



# APPARITION

## Literary Magazine

Issue 19:  
Omen

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Tania Chen  
Vanessa Jae  
Marie E. Kopp  
Maria Schrater  
Guest Editor Kevin M. Casin



# Apparition Lit

Issue 19: Omen, July 2022

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# A Word from our Editor

by Kevin M. Casin

Dear Readers,

In 2020, I became interested in astrology, but not just sun sign astrology, all of it. I had read the book *You Were Born For This* by Chani Nicholas—highly recommended—and I was so curious about what the planets had to say about my past, present, and future life. This was also the year I was, for the first time, self-publishing my stories on Medium.com. It was also the year of my Saturn return and a Jupiter-Saturn-Pluto conjunction.

Saturn returns are powerful. They change us. They come around our 30s and use the lessons of our early life to teach us about where we can go. Conjunctions are also powerful. They often initiate the creation of new paths. *Saturn*, the disciplinarian, *Jupiter*, the sage, and *Pluto*, the reformer, were all engaged in a beautiful Capricorn/Aquarius dance in 2020. All of these things happened at once. It was a big year. There was a pandemic after all.

I was in a job I didn't really like, in a city that wasn't for me, and, along with the horrors of an uncontrollable pandemic, I felt helpless. Until I looked to the sky. I studied my birth chart, I saw there was a part of my life I'd been ignoring. I had made a promise to myself

when I decided to not major in music and work toward a biology degree. I had forgotten about it. The conjunction reminded me.

And in January 2021, I sent out my first story to a magazine and joined the Twitter literary community. I've been on this writing journey for over a year now. I've had incredible opportunities, including working with the Apparition Lit team to put together this beautiful issue. I couldn't think of a better chance to honor the cosmic event that set me on this enriching path than a collection of amazing works!

- Join us under the microscope and witness the end of the world in Léon Othenin-Girard's "A Personal Apocalypse".
- Find out what Matt Richardson's raven is warning us about in "Just One Death".
- Tania Chen in "Heart-Eater" conjures the magic of the Hueseros and weaves a tale of beauty and wonder.
- Piece together Ann LeBlanc's fragmented "Infinite Clay-Tablet Memories Sung Into the Flesh of the World" to discover the story of an ancient being.
- Come and be tempered by Marie E. Kopp's "Apples in Hell" and soar to new heights in "What Use are Wings to a Creature of the Sea" by Vanessa Jae.
- Take a seat at the D&D table with Maria Schrater's essay "Here There Be Dragons".

I hope you enjoy this issue as much as I have enjoyed helping to put it together! May the omens guide you to new and exciting roads of your journey.



**Kevin M. Casin** (he/they) is a queer, Latine fiction writer, and cardiovascular research scientist. His fiction work has appeared in *If There's Anyone Left*, *From The Farther Trees*, *34 Orchard*, *Pyre Magazine*, and more. He is an SFWA/HWA/Codex member, and First Reader for *Interstellar Flight Press*.

He is a second-generation immigrant born in Miami, Florida to Cuban and Colombian parents. He loves to travel, play instruments, bake, crotchet, and take care of his orchid collection.

# Heart-Eater

by Tania Chen

**T**hey call them Hueseros—the old men and women who linger at the fringes of the city, lurking around the shabby half-brick houses with asbestos ceilings, where the rule of law ends and a wildness springs forth from the ground. From bones to minds, curses and omens, and everything in-between the Hueseros are rumored to heal it.

On the road to St. Bernabé there is a gorge, a man-made indentation that goes deep into the hill, and there at the bottom lives Izel el Huesero; said to have eyes the color of a smoked mirror and a smile made of sharpened ribs, not teeth.

They say that Izel el Huesero is not a man to be looked for unless the injury is dire. And even then, it's better to be dead than in the debt of this particular Huesero.

Lisandro knows the rumors but he presses on, undeterred.

He cannot live this way and if the whole world has abandoned him, here at least is a Huesero who will not. Lisandro is a wealthy man, or wealthy enough, anyhow, even if he isn't rich enough to bend everyone to his whims. But this Izel will do what he asks, surely. There



is always enough money, enough promises and enough lies that can be made.

So, Lisandro climbs down the set of stairs that lead down into the gorge, where a handful of houses of half-brick, half-plastic threaten to collapse at the merest gust of wind. The streets down here are labyrinthine.

The scent is pungent, no garbage trucks venture this way and black plastic bags litter every corner with trash torn open by mangy dogs. In all ways, this fragment of a place has been left to rot on its own, surrounded by high-rises that plunge it deeper into darkness. Here is a place that resists modernization with tooth, claw and the casual neglect of its neighbors. There will be nothing new birthed in these streets.

Not as long as Izel the Huesero makes this his home.



Lisandro carries a tote bag with a SUPERAMA logo on the side, bright green and filled with 500 peso bills. His black sweatshirt and Adidas sweatpants hide the hardened patches of dried blood.

Lisandro does not look wealthy like this: crawling through the gorge's narrow streets, smelling of vomit and blood, greasy ash-blond hair plastered to one side. His vanity cannot bear mirrors right now, which is just as well.

A Huesero does not care for looks as long as there is payment involved.

As the streets narrow even further, the sky disappears under the overlapping metal and asbestos roofs. The rusted pole lamps barely illuminate the streets that are more potholes than asphalt.

There is no sidewalk, and Lisandro struggles to find his footing as he follows the directions whispered to him over one too many whiskeys at a posh bar in la Condesa.

There is no door at the Huesero's, so he raps on the wooden frame instead. A flimsy plastic bag stuck together with brown tape makes for a poor defense against the elements but when Lisandro steps inside the sounds of the outdoors, siren wails and dog howls, disappear. An invisible line between the outside and inside, delineating this place as sacred.

The packed earth floor serves as a filling between their bodies and the void. The exposed bricks surrounding the bare insides, with not even careless plaster slathered on to help serve as a mock facade of a home. No windows, only the flickering light of veladoras with the name of too many forgotten saints.

The occasional pop of a burnt-out candle and the thick coppery scent of dried blood are his only companions. Lisandro feels the smell stick to the back of his throat and he gags.

There is a rattling laughter from the furthestmost corner, where the shadows coalesce together to form the Huesero sitting on dirt a cloth of black. "Aren't you a little lost, mirrey?"

It is easier not to answer at all, to stare Izel down and make sure he understands Lisandro means *business*. "I see," Izel says. "Get some cafe de olla, pass me one too. Tell me, why have you come all the way here?"

"I need you to help me. You're the only one who can." Lisandro cringes at the thought of sitting on the floor, of touching the cracked clay pots steaming on the wooden plank serving as a table. But Lisandro does it anyway,

will swallow his pride this once. It is not as if his pride is worth anything if he is dead.

“Don’t you know we skin mirreyes alive down here and feed them to the dogs?”

He must swallow it or die. The huesero watches him, then cracks a smile.



Lisandro’s world unraveled on a sunny Thursday afternoon, within the confines of the director’s pristine office. The red letters announcing his expulsion sear into Lisandro’s skin like a brand of shame, forever a reminder of his failure and the utter severing of his life’s purpose. That he is being given this notice can only mean one thing: someone in their group talked. The secrecy they had sworn had not meant anything at all if there Lisandro stood, carrying all the guilt.

Even if it had been his idea to go down to the university’s morgue after hours, with four bottles of tequila and a bag of weed. None of those objects had been Lisandro’s.

“I do not understand,” Lisandro says, crumpling the paper where he tightens his fingers. “This is some sort of ... test? A joke, Doctor Cruz.”

“I assure you, Mr.Corte-Real, it is far from a joke. It is a decision we have all carefully deliberated over.” Doctor Cruz leans forward to rest his elbow on the mahogany desk that is filled to the brim with files and graded exams. An academic, a doctor but Lisandro only sees him as a judge, jury and executioner.

Lisandro opens his mouth to speak: “Sergio,” he pleads, ignoring the way Doctor Cruz’s eyes narrow, how he sits back on his chair, trying to draw more physical distance between them. Lisandro’s pocket is

heavy with cash. “There must be something we can do about this. A way to fix it.” He digs in deep and places a wad of bills the desk next to the files upon files of student admission records and grades.

“Not everything is about throwing money at problems.” But Lisandro sees the way Cruz’s eyes linger on the money one moment too long for his words to be wholly sincere. His conscience wins, he pushes the stack towards Lisandro urging him to take it back. “Human lives cannot be measured in those terms and until you understand that... then, well. The board and I are confident in our decision.” Doctor Cruz remains unmoved betraying Lisandro’s previous memories of the supportive mentor who would not discard his unorthodox ideas, who would offer flattery to soothe an ego bruised by poor grades. He takes a deep breath, “You mutilated a corpse donated to the UNAM for medical research, playing around as if—” he stops, Lisandro watches his eyes dull with the memory of the photos taken by the police, it reeks of his father’s constant disapproval “—and *then* you punched a fellow student who tried to stop you.”

Lisandro’s pockets feel empty, even with the fold of bills tucked back inside. His father lied, money does not fix everything.

“Go home, Lisandro. You’re not suited to hold human lives in your hands.”



Lisandro drinks too much. Remembers his first year in medical school when everyone would pile into the nearest bar and throw back shots of tequila until that memory and this moment seemed to stretch into eternity. A tangled vine of present-past-present that is unbreakable.

He feels like that now. Loose-limbed and predatory, stumbling down an alley paved so smoothly it glows under the dim light. Overhead, two buildings seem to bend giving the impression of a concrete mouth, swallowing the light behind trashcan teeth.

In the middle of the alley this world ends and a new opens up; a cardboard box with damp edges is spat out by the shifting pavement. The overpowering stench of rotten meat crawls its way down Lisandro's throat; he can taste the mushy texture and maggots, he swears he can *hear* how meat sounds. It croons and trills, soothing the knee-jerk terror of watching the world ripple and bend and buckle under the pressure of the uncanny. Lisandro waits for the world to slow its spinning before giving into the curiosity.

A small, ordinary cardboard box, the kind often sold at bakery stores, often filled in his memories with pan dulce or tartas de miel. Lisandro leans down, pulling the flap open.

A heart sits square in the center, perdicardial sac peeled off to leave behind arterial bright red, open atriums releasing an arrhythmic singing with each pulse. It smells of copper and ten-year-old rust, breathing the night air with hungry, hungry gulps.

The street is empty.

Lisandro closes the flap and tucks the box beneath his arm, an idea taking root.

Behind Lisandro the alley closes up, the two buildings shifting back together as if the passage between had been a brief respite in time. A yawn before the universe started marching on again.





Lisandro had been hesitant about renting his first floor apartment, much preferring a penthouse with a view, but the rent had been cheap for a two-storey space and the proximity to campus allowed him to sleep in. Besides, he had thought that proximity to school would count in his favor, a sign of *devotion*.

Had he known back then what he does now, that he is unsuited to save human lives and no amount of ass-kissing would make a difference, he wouldn't have bothered.

Crammed in the small service elevator that links his apartment to its private basement, Lisandro feels the thrumming of the heart in the cardboard box. Steady, soothing, slow.

What is he going to do with a heart and *just* a heart? No matter how extraordinary of an organ it seems to be, continuing to pump despite being unconnected to the rest of its meat and bone housing.

But is this not the opportunity of a lifetime? Whoever left it, whoever *lost* it no longer had a claim. This heart, with its beating, breathing, living core is either a scientific miracle or an anomaly that could revolutionize the world.

Human lives can be measured and weighed in the palm of his hand. Doctor Sergio Cruz would eat his words. Lisandro would make sure of it.



The heart is given a center place on a wooden table in the basement. The organ roots itself in place, spidery veins and arteries taking hold of the surface. The hay-yellow color of the table leeches out from where the veins nestle, turning it a dull rust-red.

Over time Lisandro brings back black bags of various shapes. Long and thick. Narrow and brittle. Cartilage tossed into a plate-like peanuts, then pressed and reshaped to resemble ears and a nose.

Tendons and muscles—connected through careful stitches, then plastered down onto bone. Sometimes, if the bones are not the right shape or they are broken, Lisandro will do what he can with hot metal and barbed wire.

The bags pile up, empty.

“A Coyote gave me these, so they better take.” In the absence of company, he has begun speaking to the heart and its various pieces. Normally, Coyotes are border dwellers, crossing back and forth beneath wire fences and over cement walls. For the right of passage, they expect a toll to be paid. Those who cannot pay are discarded halfway in that no man’s land.

The heart, in its center place at the table, waits. Surrounded by metal and bones, sinew and tendons, muscle and fat.

It pulses and reaches towards the nearest rib, pulmonary veins pulling around towards itself all the torn cartilage, and muscle, the brittle bones with tendrils of spongy marrow, the ligaments sliding back in place.. It even draws in the shattered pieces of mirrors Lisandro has discarded, slots them next to each organ. They’re all useless, his face looks wrong.

This is not *magic*, Lisandro thinks, it is *technology*. Nanowhatever-they-call-them. Science that has been left discarded and his for the taking.



It is neither science nor for the taking.



An inert body lies across a rusty-colored table. The skin is of a matching shade, and between the carved ribs a steady thrum threatens to break out like springtime marigolds, blooming brightly between meat and wood.



It becomes they taking their first breath on a stormy late night which would seem trite and passe if not for the bone shattering intensity of the sky calling down to the earth.

They unhinge their jaw to gasp for air, claw at their ribs until a sluggish trail of days-old blood runs down the side.

Then they find their voice: a rising wail meant to tear down the sky.



Lisandro tries to drown it. To him this abomination will remain an object stripped of life and sentience and freedom. This is not what he had wanted. Holds its misshapen head inside the bucket, fascinated by its lack of self-preservation until air runs out.

Burning does not take, the charred skin peels off to reveal fresh, smooth baby skin devoid of any imperfection. The more Lisandro burns, the more the crimson sickly texture of its initial skin gives way.

Lastly, he tries dismemberment, except the cleaver gets stuck on the first blow. The heart trembles and hums then tendrils wrap themselves around the handle of the cleaver and pull it inward, metal assimilated to flesh.

It looks at its creator, a ring of purple and red delineating the eye socket. Eyes smooth like obsidian, reflecting Lisandro's face back at him.

Smoke trails down their face.

They open their jaw wide enough to swallow an entire skull, scream until Lisandro feels the void surging up to meet him.



It has to die. *They* have to die, though Lisandro still refuses to think of the thing birthed in his basement as anything but that: thing. Object. Abomination.

And yet—would proof of its existence not put his name in books? Would it not prove once and for all that life is something he can and should hold in his hands?

Doctor Cruz does not take his call, but Lisandro leaves a voice message that betrays his excitement and desperation.

'Sergio, Sergio—I need to show you a miracle.'



The halls leading towards Sergio's office are silent, the hour too late for the bustling student body that trails up and down from lecture to lecture. The morgue is at the right far end, the faculty's lounge and personal offices on the far left.

The light is still on in Sergio's office, the wooden door swings open at Lisandro's impatient touch.

The word miracle twists inside him, eagerly taking root with the promise for more.

Sergio's stoic face greets Lisandro, still unmoved at Lisandro's excitement.

He feels an odd sense of calm descend as he takes in Sergio's body splayed out on the chair. The doctor's ribs have been punched in, bits of torn clothing, bone and tendons mixed together in red and white.

Visible, even in the darkness is Doctor Cruz's heart, faintly beating, pumping air and blood down the leftovers of his shirt and dress slacks.

Behind Sergio, a human shape perches on the top of the plush chair, feet gripping the edge as one hand reaches into Doctor Cruz's open chest. "The heart is everything," they say, and their mouth widens, an open knife wound from ear to ear.

"You!" Lisandro had, among all the pieces the Coyotes gave him, not brought vocal chords. It—they—shouldn't be able to speak.

"Me." The monster agrees affably, as they swallow the heart and thrum in pleasure. Burnt, strangled, drowned, quartered—they remember the little deaths inflicted on their person spelling out a violent rejection; they will take everyone Lisandro knows, "you. I will swallow you whole."

A promise, not a threat, as they leave Lisandro to the sound of approaching police sirens.



What is a miracle if not an act so great as to incite madness? To Lisandro crime becomes permissible as he flees with little dignity across the city. From his parent's penthouse in Polanco where the police gather the scattered limbs of his family, to the crudely crafted homes that are barely hospitable. He preaches of his miracle once on a neon-lit street corner before a few passersby that speed up at the sight of his unkempt self. Time crunching between consciousness and crime;



Lisandro mourns the absence of time. In every shadow, in every face he sees the miracle that won't die, won't end, and won't stop torturing him towards the end of the world.



“So now you see why I’ve come to you.” Lisandro shifts, feeling his legs numb, pins and needles contesting with the gravel and dust. He runs a hand through his hair—even if there is nothing he can do to fix his appearance at this stage.

Izel el Huesero inclines his head slightly, the shadows falling over the gaunt, stark lines of his collarbone and shoulders. “I do.”

He brings the clay pot to his mouth and spits inside, ignoring the look of utter revolt Lisandro gives him. His own coffee pot sits untouched. “Then fix it, money is no object make them see.”

“Ah, mirrey.” Izel scratches at his chest, harder and harder the fingernails gouging deep furrows in the flesh, furrows deep enough to see the heart beneath.

Lisandro knows that particular heart. He hears its call—a lone ba-dum that picks up speed replacing the silence of this half-finished brick structure.

“Didn’t you want to see a miracle?”

The sound grows deeper and louder. Hundreds of hearts beating in unison, held together by a membrane of flesh that is vaguely human-shaped.

*I am the Heart-Eater, the Smoking Mirror, Tezcatlipoca. You put me together and now—*

Lisandro feels the void rushing up to meet him at last, madness taking root in the sockets where his eyes

dissolved—his heart half-eaten but living still, a miracle to behold.



**Tania Chen** is a Chinese-Mexican queer writer. Their work has been published in *Unfettered Hexes* by Neon Hemlock, *Strange Horizons*, *Pleiades Magazine* and *Baffling*, they are a first reader for *Strange Horizons* and *Nightmare Magazine* and a graduate of the Clarion West Novella Bootcamp workshop of January/ Feb 2021.

# Apples in Hell

by Marie E. Kopp

There is a ghost  
Who slips her spindly fingers  
Between mine

And whispers dusty secrets  
Against my lips when no one's looking

I found her under a rock  
In my backyard when I was three

And she's hung out, haunting me,  
Ever since

When boys get too close,  
She swoops down from the ceiling  
Flashing her green teeth and  
Feathered ears until they scurry up and  
Leave

And I used to appreciate it,  
But now, sometimes, she  
Scares me  
When she mentions the apples in  
Hell

And wanting me to taste them  
With her—

I used to think she just meant someday,  
But yesterday I thought I heard  
her voice in my sleep  
Repeating  
*Tomorrow*



**Marie E. Kopp** (she/her) is a writer living on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with her demon-child cat, Oliver. Her work centers on her experience of bipolar 1 disorder, the deconstruction of her traditionalist Catholic faith and values, and her newfound exploration of the erotic as a queer and disabled female in our harsh contemporary American landscape. Her poetry has been featured in *The Ethel Zine*, volumes 5 and 9. You can find Marie on Twitter at @shoelessbanshee

# Infinite Clay-Tablet Memories Sung Into the Flesh of the World

by Ann LeBlanc

*[Fragment 1: sun-dried river clay; found  
at site 14 temple complex, grid 14N]*

**T**hey summon me to answer, “What caused the fire  
in the potter’s quarter?”

This time, I recite the words I have said before, the words I will say again, these words written on the hardened clay fragment of my long-dead body. It was me. I caused the fire. It was a child’s birthday party.

*[Fragment 2: sun-dried river clay; found at  
site 8 residential complex. Unusually uniform  
character formation, indicating non-standard  
stylus, similar to tablet 1 found at site 14.]*

I have a reputation among the potters and the woodworkers whose houses huddle in the shadow of the cliff-carved temple. They whisper that I am the



sort of demon to be summoned when you want to have a good time. They imagine secret gatherings in hidden courtyards, waterskins bursting with new wine, wild displays of hedonism, ritualistic copulation, and other practices banned by the temple-men and their holy calendars.

It's true, such things are done, and I am often involved, but what is also true is that sex leads to children, which leads to parents needing childcare; so the thing I am summoned for most is children's birthday parties.

*[Fragment 4, sun-dried river clay; found at site 8 ritual(?) chamber, destruction layer]*

The disaster begins with a question, asked by the birthday girl while she oh-so-carefully places yarrow blossoms in the twig hat that lays atop my clay false-body.

"When is your birthday, Feah?" she asks me, her face serious, her chin wrinkled.

I pause, unsure. "I... do not have one." The parents watching us smile at our exchange, but the smiles are strained. They glance nervously at the cloth covering the door that moves in the breeze like a tongue betraying secrets.

"But everyone has a birthday. You must."

To the humans, time is a bird they can see moving across the sky: in the traversal of the sun, in the changes of the moon and the yearly floods, in the calendars carved in the wall of the cliff-temple. But in the place where my true self exists, there is no time or space or hope. There, I am like a beast frozen in the mountain ice. Only when a human chips away a tiny bit of my prison and yanks one of my toes into the air does that

small part of my whole understand what it means to be warm with change.

But she is a child, and I cannot explain this to her. She looks up at me with eyes full of trust, a small fragile person in a world that swirls with change and pain and love—all the things I crave. I cannot disappoint her, nor her mothers who I have known since they were children. So I lie.

“My birthday, dear Mouse, falls upon...” My false-body twitches, aware only in a fragmentary sense of the looming danger of this momentous choice. “My birthday is the twenty-fifth day of the month of green-leaves.” A good day, neither too cold nor too hot, perfect for resting in a hidden courtyard garden beneath the blooming trees of a new season.

She nods—my answer satisfactory—and runs off to play with the other children while I prepare for my juggling act. When I am in this moment, when it is real and not just a fractal memory, I don’t expect her to remember my answer. I am more concerned with the children having a good time. My body—carved ash-wood bones, flesh of clay and sacred oil—has six arms, perfect for all manner of entertaining tricks.

*[Fragment 5: sun-dried river clay; found at site  
8 residential complex. Conjoins with Fragment  
4. Further evidence for singular author theory.]*

Perfect for enflaming the terrified imaginations of the temple-men. They arrive at the party, uninvited and unwanted. Did a jealous neighbor tip them off? Did I—in my misunderstanding of the linearity of time—warn them about the party? It does not matter. They stand at the threshold, they have torn the cloth from the doorframe; it is too late to turn them away. To these

temple-men, it is impossible to believe that a demon would do anything at a birthday party but corrupt—or eat—the children.

“Please, stop,” I say as the men topple tables and tear decorations down. Their faces display a vile admixture of anger and joy. Children scream as their parents are pushed to the floor.

My first instinct is to juggle at the temple-men, a big open-mouthed smile on my face, my feather eyebrows that give me my namesake wagging up and down. They are not amused, they do not stop and stare and wonder, won’t stop hitting and grabbing and tearing and breaking and—

I cannot let this happen; cannot let my friends be punished on my behalf; cannot let my dear Mouse’s birthday be ruined; cannot let these events be baked into a hard and brittle future.

But it’s too late. The mothers are gone, the children are gone, and I am gone. I am returned back to my hated home.

*[Fragment 5: appears to be an exact duplicate of Fragment 5 in shape and composition, albeit with different text. A forgery? A practical joke?]*

I failed once. I try again, summoned again to this same birthday party. How many times have I lived this terrible moment? My unhappy relationship with linear time returns me here again and again. This time, I do something fool-desperate. The temple-men believe me to be a monster; I must exploit their weakness—fear.

I stride blur-fast to the animal-fat torch and dip my hand into the fire. My fingers dance with the flame, and the oil in me kindles. I roar with joy at the heat and

rip my burning clothes off. I advance, blazing bright, hurling flaming bits of my body as I shout secrets of burn-treatment so none will be permanently harmed.

They retreat in terror. I am surrounded by flame, my body and the tables and wooden beams that hold up the mudbrick roof all dance the song of their own consumption. Before I can say goodbye, before I can make sure everyone escaped, the embers of my false-body dissolve and I am pulled unwillingly back to the rigid perfection of my home.

*[Fragment 1: sun-dried river clay; found at site 14 temple complex, grid 20F. Another duplicate. What is going on here?]*

They summon me to answer, “What caused the fire in the potter’s quarter?”

A ring of fire surrounds me, crackling with the fat of a sacrificed beast. Beyond the fire are the temple-men in their fine jewelry and leather boots. They believe the fire protects them because it is a child of the sun they worship. They do not understand that the fire is nothing to me, that I do not want to hurt them. I want to help them, to see them smile in satisfaction, but not *just* them, these men whose power grows equally with their jealousy.

This time, I ignore their questions. I stare at the soot-blackened sandstone ceiling of the great ceremonial chamber carved in the side of the canyon cliff. Behind the priests is a wall adorned with an elaborate painting of my home, which they call the realm of demons. They depict it as a dark and fiery pit, filled with creatures they imagine to be vile. A place of chaos and change. If only it were so.

I tell them my home is a place without tense or distance, where all things lay atop each other in a single brilliant point, pure and unchanging, singing a perfect crystal note for ever and ever. I hate it there—but I can only hate it when I am here. When I am home, there is no hate or love or me separate from the whole. No chance for desire to transmute action into achievement. Only when a small shard of me is pulled into this world can I understand hope, understand that plans brought to fruition might allow me to rip myself violently into this world, away from the rest of my self that desires to keep me trapped wholly in the perfect hateful glory of my home.

They repeat my words back to me, anticipating what I will say. Repeating the words I told their predecessors long ago, before they carved this chamber, before they built the mud-brick town below. I shared my secret hopes with them, and they reacted with horror. This is why the temple-men ban the people from summoning me. This is why they send clay tablets warning of me to the other city-states that rise out of the flood-plain like termite mounds.

Is it the truth I tell to the temple-men, or the lie I tell at the birthday party that is to blame?

*[Fragment 7: sun-dried river clay; found at site 8  
residential complex; unidentified fluid residue]*

I am here at the moment of her creation.

A man summons me into a clay body shaped like a man: broad chest, long-limbed, wearing the bountiful skirts of a merchant. There are candles, wineskins, and a bed. He wears a body made of muscle and bone and blood. He is his body, and he feels all the changing glories of his flesh.

I feel nothing. I don't know this man, not well, but because he has given me a moment of escape from my home, I do my best to make his night special. First, we talk, as he drinks wine and I learn the sacred shape of his desires. Talking transforms into dancing and kissing and I hold him tight within my embrace as he plants his seed in me.

I must move fast, wrapping myself in animal skins to disguise my true nature, and stride into the star-cold night. My journey along the labyrinthine jumble of houses built atop one another is accompanied by the scurrying dances of rodents and the muttered wing-beats of night birds.

Her mothers—not yet mothers—greet me at the door with kisses and joy. They help me sculpt my body into the shape of a woman: hips widened, shoulders narrowed, eyebrows trimmed. I know these women, know the shape of their desires. I have kissed them in the past, I will kiss them in the future. I know where to place my hand on the fat of their thigh, what words they want me to whisper as the suppleness of my body flows around them.

I don't feel it the way they do in their heart-pounding flesh. The wood and oil and clay and feather of my false-body feel things differently. Yet, whenever I have the opportunity to culture joy in another—especially someone I know and care about—a mirrored joy blooms in me.

These two women desire to have a child, and I am the means by which a man's distant seed is brought to sprout within one of their wombs. If the seed ripens into a living, crying child, the man will be paid, and a bond forged between the four of us. A hidden bond; unseen and thus unbreakable by the priests who believe

their predictions and calendars allow them to dictate the flow of life.

I am here in this moment, more aware than these two humans of the glory and horror of what we do: the creation of a thing that will hurt and laugh and feel and love and hope and die and—

*[Fragment 7: duplicate]*

I weep, and her not-yet-mothers hold me tight. My face is dry and I weep with the noise of my voice. I weep and I don't know why. I weep because I know what I've done. I weep not because my body forces me to, like a human, but because I am fear-lonely and I need them to comfort me.

*[Fragment 8: sun-dried river clay; site 10 granary, grid 3A; food residues on surface]*

I awaken in the month of green-leaves, sitting in the shade of a pecan tree just starting to fruit. I am wearing a clay body, and the body is wearing a gown woven from yucca fibers. I rub the corpse-fibers of the plant—changed from one purpose to another—between my fingers and listen to the music of happy human voices.

The birthday girl is here; still a child, but awkward-tall now, so this is after the birthday party that ends in fire. My little Mouse survives the fire. She survives with her mischievous eyes and her heart pumping fast with the desire to carve the world into a pleasing shape.

“What's this for?” I ask when the pain of pinning my soul has eased enough for me to do more than focus on the way in which sensations here change over time.



Little Mouse looks up at me, claps her hands, and says, “It’s your birthday!”

Her seed-father rolls his eyes and spits in his hands. “These things don’t have birthdays,” he says, and I can tell he is reciting an old argument. “They’re dangerous servants. The only thing preventing it from ripping your face off is the bindings I placed in the sacred oil.”

Not only is that a terrible thing to say to a child, but it’s not true. What prevents this man from feasting on the red-rich flesh of his seed-child? Nothing but love and consequences. So it is with me.

But I don’t correct him, and I don’t give in to the urge to ruffle the hair of this perishable man. Instead, I lean down to mock-whisper to Mouse, loud enough for him to hear, “I wouldn’t eat his face—he never washes it.”

We celebrate in the ruins of a storeroom, trees growing between the remnants of vine-laced mudbrick walls. I remember when this was a place where humans lived, before the whims of the river moved elsewhere. Her parents have strung decorations amongst the plants that work to transform the works of humans into their own designs. A feast lays upon a crooked table: honey-drizzled cornmeal pudding, squash and beans soup, dried rabbit meat, and other foods whose sights and smells make me wish I felt hunger.

They’ve thrown me a birthday party. Me! I clap my hands and smile wide and join the revelers. We dance and sing and eat and drink. I am having a wonderful time, and then little Mouse asks me the second of her terrible questions.

“I’m so sorry, Feah, we didn’t get you a proper gift. What do you want?” she asks, eyebrows frowning, mouth pouting pensive.

What do *I* want? Me? Is this the first time I have been asked and offered the fulfillment of my own desires? To the humans, I am not a thing that wants; I am a thing that soothes *their* wants.

I tell her I want a real body, a permanent one. I want to sever the connection between myself and my larger self. I want to escape unchanging immortality. I want to live here in this world of chaos. I want to change, to choose, to flow like the river and flap like the bird. I want; I want; I want. It pours out of me like I am a cistern filled to brim with only a tiny hole at the bottom through which my desires can flow.

Is everything that happens afterwards her fault, because she asked? Or my fault, because I told her the truth?

*[Fragment 10: sun-dried river clay; site 10 granary, grid 9G; found with knapping tools]*

The first time she summons me herself, she is dressed in the skins of wolves and buffalos, scraped smooth and sown tight around her. A spear is strapped to her back, the stone tip made darker by the rich brown of dried blood. Woodchips and clay tablets lie scattered on the floor, and the shadow-crescent curve of her face—so like her mothers'—is triumphant.

She hugs me tight, her arms banded with muscle and love. How long has it been for her? For me, no time has passed. For me, the wait has been endless.

She strokes my feather eyebrows and I laugh and then she sits me down and tells me she wants to help. She has a plan. I juggle unshelled pecans while I listen, and at the end of her explanation, she asks, "Does that sound good to you?"

I smile and reply, "Of course, dear Mouse. I understand your plan; I understand how to help."

She shakes her head. "No. I'm asking your *permission*. I want you to think about it. I want you to *choose*. I want you to be able to say no."

I begin to speak, and then I am silent. I am silent for a long time, my body still except for the movement of my arms and hands as I toss pecans into the air and catch them and toss them again. It helps me think.

She waits for me. She waits through the passage of the sun across the sky, through the morning chorus of the bids. She waits even though her body makes her hips shift with the need to urinate. She waits for me. For me!

And when it has been so long that I feel the pull of my home become irresistible, I say, "No."

Feeling drains from my fingers, pecans fall to the floor, my limbs hang limp, no longer a part of me. When all that is left to me is my heart and my head, I smile and say, "I have a better plan."

And then I am gone and the horrible song of my home blots out all sensation.

Is my plan the one that destroys us? Or is it hers?

*[Fragment 12: hibiscus-era style potsherd(?);  
surface residue preliminarily identified as blood]*

She is so old; I am so small. I curl up in the palm of her wrinkled hand. This is the last of the clay, the last of the oil, the last time in her life she will see me. Everything is wrong now.

She places me in a leather pouch. She strings the pouch with sinew and hangs it around her neck, so I am

nestled against her chest. I listen to the small bird of her heart flutter its delicate wings, making a soft song of fear and love.

I am there when she dies. I am there when they come for her, and there when the temple-men drown her. We float together down the river, through the delta, and into the sea. I weep, and I have no tears. The sea is my tears.

*[Fragment 11: hibiscus-era style  
potsherd; site 8 camp, grid 10L]*

She is the artist, and I am the medium. We experiment with form and function, not bound by the need to make a useful tool, not bound by the human fascination with their own form.

I am a snake, slithering up to the temple-chamber, listening to whispered priest-secrets. I am a hawk, swimming in the air, finding hidden places in the mountains and the forests. I am a lizard, searching sun-warmed crags and ruins for abandoned clay-carved words. I am a dog, my mouth wide and full of stone-sharp teeth, my eyes watching the dark while she sleeps in wild places.

I am a pot, a wall, a loom, a bed, a spear, an arrow, a map, a tablet. I am a new thing, a thing seen in dreams, a splatter on the wall, an unworldly shape. We are children, playing with clay, making no progress except for our own pleasure. I learn to gather the honey she likes drizzled on her corncakes. I learn to make her laugh. I learn how to divert her impatient determination away from fatal plans. I learn the secret meaning to the wicked curve of her smile.

[Fragment 13: composition unknown, resembles petrified wood; site 9 tannery, destruction layer]

Mouse summons me to the forest and says she has a solution. She tells me that my home is me, and so the only thing barring the way, is me.

She holds my hand and we listen to the birds, each one singing their own desires into the world, all of them a chorus to the songs of change made by the wind in the leaves and the snow transforming into trickling waters that flow to the flood-plains below. She points to the gentle curves of the river where she will make my future home.

Our time is up, and my spirit flees the body she made for me. I return to myself, to the realm that holds my true body, and this moment is erased for me. Only now—when it is too late—do I remember her terrible plan.

*[Fragment 1: another duplicate. Despite wide geographical distribution, all unusual samples appear to be localized to former watershed area.]*

They summon me to answer, “What caused the fire in the potter’s quarter?”

But this time, I have questions for *them*.

By summoning me, by forcing a shard of me into their world, they changed me, changed my unchanging, immutable home. But they are not the ones who made the song discordant. I think it was always such, but now having come to understand the concept of change I also understand the horror of my prison-home.

I fear that change goes both ways. There is no time in my home, no before or after, only always. What happened to their universe when always met past, future, and present? Why do I remember being summoned to the

same moment multiple times? What will happen when I bring the sum total of my always-body into their home? Why do they fear that question?

*[Fragment 13: composition  
unknown, another duplicate.]*

She summons me to the forest, and says she has a solution.

I tell her, “No.” I am not worth it.

She yells at me, wrestles me to the ground, tries to pound selfishness into my body. I don’t resist. I lay scattered among the roots of the juniper tree, and in the moment before I return, I hear the sharp cry of an unbound hawk.

*[Fragment 13: duplicate]*

She summons me to the forest, and says she has a solution.

I ask “How?” She says she learned the truth when she summoned two of me at the same time. This time, I don’t remember that happening. What was it like to not be alone? What was it like to touch myself? To feel myself held and loved by my self?

“Why?” I ask. “Why are you so determined to do this for me?”

She laughs, bitter with frustration. It’s not my fault—I am born into the bodies they make for me. But the bodies aren’t me. How can I make my own desires when I am bound by the shapes they rip me into? I am not these hands, not this head or heart. I am a beast, I am a bird, and when I go home, I am all alone.

*[Fragment 12: hibiscus-era style  
potsherd; another duplicate]*

I am there when she dies. Old and soft, lying on a bed I built for her, surrounded by children and grandchildren, wives and husbands, friends and lovers and apprentices.

I hold her hand, her grip still so strong. Her house, nestled like a lover among the other houses of the city, is full of the things she made. Pots and statues and bowls and people. And me.

I am her child. I am her mother. Soon I will be alone.

I ask, "Is it better this way, little Mouse?"

She squeezes my hand. Her eyes are wet and I envy her tears. "Better than what, Feah? For who? I'm not the one who gets to choose."

*[Fragment 14: sun-dried river clay; carbon dating  
inconclusive, appears to be moderately radioactive.]*

She summons me while hip deep in the river. Her arms stretch to the sky, her feet sink into the muck. The river is a snake, a leviathan in motion between the mountains and the sea, a body big enough to hold my horrible soul.

Upstream, the temple-men stride along the bank, closer and closer, their hands filled with spears, their hearts filled with murderous fear. This is our last chance—her last chance; I am stuck like a fly in amber in an infinity of chances.

Her eyes are wild with determination, and yet she still asks for my permission.

“Yes,” I say, and she hefts her stone axe—the blade I knapped for her—and strikes me down.

*[Fragment 14: Please place any duplicates  
of this fragment in lead-lined case]*

She summons me while hip deep in the river.

She summons me. Me! All of me! I am not the shard, not the limb they chip from the ice. My body is a broken song, and this time the first note she plucks is the word “Yes,” screamed so loud into her world that it shakes the mountains and topples the walls and makes the birds fall from the sky.

She summons me into the only body big enough to write all the notes onto. My flesh is the clay riverbed, my blood is the rich black-silt river, my heart is the woman who loves me, my hands are the brick-built cities, my lungs are the sky which cracks open like a bird’s eggshell to reveal the wild yolk of my soul.

The world trembles at the glory of my arrival. No—I am the one who trembles, and the world itself obeys my need to shiver in fear-delight as my coming obliterates my new home.

I sing, and the world hums in tune. I am not just the clay, not just the water, I am the rock, and the wood, and the flesh, and the air, and the void beyond. For one eternal moment I sing my song and the melody changes. It changes! I wrest the tune, I harmonize my infinite voices, and I sing and sing and sing the song I have always wanted to sing, and the world sings with me, and my Mouse sings too, even as everything falls apart, even as everything is good forever and ever.

And then I am a fish.



A fish flopping and gasping and afraid in a place that is not home. And the woman who lured me into her woven fish-trap sees my pain and thinks to throw me back, but the lake has boiled into mist-song and so—

I am dead.

And yet—

And yet—

In that terrible moment, in the throes of my death, I write myself—all my memories, each variation on the times I was and will be summoned. I sing the epic of my soul into the flesh of the world; an imperfect, perishable, scattered shard-record so that me and my little Mouse will not be forgotten. All the infinite memories, clustered branching like the web of arteries in her beloved body, carved forever into the dead and changing place she calls home.

*[Fragment 12]*

“Little Mouse,” I say at her deathbed, in her home surrounded by love. “It is better this way. It is better that you let me choose and that you taught me how to become that choice. I will not regret what we did. You sang with me, and you transformed me into the song, and you transformed the song into what I will always sing.”

*[Fragment 7]*

I am there when she is created. This time, I do not weep.



**Ann LeBlanc** is a writer and woodworker, whose stories about queer yearning, culinary adventures, and death can be found in Fireside Magazine, Mermaids Monthly, and Baffling Magazine, among others. She can be found at [annleblanc.com](http://annleblanc.com) or on twitter at @RobotLeBlanc

# Just One Death

by Matt Richardson

**H**igh in the trees, watching over your tiny hunting village, the loud cries of the ravens drown out all other noises. The ravens are far from the most threatening thing you protect your village from, but they still make you falter. They scream most mornings, hidden deep in the forest, but only come out to taunt you on the good, sunny days when you are convinced that nothing is wrong.

The birds couldn't have been there for more than a few minutes, but to you it feels like hours, dread making every second move like sap. Time always slows when the ravens arrive, blocking you from venturing further into the forest, daring you to do something.

You turn away from the birds as if that would change what they mean. Their deep croaks follow you as you head back to your home, echoing in your ears and filling your mind with inky feathers. You pull your unused bow over your shoulder and tuck your game bag away.

The rest of the village is oblivious to the awful things happening around it. The ravens in the trees, the deer slaughtered before you could hunt them, the rotted wood, all go ignored. Once, you'd tried to tell them what

you were seeing, but most brushed you off. They told you it was mere coincidence, that you had to deal with it because it was your job. Some said it was a message from the Gods. All could be the truth; figuring out which feels impossible.

Hands wave, lips smile, but the kind faces of the villagers blur into each other as you pass them. They should be familiar, you know they are, but your mind swims with the pale colours of their tunics. It always happens, with every omen, every raven and black butterfly and white horse in the night. How do you handle such things, knowing exactly what you are seeing and knowing that someone you know will soon die?

Your partner stands near your rickety home, a basket of fruits in their hands, long hair tangling in the wind. They don't see you for a moment, passing their basket to another villager with a sweet smile on their face. When you touch their wrist, their eyes widen with concern.

"Back already?" they ask. The orchard spreads out behind them, framing them with thick green leaves and bright fruit. At least the village would gain some food from the trees, because they wouldn't get anything from you.

"Never started," you say with a shake of your head. "Are you done?"

"For now," they say. There is a frown on their face, one of concern, but not disappointment. Never disappointment. You share a knowing look, sad and exhausted, before they nod towards your home. "Walk back with me, my love."

A cough follows and you flinch.

The weather is growing colder, a cough is common, but the ravens are still cawing in the distance.

You've had too many dreams of them dying, of everyone dying, to pass it off as just a cough.

"Did something happen?" your partner asks, worry lacing every word.

"Ravens," you say and lean heavily against the creaky wooden walls. Frowning, they nod and run a hand down your arm. You've told them before what you've been seeing, but it is impossible to tell what they really think about it.

Another cough, one that fills your veins with dread, and your partner gives you a watery smile. "Rest," they say and guide you towards the too-small bedroom and the lone piece of furniture within. "The others can hunt today. It doesn't always need to be you."

It does though, it always needs to be you.

You sleep as best you can, your dreams filled with caws and feathers. For so long you have protected your village. From the moment you could hold a spear your father had forced you out there. Everyone in the village sees you like that, their protector, their hunter. Everyone except your partner, who touches you with soft hands and helps you forget your responsibilities.

But not even they can help you forget what is going on. Someone is going to die, the Gods are showing you as much.

Why the Gods have chosen you is unknown. It is torture, knowing someone is going to pass but not who or when. You could stop it if you knew, but none of the omens give you any specific details. The ravens told you that someone would die, but never said who, never said when.

Three knocks on someone's door would tell you who was going to die that night, but you've never heard them. The Gods have sent good and bad omens to the village all your life, but they are always vague, nothing more than hints at what will happen.

Your partner sneaks into bed when the sky grows dark. They mutter something about keeping people away, but you don't hear enough to bother with a response. Coughing, they crowd in close and shiver against you. You should ask if they are alright, but their arms are so warm, so comforting, that you forget.

They are worse in the morning, spluttering all over your pillows. For the first few minutes after you wake, all you can do is stare. Then you move, legs tangled in the fur blankets, and tremble at the side of the bed. They are pale and shaking almost as much as you, every breath coming out like a wheeze.

Mind racing, you do the only thing that you can make sense of. You run for help.



When you are finally able to focus again, you stand in the bedroom doorway, watching the village doctor talk to your partner. He asks them questions they can barely answer through the haze of their sickness, their voice thick and tired. The doctor keeps his back to you, but the set of his shoulders tells you enough.

Your words are trapped in your throat when the doctor turns around. "I've given them some medicine," he says and pats your partner's shaking hand. "It'll help. I'll check in every day to make sure."

You show him to the door in silence, nodding along with his instructions. When he passes under the doorway, a beautiful black butterfly flutters behind

him and you almost slam the door in your panic. The coughing echoes towards you, hanging in the air like an axe about to fall.

Any attempt at hunting or looking after the rest of the village is forgotten for the sake of your partner. They choke and splutter and shake weakly on the bed. You are healthy. You are completely fine, aside from the panic that controls every movement.

“My love,” they’d say whenever times were tough. The end of the sentence would always change; sit with me, dance with me, stay with me. They always knew what you needed.

“My love...” they say from the bed, but not another word comes out. They are too weak to do anything but lie there.

It can’t be them. It shouldn’t be them. They’ve been with you for as long as you can remember, treating you like a person instead of the nameless protector of the village. Losing them... You didn’t know what would happen.

You stay with them through the coming days. Not going outside for almost a week means that you barely see the omens, but the ravens still croak and visit you in your dreams. Other villagers stop by to bring well wishes. They smile like they usually do, but with awful sadness in their eyes. You send them back to their warm and comforting homes with a grunt.

Your partner grows worse until they become one with the bed, trembling under the blankets you keep piled on them. The ravens yell almost constantly, as if they are counting down the days until they can carry your partner away.

You could fight them off. But animals in the woods are one thing, the Gods are another. They want a death and will not stop until they get one. They've shown you for weeks, prepared you for it. Why would the Gods give you such a warning if they weren't going to let you fight back? There is still time. You and the doctor could still find some medicine to save your lover. Anything is possible.

It has to be someone else, anyone else.

On the eighth night since your partner fell ill, the doctor shakes his head and turns away from their thin, unconscious frame. They are too pale, a sheen of sweat on their forehead and their lips parted to take ragged breaths.

The doctor sighs. "I'm sorry, but--"

"Don't," you growl.

"The medicine isn't working. It hasn't worked from the start," he says and places a hand close to your shoulder. You could tear that hand apart. "I doubt they're going to last much longer. I'm sorry."

You choke and gasp, your heart clawing its way up your throat. There are many things you could do in this moment: scream, throw something, demand an alternative. You do none of those things. Instead, you sit at the edge of the bed and grab your partner's clammy hand. You whisper to them, beg them to wake up, and ignore the prick of tears in your eyes.

The doctor, the coward, waits in the doorway during your breakdown. He turns away, heading for the door. But he has no right to leave. If he isn't going to save his patient, he should be here as they pass.

Why does it have to be them? The Gods had already taken your father some years back and forced you to



take up the mantle of protector in his place. You have done so much, saved so many people, fed the children and helped their mothers, and still the Gods want to take more from you.

You won't let them.

"It'll be alright," your partner whispers thickly, still sleeping, still smiling. You run a shaking hand through their hair.

Just one death.

There is something you could do. The Gods want a death, a single death, and you could give it to them. How easy that would be. The doctor could still prove useful. If the Gods want a soul so badly, you will give them one.

The doctor stands by the front door, but won't meet your tear-filled gaze. At his feet is your woodcutting axe, shining in the dim light of the nearby candles. You reach past him and instead of pulling open the door, your hand clenches around the handle of the axe.

You turn, you face the man you are about to sacrifice to the Gods, and feel no remorse. Perhaps you should. Perhaps that would be better. But your mind is still when you swing the axe, the calmest you have been since the omens first appeared.

It is what needs to be done.

The doctor doesn't make a sound as he dies, eyes wide with shock. No, the loudest part is the sound of the axe sinking into flesh and bone and organ. It echoes in your mind, the awful thud of the blade. You swing again and again and again, until there is nothing left except dark blood and the sound of your laboured panting.

Your Gods stare at you through the misshapen eyes in the grain of the wooden walls. The axe clatters against the wet floor and lands among the pieces of a man who

has been nothing but kind to you. Kind, but not a good doctor if he couldn't even save someone from a simple illness. It had been so fast, faster than you'd expected it to be. You step back, your hunting clothes stained with blood, and let out a long sigh of relief.

A soul for the Gods, your partner saved. It's as simple as that.

Cleaning up is easier than you thought it would be. You scrub the floors, hide the remains in the garden behind the house with your soiled clothes, and change into new, clean clothes without once dwelling on what you have done. The house is quieter and cleaner than it has been in weeks, and the ravens don't dare cry from the bordering forest.

Later, something will need to be said about the doctor's disappearance. But for the moment, your partner needs you.

They still lie in their mound of blankets, sweat still plastering their soft hair to their face, but there is something off. The room is too quiet, a frozen pocket of space amid a bustling village. The breeze doesn't dare push at the curtains or your partner's long hair.

Muffled footsteps echo through the room and it takes you longer than it should to realise that you have moved. You stand by the bedside, your partner's pale face the only thing you can see. Their lips part as if they are about to whisper again, but no sound comes out.

With shaking hands, you break the stillness, and push the blankets aside to press two fingers against their neck. A pulse, a weak flutter against your fingertips. The noise you make is almost inhuman. You collapse next to them on the bed, body trembling, and let the tears stream down your face.

In the distance, hidden in the trees, the ravens caw.



**Matt Richardson** (he/they) is an Australian queer author who writes primarily queer fantasy and speculative works. Usually found at his desk with his four cats, he is always experimenting with style and perspectives in his work. Their other works can be found in TL;DR Press anthologies and in Swine Magazine.

# What Use are Wings to a Creature of the Sea

by Vanessa Jae

I sewed my lips shut with seaweed  
my mother gave me to cage  
the snake growing inside my mouth.

It whispered secrets to me,  
praised the roughness of my scales,  
the strength of my wings.

Mother didn't want me to drown  
like her, abandoned me with a beast  
in decaying shackles I couldn't tame.

It scraped its fangs against my flesh  
and bone until my jaw was mauled,  
its force fueled by the air of the shore.

There's a snake sprouting out of my maw,  
it shatters enemies and lectures me  
about rulership and the fall of empires.



**Vanessa Jae** writes horrifically beautiful anarchies, reads stories for Apex Magazine and translates for Progressive International. She also collects black hoodies and bruises in mosh pits on Tuesday nights. To read tweets by interesting people follow her at @thevanessajae.

# A Personal Apocalypse

by Léon Othenin-Girard

**W**hen the first horseman arrives, you see him through a microscope. Mini gallops amplify the buzzing of your phone, followed by a trumpet that you don't remember having set as your ringtone. You step away from your tools to pick up your phone, brush the white horse with its crowned rider off the screen, and see a message from a close friend.

*smth came up. sry*

And while it sucks because you'd been looking forward to it for a while, you shoot back a quick response.

*np, busy at work too, ping me  
next time you're in town*

You know you'll see your friend on Instagram later, happily taking pictures somewhere else, but right now you focus on the microscope again. There are many things in this lab to analyse and discover, to approximate with distributions and models, but the probability of your friendship falling apart is not one of them. You're just overreacting anyway, you tell

yourself, chest loaded with words you'll aim at that friend someday.

You see the horseman again on your feed that night, an emoji of a white horse in the background of your friend's pictures, crown emojis on the heads of other people you know. Realistically, it's a coincidence, but it's still uncomfortable; you mute their accounts. You're good at spotting patterns.



You're in a fight when the second horseman bursts through your apartment wall. It doesn't feel like a fight. There aren't any strong emotions crashing through to the surface, but the red horse standing between the two of you suggests you might be missing something. Long distance isn't something you've ever had a problem with, but for this relationship it feels wrong.

Yes, you're sure it's about this relationship. Why would it be about anything else? At least that's what you say— it's what you believe, too— but now there's a horse in your apartment and a horse-sized hole in your wall, and your lover isn't seeing any of it. Or are they? They ask if you're talking about the pale horse you set as your profile picture, but you haven't changed your profile picture since you got this phone.

But this isn't the point, you both decide, and move back to the topic at hand. You don't think they should take the overseas job offer, at least not while you're still doing your thesis. They hang their head, but they agree. They don't want you to feel pressured to move anywhere. You part amicably.

And then you break up via text. You do the honors, the bright red horse staring over your shoulder as you type. It huffs when you put your phone down, and you

pet it only for it to bite you. You can't see the horseman's face during any of it, but their smugness is more of an aura, anyway.

They jump back out through the hole in the wall. You wake up in the morning with texts from most of your friends, and a block from your now-ex.

You promise yourself you'll get a job now that you don't have your ex's financial support, but you forget the promise under a pile of reports at the lab.



The third horseman chats you up as she manoeuvres her black horse into the subway seat next to you. You look like shit, she says with a laugh and offers you a cigarette, which you decline only because you're in a subway, and she says she'll remember that for later—you will too, because you don't smoke.

Where are you going, she asks, and, for a second, you slip-up and say home, even though you're headed to the lab, though it's not inappropriate at this point. As you consider correcting yourself, she says she lives right near the university labs, and you falter for a moment. Wouldn't it be nicer to sleep in an actual bed tonight? With someone else?

Exiting the subway together, you decide to take her up on the offer. And the cigarette. It tastes like shit and you have to cough so hard you almost vomit, but you've been doing the same thing for so long that any kind of change would wring your gut, you figure. Knowing these things are bad for you, you decide you'll just have one or two, and then not do it again. A learning experience of sorts.



You spend most of your nights in the next few months at her place, and one or two cigarettes become weekly packs. It's good for the stress at least.



When I arrive on a pale, skeletal horse, your booze-drenched snoring is so loud I can barely think. A heavy chest-sized asteroid floats behind me, but passes through the walls without moving even a speck of dust. I wait by the side of your bed, watching the minutes tick by, until you wake up.

The first thing you do when you see me is shoo me away. Something about having to pay your bills first, though I don't really care. Don't you see the asteroid I brought you? Didn't you hear the trumpets? This is the end of the world, and I need you to start acting like it.

You roll your eyes at the phrase then look at the asteroid. Single objects from your apartment have started to float in its direction, creating trash-moons for an asteroid planet. You raise your voice for a second and ask if this was all my plan—ask why it had to be you—and I laugh. This was never about you, you just decided it was, and like the asteroid, it all began to orbit you.

A pause. Finally, it seems like you're listening, but before I can smile and stretch my hand out ominously, you start grabbing the objects flying around the asteroid, to put them back where they came from, but they simply float back. That's when you realize what the objects have in common. Things your friends gave you, things your significant other gave you, packs of cigarettes. I know, I know, it's on the nose, but you wouldn't believe how long people take to notice if I don't make it this obvious.

At some point you tell me to shut the fuck up—I wasn't really aware I was talking, but I don't make an effort to stop—and you grab a suitcase, pack all the floating objects, in the hope that maybe that would stop them. No. Of course it doesn't.

I take this moment to hold out my hand, but you just look at me with distrust in your eyes. Lesson not yet learned, I guess. You're not ready to give it all up and finally move on. Well, I can still wear you down some other time. I'll keep returning, and eventually, eventually you'll see this is the right thing to do. You've let your life fall apart. Nothing is keeping you here.

But as I make my way to the door, you clammer to the asteroid. Every time something gets near it, you grab it and you put it back down, and you even try to pull the asteroid away from me (the hubris!). It doesn't budge. Still, you don't stop trying to keep it here. Even as my horse leads me out of the wall, four stories above the ground, the asteroid threatening to pull you out the window, you don't give up.

So I pause. I hop off the horse. And I approach you, hanging onto the asteroid just over the kitchen sink with panic in your eyes, to look deep inside.

There are flashes of images, of all the people you've fallen away from, all the passion you've lost, and a deep-seated regret, and for a second, I am so fascinated that I lose my hold on the asteroid—you anchor it to the sink.

This was not what I expected.

I float back up onto the horse, then turn back one last time. The asteroid continues to float over the sink, and as things float up near it, you take them in your hands, and you make a note. It's intriguing to watch,

but eventually I compose myself again. I did not expect your endurance.

And as I gallop away, a massive comet remains frozen in the sky; an extinction event turned into a new moon.



**Léon Othenin-Girard** (he/they) loves writing queer speculative fiction filled with hope, playing video games with confusing stories, and petting his cat. Currently, they're studying Computer Science, and have figured out how to use the daily commute for writing, inspiration, and homework.

# Organizing an Omen

with Erika Hollice

**O**mens are only really seen in the rearview. It's something significant, best understood once something else has happened. It's context and ignition. Two very disparate paths were proposed for Issue 19's cover: a joyous wedding or a foreboding figure. We rarely line up cover design with issue themes. Often coming up with design ideas is a bit of a gut punch, it's a quick feeling that grabs us by the belly and can't really be ignored. It's not like us to wheedle on a concept.

Generally when I toss the idea to Erika, I have an inkling of what I'd like to see. There's a shifting form, fuzzy but still guessable. And if I had to be completely honest, I was hoping for that wedding scene. I wanted some creatures in love but couldn't describe what they should look like. I threw out the idea of an angler fish, since who doesn't love a mouthy glow-monster?

I think I hooked Erika with the idea of the angler fish. She took every murky concept I had and wove them together in her sketches. There were three wedding scenes and one, lone figure. In each sketch there's the same angler fish, menacingly chomping at the scenery. For each of the romantic scenes, the partners are staring

deeply into each other. The happiness and satisfaction were obvious. There's satisfaction in the first sketch as well. It's mixed with the promise of a threat that's as clear as the promise of devotion in the other images.

A perk of working in a group that you get to experience other people's joy and imagination. When I asked for everyone's preference, they all picked the lone figure as one of their top choices. Yeah part of it was likely the glowing red eyes, but mostly Apparition Lit might be a thirsty bunch:

REDACTED EDITOR 1: Sexy eel sexy eel

REDACTED EDITOR 2: Ursula vibes  
but, like, if Ursula could steal my voice  
AND get me to be her frightened-and-  
intimidated-but-super-thirsting girlfriend.

The eyes are what sell the cover, it's an immediate showstopper: the placement of the eel, that glow. There are so many other little details that aren't apparent at first glance. The obvious slickness of the eels, the translucency of the bubbles, the hint of scales, the muscles in the back.

I've been trying to narrow down the precise omen associated with this cover. What was the keystone that spurred the concept? The blinking left turn signal that hustled me further down an irreversible path? Maybe the path is too long. Maybe there are too many broken cobblestones, kicked over garbage cans, and open manholes for it to be a direct route.

As a millennial, I was definitely impacted by Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. Yes, it introduced me to the concept of body dysmorphia too young and made getting married at 16 seem like a super great concept... but I think it resounds with my generation because Ursula

was a fantastic villain. She was all business, it wasn't personal. For me, the lasting scenes of that movie don't belong to Ariel at all. It's Ursula and her loyal eels Flotsam and Jetsam. Those eels terrified me as a child, the idea of something wrapping itself around you, holding you down underwater. Perhaps the omen for the cover was a shared one--a different *Final Destination* moment between all the editors that led us to choosing that one design. 30 years ago a child watched a movie, 2 years ago a tourist visited an aquarium, 6 months ago a bored office worker read about the Mariana Trench.

Who knows, we can only see it in the rearview.



Written by Rebecca Bennett

Erika Hollice is our Artist-In-Residence for 2022. You can find more Erika's art at <https://www.eriart.net/>

Find the sketches from Erika on our website.

# Here There Be Dragons

by Maria Schrater

**A**t my last D&D session, my first roll was a natural 20. I stared down at the die and laughed. “This is either a great omen, or I’ve spent all my luck.”



*An augur interprets omens from watching birds.*

At home, I sacrifice oatmeal to the altar of the pigeons. If I don’t, they peck at my doorstep, literally wearing the wood away. I think they eat it. Eventually, one will tunnel right underneath my door, in its Al Capone suit and purple necktie, beady eyes blazing, and demand the goods.

Yes, I have cats. No, they don’t help.

I notice the birds wherever I go: what plumage flashes through the trees, what songs filter down, what dares to feed on the well-trod path. I count feathers. I must remember this. I may never see it again.

A few years ago, I lost a friend. Let’s call him Sigurd, because he had the brawn of a Norse hero and the accompanying, contradicting gentleness. It’s strange to lose friends in this age, where everything is frozen

online while I still have my passwords. I can go back and read every text message. I can see the logs of every time we called, and how long. A lot of the messages are *I'm home now if you want to hang out*, and those memories are more ephemeral. Our group of friends, sharing a beer and talking about things I don't even remember now.

Sometimes I wished he'd lived more of his life online, that his pictures were less blurry, the details smudged and faded just like my imperfect memories. I've heard that every time you remember something, it's not the real thing. You're remembering the last time you played through that memory, like—I don't know, I'm too young for this—a VHS tape that can wear down. You add details, fudge others, forget.

Smell is one of the strongest sense memories but also one of the first to go. I only remember that Sigurd smelled like cigarettes because it's so common here. Now, a man and I get off the train on the same stop, and while we walk, both trying to figure out who should outpace the other because it's weird to walk side by side with a stranger, he lights up a cigarette. And I remember. And I think, *who's next?*

The ways we have to tell each other about deaths are so mundane it wraps back around to unreality. In high school, I saw the news of a schoolmate's passing on Facebook while I was traveling. I thought it was a prank because that was better than the alternative. I learned my stepsister died when my dad texted me in the middle of my workday. I was so shocked I couldn't even remember who she was, couldn't connect the name with the face, couldn't breathe..

When Sigurd died, one of our other friends called me, which if you know anything about Gen Z you know



is cause for alarm already. I missed the call, saw the notification, no voicemail, and I thought, *who died?* in that half-joking way of dawning terror.

A robin catches a worm. There is an empty bird's nest on my windowsill. A cardinal flashes scarlet through the summer foliage. A crow hangs out on the powerlines, minding its business, pretending not to be a bad omen.



*A haruspex finds their omens in the entrails of sacrificed animals.*

Romans had it down to such a science that archaeologists found carved stone organs, neatly divided, labeled. What does it mean if x part is missing? Is the liver shriveled, or smooth? They were big on livers, the Romans. All the poisons of the body are filtered through them.

If you took me apart with scalpel and bonesaw, you could tell how old I was. What I ate. Examine any damage acid reflux has done. Find old knee injuries. Catalogue my scars, inside and out. Even scan my brain. Go down even deeper. Trauma rewrites DNA. But you can only ever read the effects, not the cause.

It's like my texts with Sigurd. I met him in college, where I was seventeen and nothing but raw, raw nerves. Looking back, I see how guarded I was, laughing off his every attempt to connect. He invited me to a party, once, and I don't know if anyone but me can tell how tense, how panicked I was when I wrote back that I was too shy to party. Leaving even the wretched dormitory was a trial.

*If you're ever at a party and you need to leave for any reason, he wrote to me, let me know. Or let one of our friends know. We'll come get you. We take care of our own.*

No one else ever made me an offer like that.

Later, Sigurd would fix my shitty IKEA bed with a round saw not built to cut through the slats. We'd sit side by side at my roommate's long table as six of us played drinking games. It was always a mistake to sit next to him; he'd compete with me, and I could only manage one PBR before the nasty, thin taste of rotten bread made me gag. I'd cheat, chugging for all I was worth while blocking the can's opening with my lip, miming fun. No one ever called me out. My liver thanked me.

If you slice through my stories with the scalpel of literary analysis, what will you find? I write about death, but everyone deals with death. I write about tangled landscapes and grim survival. *Where does it come from? Why are the curtains blue?* If I don't leave any records—no journals or essays or vulnerable tweets, if I filter it all through the muddying silt of fantasy—no one will ever know.

I want to be cremated, too, so even my bones won't have a story to tell.



*A lecanomancer reads omens in the ripples of water.*

When life is overwhelming, there's a dream in my head I return to, fleshed out and fully built as the memories of my childhood house. I'm floating in a Minnesota lake; the water is cold, green, clear but tinged murky. The light dips its fingers deep, but I can't see the bottom. I can't hear anything. I don't need to breathe.

It's ironic because in real life, my lake-swimming days are long over. Every time I ventured in as a kid, I'd panic that something scaly was about to brush the backs of my legs. I even thought there were sharks in swimming pools.

After Sigurd was gone, I went to a birthday party for his

toddler daughter. It was raining, the grass squelching underfoot as we sheltered under a tent in the backyard. I had no idea what a three-year-old liked so I bought mythology books, more for myself and her dad than her.

I don't remember what the weather was like for his funeral, but I can still feel damp socks and frizzy hair, clothes sticking to my back, one arm pressed against my stomach to balance the elbow of my drink-holding hand. Looking around and realizing I didn't know almost anyone else, that I'd never been as intertwined in his life as I could have been, that I was never going to come back. That, at least for now, the final threads holding our lives together snapped, leaving only the spider-gossamer of ghosts.

My dog dragged all my pretty, empty notebooks off their shelf as I was writing this, and I found a memorial card from the wake. Everyone I know who died unexpectedly has left around this time of year. My body remembers even if my mind doesn't; I've dreamed of him, the last few weeks, and the grief is fresh again with every dawn.



*A libanomancer divines omens through observing incense smoke and ash.*

It is a well-known truth that whichever side you sit on at the campfire, the smoke will blow straight in your face.

Cigarettes, and campfire smoke. My friends and I went camping a few times a year in college. I'm on Sigurd's back, clinging on for all I'm worth, while he runs across a starlit field like I'm not even there. He could pick me up with one arm: one of my favorite things about him.

Memory fades so fast. Someone I barely knew had to remind me of the way I'd run to hug Sigurd, throwing my whole weight against him at top speed and he

wouldn't budge an inch. Missing him is even more of a mountain, is more solid and unscalable and impossible.

I've never written like this before, not about him or anyone else. I've tried to, but the words always failed me. Every description rang hollow, every emotion was too flat on the page. I'm not getting it right. I'm leaving things out. But you can't pin down smoke. The atoms of my memory are fraying and spreading faster and faster, colors thinning out. I must write this because I don't know how long I will remember these scenes. When they slip away, I won't notice that they're gone. Here, now, I bring forth the memories, tack them down on the table like old maps, chart my courses around the blank spots with shaking hands, pray that I'm not making anything up – *here there be dragons*.



**Maria Schrater** is a writer & poet based in Chicago. Her work can be found in Sycorax Journal, Abyss & Apex, and in Air & Nothingness Press's Wild Hunt and Future Perfect in Past Tense anthologies. She is also an associate editor for Apparition Literary Magazine. She especially loves folklore and mythology and often works with retellings. When not writing, she can be found imitating bird calls in the woods. You can find her on Twitter @MariaSchrater or on her website [mariaschrater.com](http://mariaschrater.com).

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