something *redder*.
They watched the undertaker
pound nails into her coffin lid,
lower empty body into loamy earth,
cover with dirt.
Book thumped shut, air of finality.

Scarlet caked under cracked nails,
and now petrichor and mossy soil.
Ravenous mouth gnashing, craving *blood*.
Moonflower ripping apart a casket roof,
clawing up through corpse-fed ground
to drink the harvest moon's
glow in a cemetery garden.
Trading her burial shroud for spattered satin,
viscera in the alley behind the butcher's.
She dances through
midnight's shadowed skirts,
chasing music of hammering hearts,
seeking out gilded places
and powdered skin to sink her teeth into.



Sara Omer is an American SWANA writer whose work has appeared in *The Deeps*, *MYRIAD*, and elsewhere. She's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and is the Associate Fiction Editor for *Orion's Belt* and a first reader for *Uncharted Magazine*. She lives outside of Atlanta with an old cat.

The City and the Styrofoam Sea

by Mar Vincent

Yand poled her way across the Styrofoam Sea.

Buoyant beads crowded the water's surface, multiplying in the wake of her raft. The raft's sleek shape reduced the aggressive speed of their replication, but it was impossible to completely negate. Every step and breath this close to the city risked metastatic consequences, so no one ventured from the Bunker but her.

Not like she had a choice anymore.

A sky yellow as battery acid cast palpable light on the gently waving sea. Hard to say where toxic shore ended and polluted water began.

Yand relied on her pole and her patience to guide her. She relied on the non-permeable membrane of her bodysuit to repel the dangers of sea and air, spore and particulate. Ironic that the suit, a product of civilization, protected her from the very city that had caused all this ruin. Tumorous towers and columnar smoke

stacks loomed in her peripheral vision like the exposed respiratory system of a poisoned beast.

Fishing had been poor on their river for some time, but she hadn't come here to try to fish. Wouldn't imagine it. With careful, deliberate movement, she swept her pole across the froth of foam beads to reveal a disintegrating fish, stiff and staring, a film of slime and gauzy plastic merged to cocoon its remains. Water billowed the translucent plastic like a parachute, revealing where it spilled from blown-open gills.

A dismayed groan echoed in her mask. As she'd suspected, the deformities they'd seen further upriver had their source here, in the concentrated runoff of the city. The Bunker's location upriver and upwind wouldn't protect them much longer.

Yand believed there must be a way to stop the creep of the cancerous city. Whatever had brought it to insensate life, radiation or extraterrestrial infection or something else, had to be neutralized.

If the Bunker's residents knew how to do that, they would have by now.

If any of the others believed it possible, they'd be with her, seeking answers.

Movement caught her eye; an undulation that parted the floating beads, revealing murky water for a brief moment. Beads dissolved in its wake, in opposition to the normal reaction of multiplying when agitated.

She shifted forward onto one knee and poled, slow and steady, in that direction.

As she approached, foam beads refilled the gap, covering the place where something had submerged. Yand slowed to a stop, eased her weight to the front of her raft, and swept beads aside with her pole.

Gray-green eyes, set in a human face, opened just below the surface. Yand cried out in surprise. Bubbles escaped from those underwater lips, pelleting free, dissolving the froth of beads as they met the air.

With effort, Yand tamped down the race of her heart and eased back to balance her raft.

The figure rose, buoyed horizontal, until face and upper body broke the surface.

Yand clutched her pole and watched lips part to take one measured breath after another. A girl—a young woman, perhaps near her own age.

The Styrofoam Sea made a halo around the green-eyed girl, repelled by her presence. The sight made her hesitate, but only for a moment.

Yand slid her pole past the front of the raft, toward the girl.

The girl took hold of it. Where the edges of her hand touched wood, the pole bloomed with a powdery grayish green.



The city had started it all.

She was hardly old enough to recall the world a different way. Blue sky had been commonplace then, rather than the rarity it was now. If there weren't others in the Bunker old enough to confirm this memory, she'd almost believe it a fancy of her own imagination.

A time before black plumes spewed relentlessly into the sky, and with them the metastatic material—no longer organic or synthetic but a messy mix of the two—which infected the landscape in all directions, devouring what existed, natural and man-made, and repurposing everything into new and illogical growths.

Fungal lampposts. Fields of waving copper-wire weeds. Once-suburban neighborhoods gnawed down to slumping cave mouths in a shingle-shale wasteland.

It was always spreading further. Yand studied the city, imagining ways to return it to the inert, inorganic landscape it should be. If an entire city could be brought to seething, destructive life, the opposite must be true as well.

She should be able to kill it.



The girl from beneath the waves appeared human, despite the impossibility of the fact and the tinge of green in her skin. Yand helped her hold on to the raft. Pulling her aboard would disturb the sea too much; better to pole to the shallows and let her wade out. And yet the Styrofoam Sea continued to give the girl a wide berth.

The same powdery growth that discolored her pole outlined the place where the girl clung to the raft.

If not for her bodysuit, Yand would be wary to touch the girl. At shore, she offered her shoulder and the girl pulled herself up on it, clumsy as a newborn animal. Her free hand caught for purchase, then closed on the sensitive flesh alongside Yand's breast, gripping like a handhold. Yand winced but bore the discomfort.

A dozen yards from the bank, the earth was relatively clear. She lowered the girl to sit there, then retrieved her shelter from the raft.

The girl blinked in the yellow light, her eyes fixed on the distant city as Yand set up the shelter. Yand cast furtive glances at her, expecting to glimpse fiberglass unfurling through tears in soft flesh, rubberized calluses on elbows or knees, twists of wire in pale,

brittle hair. Anything to suggest the girl was as toxic as the sea she'd come out of.

When the clear membrane of the shelter pressurized and the air monitor gave an all-clear, Yand opened a hand to invite the girl in.

The space was small enough that, though they sat at opposite ends, their feet almost touched in the middle. Yand watched the air monitor, anticipating an alert at the girl's presence. It didn't budge from the safe zone.

"Who are you? What are you?" Yand asked, unsure of the right question.

"Lichen," she said.

Yand was equally unsure which question she'd answered.

She considered the powdery gray-green furling out around the girl's bare feet. A thin crust along the shelter's floor stopped just short of her boots.

She'd heard rumor of lifeforms that survived in this poisoned landscape. Seemingly simple things becoming symbiotic clusters, to resist the infection. Through unified effort they protected themselves from the city's carcinogens.

Yand hugged arms around her knees. It was exactly what she'd hoped to find: some way to counteract the city's spread. To stop it once and for all.

She hadn't expected it to appear in the form of a person. A girl with green-washed skin and gray-green eyes.

How many organisms had come together to create her? How was it even possible?

The air monitor hadn't budged. Safe. Whatever the girl was, she was safe.

Yand reached up, hesitated, then removed the mask of her suit. The air within the shelter was warm, scented with chlorophyll or something like it. Petrichor? She couldn't be sure; it was so long since she'd smelled either.

Yand pulled off a glove, held a hand out toward the girl. Lichen mirrored the gesture, pressed her fingertips to Yand's. Solid flesh resisted her, yielding as it should. No more, no less.

Powdery gray-green growth passed from the girl's fingertips to her own, moving across her skin with a rapidity Yand couldn't follow. Hairs prickled down her arm and up the back of her neck. Her palm tingled at the proliferation of life across it.

"Lichen? Is that really your name?"

"It's what you'd call me in any other form," the girl said.

"Then why do you have this form?"

"Even the organisms that compose me can recall the shapes of what came before."

"Before the city?"

Lichen nodded. As much as humans were a part of that poisoned, industrial landscape, they'd been a part of the natural world, too. They could be, still, even if the definition of natural was no longer what it used to be.

"I'm trying to find a way to stop the city's infection. To protect my home."

Lichen's expression went thoughtful.

"And you? Why are you out here, in the water? Alone?"

"Not alone," she said, and smiled. "Not like you are." Her eyes ticked to the distant cityscape as their hands remained pressed together. Dark cement shapes, like

bent and twisted fingers, reached in all directions, heedless of sun or sky or gravity, whichever had been the initial purpose for their glass and concrete facades to grow so straight and tall.

Yand drew a breath that trembled with hope. “Do you know the way to its heart? To stop it?”

Lichen’s eyes returned to her. Gray-green. Deeper and vaster than the Styrofoam Sea. Her fingers slipped into the gaps between Yand’s, straight for a moment then curling down to squeeze reassurance into her, palm to palm. “I can’t tell you the way. But if that’s where you want to go, I’ll take you.”



Yand had supplies to last a few days—more than enough to reach the city and return home. With Lichen to help, she could get closer than she’d ever expected on her own.

Lichen had no fear of the veils of pollution they passed through, or the desert of warped asphalt and vitrified linoleum and rubberized turf that opened up before them. She knew her immunity to the landscape as surely as Yand knew her own vulnerability.

The irregular mix of textures underfoot made the smooth, rolling expanse deceptively difficult to traverse. It must have been the churned, bald earth of a construction site before the city converted it into this strange, ever-widening landscape.

Yand had investigated the edges of the desert to gather samples, to prod at its strange, cactus-like growths of chain link and corrugated metal, but she’d never gone very far. Every step forward was untrammelled territory.

She took reassurance in Lichen’s sure stride. Her always-forward eyes.

Even here, Lichen's passage quelled the ever-present metastatic reactions. Overgrowing surfaces fell back, inert, where she passed. The air appeared clearer than Yand was accustomed to, but that could be a matter of shifting winds.

Lichen paused before something on the glossy ground and Yand joined her. It looked like an air-filled bladder; some organ pried free of a living creature, quivering as veins pulsed across the membranous exterior.

Lichen moved to reach out, but Yand stopped her. It must have been part of a living animal. Infected, infested, eaten up, and swallowed into the landscape. The darkened ground around it was all that remained. A corpse mark burned into blistered laminate.

"It's not safe," she said, and drew Lichen on. Away, further down their path.

"I don't think it can hurt me," Lichen said.

"I don't want to find out."

Lichen blinked. She didn't object, though she seemed confused by Yand's concern. "What I think is what tells me to act. I wouldn't think of touching something if it was dangerous."

Yand realized the tightness of her grip and loosened it. "Maybe. But I wouldn't want you to be wrong."

"I'm not," she said, simply.

How do you know that, Yand wondered but didn't dare ask. It didn't seem like the sort of question that had an answer. At least, not one Lichen could express in words.

They set up shelter when night fell. Though it kept the air safe, it did little to provide warmth, so they slept with their backs pressed together.



The towers seemed no closer after days of walking. Yand almost believed that the space between them and the city grew as they walked across it. Their footsteps sent forth vibrations that caused subterranean expanses to accordion out before them, a defense mechanism to delay or confound their arrival.

If the city possessed the intellect of even the simplest organism, perhaps it realized what Lichen was, and sought to escape from her.

They wended their way through a forest of dendritic columns, an amalgamation of plywood and metal, concrete and tubing. These imitation trees obscured the sky, threatening to drop parts of their unnatural biology on her head.

Even the wasteland was bearable compared to this claustrophobic labyrinth. Yand set her eyes forward and steeled her thoughts against the desire to go back.

If she became injured or her suit damaged, she was dead. The pollution would take hold and make her a part of this place. Dissolve and disassemble her, like it had done to that once-living thing they'd found in the desert, and use her to sustain its destructive existence. The thought clenched her stomach into a tight, hard ball of dread.

Lichen continued on, led by instinct. Only glimpses of the skyscrapers through wood-printed pillars promised their goal still existed.

The proximity of the city, the burdened heart and wheezing lungs of industry, pressed into her skull like a thumb into soft clay. Imagined toxins flooded her mind. If her bodysuit wasn't perfectly secured, she'd already have them crawling across her skin, passing through her body with every exchange of breath.

A flick of movement in the corner of an eye caused her to turn, then turn again as it moved ahead of her gaze. Nothing there. The branching columns remained unmoving.

She caught sight of it again, down at her side. A deformation on the wrist of her suit.

Infection. Invasion.

She hadn't expected the suit to remain impervious forever, but had hoped—hoped—

She tried to call out, but her voice was a strangled sound, muffled to silence by her mask. Panicked tears pattered the inside of it as she watched Lichen's form dwindle to dimness in the sharp-shadowed forest.

Elbows pulled in against her sides and Yand sank to the ground, her knees striking with a puff of thick, fine dust that rose and glittered and multiplied itself in all directions.

Whether Lichen felt the vibrations of her fall, or simply stopped to look back, thin arms caught her, curled around her shoulder blades, held her firm. Her mask bumped askew when Lichen leaned her forehead against the side of it.

"I can't. I can't," Yand gasped, surprised by the fear-heavy weight of her voice.

She raised her wrist to show Lichen the problem but, through blurred eyes, the deformation wasn't visible.

Lichen spoke low, reassuring words, hands moving across her back as though she understood the why but not the how of such human behavior.

Lichen took her pack and assembled the shelter. She must have watched every time Yand did it, as she performed the steps precisely. Yand only half-noticed,

still struggling with the panic that moved through her in slowly receding waves.

They crawled into the shelter and huddled hip to hip, warmth mingling between their bodies. Yand watched the air monitor and the wrist of her suit. Both promised normalcy.

Lichen removed her rebreather and mask, then closed both hands over the seal of her glove. Yand waited for the deformation of the seal to become evident. The powdery gray-green of Lichen's touch spread across the material, revealing no flaw. She relaxed, assured that the deformity she'd seen had been in her mind.

"You've been trapped in this suit for days," Lichen said.

"As though I have any other choice," Yand said, but yielded when Lichen undid the seal down the suit's back. "I wish I understood how you're able to walk here unaffected."

"It's in my nature," Lichen said.

"Your nature." Yand gave a soft laugh. "That's what I truly don't understand."

"What is there to understand? You live as you are, and I live as I am."

"Exactly. How are we different when we're made of the same things? Or are we, even?" She considered the steady, silent creep of Lichen's powdery touch as it spread up her shoulder. "Whatever caused the city to become what it is, it must have affected you the same way. Or you're born out of a response to it, but ..."

"There, you see? So you do understand."

"But if you could just explain it to me."

Lichen's head moved side to side, an imitation of how Yand shook her head no. "I know what I am in a way beyond words. Some things can be felt but not spoken."

For the first time, Yand wondered how Lichen could speak at all. "Why do you have a human form? What reason do you have to move through the world as we do?"

"You just said it yourself. We're made of the same things," Lichen replied, and touched her far shoulder to urge her to lie down. To rest.

They stretched out side by side, Yand with her suit peeled down to her waist. She closed her eyes, matching Lichen's measured breathing with her own.

Perhaps that response suggested that there was, after all, a human underneath the green-skinned mystery beside her. If the city could twist organic and inorganic forms together, why should it be so strange for the organisms which had survived in this wasteland to develop similar abilities? Perhaps strangest of all, considered in that context, was the way Lichen referred to herself; she was Lichen first, any humanity subsumed somewhere beneath or within that symbiotic identity.

"When we return to the Bunker, after this," Yand murmured, her voice low in case Lichen was asleep.

"Yes?"

"Let me learn from you. What you are, what you can do. You will come back with me?"

"Yes. We will."

Chlorophyll, vegetal life, filled her nose and lulled her to sleep.

She dreamed that the thin crust of green covered her, then thickened, then reached upward in foliate fingers

and unfurling tendrils. More greenery than she'd seen in countless years anchored into her as though she were a stone. It spread in sympathy, or symbiosis, of her desire to see the world returned to order.

She opened her eyes in the light of morning and gazed up through the forest canopy, into the yellow sky.

She hadn't been able to see that much of it the day before.



Columnar trees fell away at the edge of the city's center. Multi-story buildings, tumbled under the weight of their own metastasis, spawned miniaturized versions of themselves like mushrooms on rotten logs. If she stood still long enough, she could watch them growing. Would they reach the height of the skyscrapers that had come before? Rebar threaded what remained of the streets in a network of metal roots that drew sustenance from dead buildings.

In the center of it all, a few towers still stood, swarming with overgrowth. Black clouds venting from their tops offered the surest sign of life.

They walked in that direction. What would happen when they got there?

Lichen's nature had reversed the city's effects so far, but how could she stop the furious, pumping heart of a thing so huge in comparison to her?

A toppled tower lay against one of those that stood, a diagonal bridge to the building's roof. They headed toward its base, through gray smog veils of increasing darkness. Particles glinted in the haze, making Yand think of jewels. Or of silicates, microscopic but razor-sharp, against the delicate tissues of human lungs.

Lichen walked through twisted steel and cable, plexiglass and pools of fuel-poisoned water. No one had come this deep into the heart of the city since it first took on a life of its own.

Lichen led the way across the crumbling building-bridge. What should have been a momentous event narrowed to the need to climb. Yand watched the other girl's back to keep from glancing at the increasingly distant ground below.

Rubble dropped away underfoot. Yand gasped in surprise and then she was falling, scrabbling, flailing at rough concrete and brick that fled every attempt of hands and feet to find purchase.

Lichen cried out. She was there, somewhere, trying to help.

As swiftly as it began, it stopped. Air slammed out of Yand's lungs as she came to a jarring halt. Yand fought her scattered mind back together to understand how she hung, suspended, against the sheer side of the building-bridge.

She turned her head carefully. Her feet dangled over the distant ruin of the city, no toehold within reach. Her body pressed against the sloping edge of the tower's side, but she saw nothing that could have snagged the front of her suit.

She felt it at the same time that she turned her head the other way and saw. A ragged, radiant pain in her armpit. A red metal beam wedged, jagged side first, through torn suit and into flesh.

Lichen appeared a few feet above, and with her, a cascade of dust and rubble.

Yand had never seen fear in the other girl's face, but perhaps this was what it looked like. A slight widening

of the eyes, a forced slowness to her actions as she descended to a closer outcrop, reached for Yand's free arm, steadied her, then pulled.

The metal beam provided leverage as she pushed upward, kicked for purchase, found just enough to get her upper body horizontal on a stable section. She breathed deep, and when the cold pain in her armpit spread, forced herself up.

They made their way, shaking and overcautious, back to the top of the bridge.

"You're hurt. The suit—"

"It's nothing," Yand said, and hated the shake of her voice. Blood streaked hot over her skin and poisoned air blew cold across it, drilling tremors down to her core.

It didn't matter. There was no going back now.

She clamped her arm to her side and tried not to see the fear on Lichen's face. She forced her feet to move and prayed that she was faster than the infection rooting in her bloodstream. "We're almost there. I can make it."

Lichen closed a hand tight over the wrist that hung loose at Yand's side. The delicate creep of her nature spread over the suit's exterior.

Something stirred, a thrumming sensation in the meat on both sides of Yand's injured armpit, waking and proliferating just beneath the surface of her. Yand directed her attention toward even breaths and steady footsteps.

At the end of the bridge, she helped lower Lichen to the rooftop with her good arm. Every flex of the damaged muscles seemed to feed the infection.

Yand descended after her, eyes fixed forward, refusing to glance at the black-bleeding wound.

The air darkened here, a thicker veil of pollution that cast them in graveyard light. Soot rose up where their feet passed, clouding around Yand but dissolving into a nimbus of clarity around Lichen.

Yand clutched her wounded arm closer as the thrumming sensation expanded, bursting the seams of her suit and the delicate structures of skin and muscle beneath.

Impossible to fight against the poisoned life that multiplied, swelled, and spread. But, really, why should she want to? The living city was humanity's legacy, a next evolutionary step for a toxic and degraded world. Just as the infection that coursed through her would be her own legacy. Her offspring.

Lichen was there, talking fast, but Yand couldn't hear the words, see her face. She saw only the boiling, blooming mass of flesh. Wherever her torn skin contacted the building's rooftop, it drew in cement and wire, shingle and grit. Inorganic materials merged with flesh. Her arm expanded into a bloated, ropy, grayish mass that grew faster the more it pulled in.

The city was as much a victim of its processes as she was. The cycle of non-life was inescapable.

Lichen worked the mask free from her face. She pressed one hand into the ruin of Yand's arm, but to no effect. The ferocity of the infection, or the nature of her body—something about it was different, unaffected by Lichen's ability. Yand couldn't feel her touch but, as Lichen pressed fingers harder into the flesh, it seethed up and around her hand. Seeking to trap and consume her as well.

With effort, Yand caught Lichen's wrist and pulled her free. Blood and slurried plaster smeared Lichen's

hand, burning through the protective structures that made her.

“I’m sorry,” Yand said, afraid for her friend. She wished that the other girl could escape, but it was too late.

Lichen closed her hand into a fist, leaned forward, and pressed her lips to Yand’s.

Yand’s bones burned with cleansing fire, skin hot with an incandescence that lit the inside of her. A new form of life, rife and eager. She welcomed it on her tongue, and every cell that comprised her responded likewise.

Pain faded to a distant part of awareness as Lichen’s presence, all of her, every organism that made her, filled Yand, mind and body.



Yand awoke to a sky yellow as battery acid. Veils of smog had fallen away, settling like a last snowfall over the city.

When she shifted to sit up, a crust of organic matter flaked away from her suit, her skin. It spread out from her, across the rooftop, over and into the building’s now-dead chimneys. The edges of the crust seemed to still be spreading as she surveyed the buildings nearby, the desert beyond. Further, beyond that, the Styrofoam Sea.

Lichen was not there beside her, but not gone, either. Yand turned her no longer injured arm this way and that, dislodging flakes of powder as she did. A faint green cast beneath the otherwise human flesh told her all she needed to know. The air smelled of greenery, vibrant life, growth and potential.

She was not alone; she felt Lichen's presence, the multiplicity of her, in blood and marrow and mind.

Tears welled and spilled over, first of sorrow, then of gratitude. She willed them down, deep inside, until she could return them to the Styrofoam Sea.



As a fine art professional, **Mar** has wielded katanas and handled Lady Gaga's shoes. As a veterinary assistant, she has cared for hairless cats, hedgehogs, and, one time, a coyote. As a writer, she can be found in *Fusion Fragment*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Apex's Robotic Ambitions* anthology, and more. Find her on various social media @MaroftheBooks.

Silt and Soot

by Gretchen Tessmer

hot oil spilled across the moon
filling pockmarked holes, dripping
earthward
like slime-slick earthworms
in a rain made of molasses
wet ashes
with too many dead things in it

and my flowers, poor darlings
drank it up

what else were they supposed to drink?

we'd come to think
this was the end of all things
and stayed inside for
most of the summer
playing checkers
making macramé
and washing dishes

over and over and over
to try and make things clean

one day
it all stopped
and hell-if-I-know-how
but I went out to my gardens
finding coal roses crying
next to panther lilies
and little black violets
cowering beneath
a sooty wheelbarrow
brimming with blackened weeds

the dear things thought it wasn't over

until I bent down
and rubbed the pad of my thumb across
those sad, sad petals
drying those black, black tears
removing silt and soot
with patient and delicate caresses
revealing pretty blushes

still blooming on velvet cheeks



Gretchen Tessmer lives in the deep woods of the U.S./Canadian borderlands. She's published short stories and poems in such venues as *Nature*, *Bourbon Penn*, *Strange Horizons*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and *F&SF* (as well as a previous appearance in *Apparition Lit*), with her poetry collecting several Pushcart, Rhysling and Dwarf Stars nominations along the way.

A Proper Vessel, A Perfect House

by Ash Huang

The ten villages gather to witness Maarik's ascension, all seven snaking roads to the central plinth pounded into mud and gravel. The downpours stopped last week, but the earth still absorbs months of rain, soft under hoof.

Each village brings their most beautiful horses, their silky geldings and spirited mares. Maarik wanders the camps and touches the many colored coats: bay and chestnut and gray, all soft with diligent brushing. Everyone stares and salutes her in the traditional three fingered way, an outdated formality reserved for solemn occasions.

She returns the gesture as she passes, though it makes her grit her teeth. She has seen it too many times in the past year, first at Zaahra's funeral, then Birimin's, and now at Mother's.



The animus wants a particular girl, a perfect girl. It has never found her, so it settles for decent girls. It will rattle inside her ill-fitting casing for years, before it wrenches all the pieces of her soul apart.

It has been with their family for generations. A legend claims the animus gave them mystical powers in times of ancient war. Another claims it brought good fortune, fat vases of gold coins amidst the worst drought of the century.

Yet another says there was no reason at all. The spirit just liked the shape of their great-great-great maternal grandmother and decided to try her on.

They are fortunate Mother held the spirit for five decades. Long enough for them to become a pillar of the community, for Mother to continue the family line and see her girls to adulthood.

Mother housed it well. She told her daughters all the necessary stories, all the necessary cautions a proper vessel heeds: *Don't burn your fingers*, when they cooked, for the animus does not like scars. *Don't appear too eager*, when other young villagers winked, for the animus prefers his houses demure.

Zaahra and Birimin were made to inherit, kind and pleasant girls who grew into kind and pleasant women. They tied their braids with crisp golden ribbons. They raced their horses adeptly, but always took second or third place so not to seem greedy.

Their virtue did not save them. The animus deflected off of Zaahra's very skin when she tried to receive it. She slumped to the ground as if struck by lightning, and never woke up again.

When Birimin was called to inherit, she sank into sadness and then into the bottle. The alcohol pressed

the spirit out of her, but it pressed hers out, too. She only held the animus for four moons before she had to give it back to Mother, and she faded away soon after.

Maarik was comfortable in her role as the feral little sister who would teach her elder sisters patience. Her hair is always in tangles, and she always wins first place, no matter who else is racing. She was not meant to be the spare.



Maarik stands before the family plinth and her mother's fresh grave. It is a neat pill of brown dirt between Grandmother and Maarik's sisters, and will flatten against the earth in time.

Looking at the graves is better than looking at the plinth, which Maarik and her horse will be chained to by two padded cuffs. They are similar to the cuffs the villagers use to hobble uncooperative horses, but bright red, only meant to be used once. They look all the more menacing with their crisp gold stitching. The chain they link to is carefully perpendicular to the edge of the crowd, underneath a new saddle.

It is a racing saddle, sleek and smelling of fresh-pressed oils, which shimmer against the leather like sweat under sunshine. A lupine creature is embossed on the seat. It exhales a cloud with curling edges. Small embroidered figures flee from its breath.

Beside the saddle is a black urn. The void-like glaze is webbed with hundreds of hairline cracks. When Mother first started dying, she pulled it down from its shelf in the kitchen, handing it to Maarik before going to bed for the last time. Mother always liked the reminder of Zaahra and Birimin's devotion, and the family's

responsibility. She often touched it fondly while she stirred the stew.

Maarik always feared the urn, even before she knew what it was for. It cast a constant pall of death over the house. Then she saw the animus' mist swirl out of Zaahra's mouth and curl up inside of it, waiting to inhabit its next host.

Today it seems to breathe, an occasional line of light pulsing where the lid meets the pot.

A friend, Yibaa, approaches the plinth. Yibaa is the only other girl Maarik's age in the village. As they grow older, she loses patience for Maarik's outbursts and half-feral pets. Pretending at war with sharp sticks begins to feel more like a tiresome duel. Yibaa would prefer to rub berries into her cheeks and build wells, as is appropriate for a girl almost twenty.

The crowd parts and Yibaa faces Maarik's horse, Moon. Moon's sour temperament is legend throughout the ten villages. She is a mean and scabby little dun, but she is brave, unafraid of the wolves that nip at the flocks. She often chases them off before the dogs can stir.

Maarik saddles Moon, relieved to have something to do. She swings into the seat and Moon dances slightly to the right, nickering and eyeing the crowd.

The padded cuff is an angry red mouth in Yibaa's hands, set to engulf Maarik's wrist. Yibaa will buckle it tight enough to crease flesh.

Mother instructed Maarik on how to bear the animus, with a smooth, motionless grace. She should not need the cuff.

But more stalwart girls than Maarik have run from the animus. The chain is scar tissue for every fleeing

ancestor over the centuries, every self-preserving girl who fled from the light within the urn.

Yibaa approaches, clutching the cuff to her chest.

Moon pins back her ears. The mare has bitten nearly everyone once or twice, but Yibaa stops short. She was only eight when Moon first clamped wide teeth around her arm, bruising her for weeks. Yibaa wishes another girl could cuff Maarik, but she is the only one of age, and the ten villages are watching. She fears the shame worse than Moon.

While Yibaa hesitates, Maarik shivers. Her pulse floods her ears until she hears nothing else.

Zaahra would likely have focused on the pleasant temperature of the day, the smiling faces of her sisters, the warm presence of their ancestors. She always focused on such things in times of distress: when her seedlings didn't sprout, when her beloved married a taller girl, or when she broke her ankle running from a wild boar. Zaahra was the lucky one, she never witnessed their family's failure. Maarik runs furious into the blackberry thickets if she so much as burns her bread. She lacks Zaahra's grace. When the spirit climbs into her soul, she will surely shatter. All of these eyes will watch the animus chew her to pieces, and she'll forever be the girl who was not enough.

Her palms sweat, dampening the reins. Moon breathes beneath her, warm against her inner calves, oblivious and impatient. The villagers wear their best tunics and newest hats, embroidery still stark and clean. Someone is cooking nearby for the celebration that will follow. The smell of garlic and caramelizing sugar would normally entice Maarik, but her stomach turns at the thought of food.

The black urn rattles, threatening to topple like a boiling pot. Its thin ceramic and ancient magic only hold the animus for half a day, and time is running short. The reins slide through Maarik's fingers, now slippery. She tries to get a better grip on them, pushes her heels down so hard her leg muscles ache, focuses on the villagers' cheerful expressions. She wonders what Mother would say and looks for signs from beyond the pale, a reassurance that this is happening as it should.

No signs appear. The clouds move unhurried, Maarik's hands keep shaking. The glow from the urn brightens, hungry to chill the spark inside of her.

Yibaa approaches with the cuff, drums up her courage—just as Maarik loses hers.

“Run,” Maarik tells Moon.

Moon is happy to oblige, and the crowd parts before she can clamp her teeth on anyone. She kicks out her back legs. Maarik lurches forward, yelping, her face slamming hard into Moon's neck. Her nose throbs as she twines cold fingers into Moon's mane. A jolt runs up Maarik's spine as Moon careens into a gallop. On another day, the wind would thrill Maarik, taking her breath away as she sped across the plains. Today it is sharp, even for her, and she squints through tears. Her breath catches so she rides gasping, with her mouth open, the hollows of her cheeks dry.

People call her name. It rolls across the plains, too slow to draw her back.

Maarik's legs burn. The saddle is stiff, ceremonial, not molded to her and Moon. She is lifted enough from the seat to see its metallic threads twinkle menacingly, flashing as her flying coat tails block the light.

Maarik expects to hear the thunder of pursuit. Instead, she hears a noise resembling the clap of a leather strap. She pulls Moon up and turns to look, pulse racing.

She thinks it's dry lightning before it grows into a black cloud, stuttering out of the urn. A miasma that seems to expand and retreat, as if confused by linear time. Its edges glow acid green and begin to solidify. Two legs descend from the three-story mass, and then two more, and suddenly the spirit has a front and a back. Its great wolfish head forms last. It turns two green eyes towards Maarik.

In its wake the crowd scatters and shrieks, most rushing to their own horses.

Moon doesn't wait for Maarik to come to her senses. The little mare rears, nearly unseating Maarik. She bolts the rest of the road, past the central village, into the mountains.



First the horses grow lanky and skeletal, and then the fields wither. None of the crop comes to head with its typical glimmering grain. The smart villagers move away, and their mounts plump up instantly, as if re-inflated.

The stubborn clans learn to grow potatoes and sunchokes, The sunflowers rise slowly, with black petals and a rasping dryness. Their horses lounge in fields and stables, and lie around like fur coats crumpled atop piles of legs.

Word spreads through all ten villages that Maarik fled the altar, so the villagers lock their doors when they see her. They perch in their front windows to glare at her, eager to witness her humiliation, but fearful she is cursed.

Since she will not apologize or beg, they click their teeth and retreat back into the dark of their homes.

Maarik is reduced to digging black root vegetables from gardens, stealing obsidian-like eggs from chicken coops, making murky stews and ominous roasts over desolate campfires.

Each night, Maarik closes her eyes and swears she will return to her ancestors' graves, chain herself to the plinth and let the animus climb inside her. Every day she does not, the lands grow more monochrome.

Some days she feels going back is the only way to restore what fades. Others, it seems pointless to return, already too late. She cannot imagine that it will get worse.

But she wakes up each morning, and things are worse. There is not a dot of green in the entire ten villages. The birds cease to sing, even the wolf packs and deer move on to more fertile ground.

And then it has been two years, she has ridden far enough that no one recognizes her.

Moon resists the wasting, admirably. She kicks the air to drive it off, chomps the dark grass furiously though it contains little to fatten her body. When she finally withers away, no longer strong enough to huff an angry breath, Maarik is leagues and leagues from the crossroads, and the plinth seems like a distant nightmare.

Maarik buries Moon. Without the spirited mare, there is no real evidence that she was ever supposed to house the animus at all.



Maarik supposes she might go back on foot, and then she meets a man.

He entertains himself by growing all sorts of dark flowers in the inhospitable dirt. He does not find them ugly. He is not distraught that the very earth of his home turns sweet sprouts into soot-black stubble.

He is broad, handsome, and almost always smiling. Maarik decides she will stay until they tire of each other, and then she will go back home.

Instead, they have one child, then two, then three. A girl and two boys, who are ever covered in mud and scrapes. Maarik cannot bring herself to caution demureness, or keep them from thorns and puppy teeth. She is at a loss on how to properly instruct them without stern warnings, but they seem to grow regardless.

The house is always filled with laughter. It expands over the years, little rooms shooting off a central hearth in lovely, crooked ways. The family does not ask questions about where Maarik comes from. The husband learned quickly that the past made Maarik go silent, sent her out into the plains for hours. Thankfully for Maarik, there is little time to think of the plinth when there are seams to fix, soups to boil.

On Maarik's sixty-third birthday, it starts to rain. It pours and pours, and the clan takes turns huddling around each others' hearths, gossiping and sewing. It has been nearly fifty years since it has rained like this, they say. Perhaps the world will go green again after it all lets up.

Maarik knows it will not. She thinks of the plinth, of the angry red cuff. She thinks of her mother and sisters, of their graves.

She thinks of Moon's black headstone at the foot of a great pine tree, which she has never drummed up the courage to visit.



Generations protest as Maarik packs her bags. Babies tug at her pant legs, her husband gives her pleading looks.

She chooses an old gelding from the paddock, a sweet natured roan with long knobby legs, slow like the rest of the blighted horses. She kisses her husband, who insists that he'll go with her.

This is the only idea the family hates more than Maarik leaving at all.

While they argue about who will accompany their matriarch, Maarik gets on the gelding, and he changes before their very eyes. He becomes a sleek young hellion, snorting and stamping the earth. Maarik digs in her heels and the gelding punches away from the village before anyone else can prepare a saddle.

The family call to her. Their pleas roll across the plains, not enough to draw her back.



The relentless pace quakes her bones, turns her muscles useless. She remembers that she used to ride any chance she got before her escape, and that grief saturates worse than the rain. Speeding through the plains, she remembers how green the hills used to go in the winters, how the air felt electric with spring.

The rain stops as she arrives. The plinth is larger than she remembers, worn smooth by decades of wind.

All at once, her body gives out. Her elderly, comfortable exterior is now a poor house to her spirit,

which remains as young and feral as when she fled. She barely swings her leg over the saddle before folding to the ground. The gelding seems exorcised of his foaming enthusiasm and bends down to lip the black grass.

Maarik gathers the fibrous grass into fists. The little steps to continuing on suddenly seem insurmountable. She must first catch her breath, and then she must somehow stand, and then she must secure the horse.

Footsteps rustle behind her.

Maarik turns and a man with acid green eyes smiles at her. He is beautiful in a haughty and frightening way, haloed in a cold light that doesn't match the environment around him. He wears a black velvet cloak with golden ribbons that twitch in the wind.

Smoke trails out his nostrils.

"You've finally come," he says.

"I'm ready for you," Maarik says.

He laughs. "What would I want with your used up shell? It's already been lived in, there's nowhere to press a hair into. Besides, it is too late for you to fulfill the bargain. I have been free long enough. I never need rely on another girl again."

"Surely there is something I can offer. Surely you can turn the land green again."

"It makes me cringe that the best your ancestors could come up with is trapping me inside their young girls. Me, an infinite spirit, sharing a mortal coil with a child. Stuffed in like too many wads of cotton until it was on to the next one. I was your family's constant companion, a little curl of smoke, but now I am free, a thing all of my own. It's all thanks to you."

Maarik staggers to her feet.

“What was I supposed to do?” she asks. “You would have eaten me up, burned me from the inside out.”

“I am only a deity. It is not my place to give your ancestors the answers you couldn’t find.”

Maarik grabs the gelding’s reins, though she is afraid she will not be able to climb into the saddle.

“Where are you going?” the wolf asks.

“Home.”

“Have you really changed your mind? Do you really want me to claim you, claim your kin? Shall I follow? Perhaps you have a daughter or a niece to tempt me.”

Maarik’s mother would have fought the animus, trapped it inside. She would have let the green mist shatter her bones and excise her spirit, even if just for a few years of plenty.

Maarik spent her life keeping to herself, hiding in the crooked house with her family. She tended scraped knees, read books, learned folk songs, stoked thousands of fires. She didn’t rise up as some leader, never learned good manners or how to please the other villagers.

Maarik lifts herself into the saddle and does what she knows best. She digs in her heels and she runs. The wind buffets her face and the silver hairs that have come loose whip her cheeks.

Only the shame burns worse.

Her neck is stiff and she can only catch glances of the animus behind her. She waits for the green miasma, for the glowing eyes, but it remains a man. It watches her ride away.



Maarik's ride back to her family lights every joint on fire. By the time the gelding stumbles onto the compound, Maarik is wheezing and feverish.

Her family lowers her from the saddle with panicked cries, and they take her into the lovely crooked house. They sob when the healer tells them Maarik has pushed her body to the limits, that she may not recover. They ask Maarik why she left, where she went, and why she couldn't have just stayed at home.

Maarik hovers between this world and the next. She refuses to tell them. If she stays silent, her wolf can never find them.



Maarik's oldest daughter, Zaahra, leaves the house to catch her breath. Just for a moment, to clear her head.

Zaahra loves her mother fiercely, but over the years there have been signs. Sometimes she reaches for Maarik's hand to find the fingers curled stiff, as if permanently holding reins. On late fireside nights, her mother's face glints, irises neon-rimmed.

Zaahra won't go far, just to a neighboring hill, to sit in the shade of an ancient tree.

As she swishes up the slope, she sees a man. Though he is dressed in black like everything else, he looks wrong in the shade of the forest: too pale, too sharp.

She blinks and he is gone.

"Hello?" she calls out, her heart rattling a quick beat.

No one replies. Nothing moves.

She gets the strange impression she will never see him again. It settles soft into her belly, but she looks for him, anyway.

Zaahra peers behind the trunk of the great tree, thumbing the rough bark. No one is there. She checks behind the mound of basalt, a monument with the carving of a rearing pony.

There, behind the headstone, a green blade of grass emerges from a blanket of black pine needles.



Ash Huang's fiction appears in *Orion's Belt* and *Alien Magazine*. In 2022, she won the Diverse Worlds Grant from the Speculative Literature Foundation for her novel-in-progress. She is an alum of the Roots. Wounds. Words. Workshop, the Tin House Workshop, and the Periplus Fellowship. You can find her knitting, making jewelry, exploring San Francisco on foot, or online at ashsmash.com.

Let There Be Blight

by A.J. Van Belle

When we think of blight, we think of the horrifying, impersonal, creeping stuff of decay. We think of fields of dead crops, forests of dead trees, and human hearts incapable of compassion. Blight is insistent, a mindless force of badassery that's hard to counter because it has no face and no consciousness. It can lurk in invisibility and grow from next to nothing into a rot that covers everything. While the literal definition of blight is a fungus that causes disease and decay in a living organism, we often think of any fungus as a blight, even those that only feed on already-dead matter. More poetically, a blight is anything that damages, destroys, or spoils. The way humans persist in knowingly fucking up the only planet we have, for the sake of a few oil dollars, is one example of an abstract blight. In fiction, blight is a convenient enemy, frighteningly impersonal and pervasive.

As a scientist who has a PhD in biology, with a more-fun-than-it-sounds specialization in the ecology of terrestrial decomposer fungi, I'm intimately familiar with furry white and green molds, slimy yellow and pink yeasts, and the quirks of their molecular genetics.

During my doctoral studies, I attended a department meeting that involved tossing a plush toy shaped like a yeast cell from one person to the next. Each PhD student who caught the yeast cell had to describe their research in a single sentence, in the style of a movie's logline. When it was my turn to grasp the fuzzy fabric fungus, I said, "Fungi are the masters of the global carbon cycle."

Why would we think of mushrooms, mycelia, and molds as the mastermind behind the movement of carbon—the basis of all living things—between Earth and sky? And what does that have to do with blight as a concept that haunts the balance between life and death?

The answer lies in a feat fungi can only perform by working together in a community, never when acting as a lone mushroom or mold. I came to the PhD program not cleaving to any particular organism. Some people are enamored of the biology of butterflies or the ecology of estuaries; I wanted only to explore a big-picture question that required a marriage of evolutionary genetics with ecology. I found it in the study of decomposer fungi communities.

These communities break down dead plant matter. They're the reason the land isn't stacked high with millennia's worth of fallen tree trunks. They evolved the ability to break down and derive sustenance from plant stuff on the heels of the advent of large, woody land plants. That's also why the Earth's fossil fuel stores cannot be expected to regenerate, even on the unimaginable timescales required to form coal, oil, and natural gas: they formed at a time when the decomposer fungi equipped to demolish newly evolved land plants' most recalcitrant tissues did not yet exist. Fungi release some of the carbon in plant tissues to the atmosphere, and they store some of it in the soil, in their own tissues. Unlike humanity's massive, rapid,

short-term release of carbon from fossil fuels into the atmosphere, fungi regulate carbon's flow between the biosphere and atmosphere in a balanced way and at a sustainable pace. Researchers are even looking into ways to harness fungal and bacterial activity to store more carbon in soils to offset humanity's excess release of carbon.

So, when we say, "Ew, gross!" to the white filaments that devour leftover food, we're repulsed by the same stuff that's responsible for the fact the Earth isn't covered with mountains of undecomposed plant matter from the last 200 million years. When we grit our teeth in disgust at the green fuzz eating into an orange that's past its prime, we're rejecting the source of penicillin. The creeping blight that overtakes strawberries left too long before eating, and the thing that kills the potatoes in your garden, are part of the same primal force that controls the global carbon cycle. Without it, the world as we know it would not exist. This knowledge sheds new light on the role of blight in fiction: it suggests upbeat story resolutions that arise from unlikely shadows, and fatal consequences when would-be heroes vanquish the wrong foe. Story is a place where we have space to explore things that are not as they seem, accept contradictory truths that coexist in layers, and tear down facile assumptions.



Before I started research on microbes, I was not prepared for the degree of caution required for culturing fungi. First, to perform inoculations (additions of fungal cells to sugar-rich medium in a Petri dish to grow colonies of selected species), it was necessary to work in a cabinet designed to prevent invisible microorganisms from entering the workspace on air

currents. All tools used in the procedure were sterilized in an autoclave via a 90-minute steam-and-pressure process and only removed from their sterile wrappings inside the pre-sterilized cabinet. All surfaces inside the cabinet, and the researcher's gloved hands, had to be thoroughly doused with enough 90% ethanol solution to kill anything it touched. All these precautions aren't foolproof; once I became well-practiced in sterile culturing techniques, I had "only" about a one-percent contamination rate. That is, in one percent of the plates I inoculated, even with the greatest of precautions, an unintended species of fungus joined the one I'd planned to grow.

Often, the intruder was an insistent, gray-green mold that seemed ever-present in the lab's air. However, another, more interesting interloper took over once I introduced it as part of a community of terrestrial decomposers—fungi that gain their nutrients by breaking down the dead leaves, stems, and wood that fall on the forest floor. *Beauveria bassiana* is a decomposer of plant matter **and** a parasite that causes white muscardine disease in arthropods. It took over everything, spreading powdery white splotches in every plate it came near, requiring three times the caution any other species did. Without extraordinary measures, *Beauveria bassiana* would, like The Blob, take over the world—or at least overrun my workspace.

Acting alone, as a single organism, *Beauveria bassiana* is a disease. But environmental decomposer fungi communities perform their ecosystem function in concert, working together in the layer of dead plant matter at the forest floor. In ecology, we call functions that arise collectively, from a system in which all of a range of organisms play necessary roles in performing the function, *emergent properties*. Sure, some

decomposition is performed by each of these organisms on its own. But decomposition as a critical ecosystem function—ensuring that nutrients are returned to the soil, that some carbon is stored and some is returned to the atmosphere, and that the soil is ready to give rise to the next, highly biodiverse, phase of the life cycle—cannot be performed by any one organism alone. A dozen or more species of decomposer fungi are active at any given time, and the genomes of hundreds of species are present in a gram of soil. In contrast, as we saw in the case of *Beauveria bassiana*, diseases are often caused by a single species. *Botrytis cinerea* is a gray rot that destroys horticultural crops such as grapes and strawberries. *Fusarium graminearum* causes creeping necrosis on corn, rice, wheat, and barley. And yet pathogenicity is not the only means by which certain sometimes-pathogenic species survive. Many of them, *Beauveria bassiana* and numerous species of *Fusarium* and *Botrytis* included, are also found as members of those communities whose collective emergent property is the decomposition of dead plant matter. We call such properties ecosystem services: together, these collections of fungal species perform a service vital to the ecosystem.



Much as *Beauveria bassiana* is a blight on bees and grasshoppers yet a vital member of the soil decomposer community, the extreme schemes humans get up to are forces of both great good and great harm.

Studying the microbial masters of the carbon cycle made me a natural choice to teach courses on climate change. So, to earn my PhD student stipend, I taught academic writing courses focused on the theme of climate change, and after graduation I taught courses on the feedback cycles between anthropogenic climate

change and human health. It was heartbreaking to have to tell roomful after roomful of hopeful 18-year-olds that we know everything we need to know to avert excessive warming, we have the means to do it, and it could be done without individual sacrifice or significant loss of gross domestic product. We're held back by a handful of very rich people who don't want to become even a little less rich, people who're unconcerned because they'll be dead by the time the repercussions come back to bite the asses of the world's wealthiest countries. The decision makers in these wealthy nations don't care that the consequences are even now dogging the heels of developing nations—always to the detriment of their most marginalized citizens, those who're already the most vulnerable. After teaching undergrad climate science classes for years, it became clear I had only one main message for these students: we know what's happening. We know what to do about it. And the people in power won't do it.

So what's the real blight here? The blight is not always the blight. When it comes to climate change, the blight is greed; whereas—at least if the research on microbial carbon sequestration capability comes to fruition—literal blight could save us.

This subversion of expectations is so stark as to feel almost like a bait and switch. To look closely into blight, whether as a literal disease-causing fungus or as an abstract concept, is to discover the cold-water shock of reversal, a shock that is by turns painful and delightful. Human ingenuity is a source of global-scale destruction despite being so often cast as the hero in the stories we tell ourselves. Likewise, the creeping stuff of decay isn't always horrifying; the most convenient villain isn't always the true enemy. The story of blight is the story of our need to look beneath the surface and

see things that aren't immediately obvious to the eye to understand what's really going on. This is true in life, and it's true in the best fiction, the tales that help us understand ourselves and the world more deeply than at surface level.



A.J. Van Belle is a nonbinary biologist and writer who lives on Vancouver Island with their husband and two dogs. Two of A.J.'s 2023 stories are on the Nebula reading list, and their fiction has appeared in journals and anthologies from 2004 to the present. A member of HWA and SFWA, A.J. is an intern at the Booker Albert Literary Agency and a mentor in two novel-writing mentorship programs. They are represented by Lauren Bieker of FinePrint Literary.



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Special thanks to our patrons and readers—without our barnacled friends, this issue wouldn't exist.

We'd also like to acknowledge the following efforts that made this issue truly shine:

Our staff for volunteering their time and effort:

- Moriam, A.J., Tehnuka, Evelyn, Monique, Mary Anne, and Léon
- Guest editor Brandon O'Brien
- and our talented and hilarious associate editors: Marie & Maria
- Font and Logo/design integration by the ever-supportive Seen R

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We want to extend a special 'Thank You' to our 2024 patrons who generously donated \$50USD or more:

- Esmeralda Languzzi
- Iain Davis

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