

APPARITION

Literary Magazine

Issue 26:
Mercurial

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RSL

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A Word from our Editor

by Jordan Kurella

Arithmetic is a sequence. One added onto another added onto another makes a smooth line that one is meant to follow to its logical conclusion: an answer that is easily understood. Two plus two equals four. Five plus five equals ten. If Samyah has three food and Yousef has two food, will they be able to feed their family until Thursday?

It is not so simple; life is not so simple.

The very aspect of living is not arithmetic. In undergrad, I dated a philosophy major (also a musician), who told me that logic and mathematics are in themselves fallible. That the only truth is in the arts: in what makes one feel, in what makes a person react. It was then that I had one of the several thoughts he didn't agree with. I thought, then, that in pursuing the arts, one becomes more alive.

The thought itself is erroneous, but like all erroneous thoughts, it led somewhere.

It led me here.

Living is mercurial. Becoming more alive is a process of taking in and letting out—messy chemistry. This is

evidenced as easily as taking one's temperature. All that we once knew can be undone, can be untied and retied neatly later at a feverish pace. Such as this: as children in the United States, we're to follow our ABCs as a hard and fast rule. And yet, in studying languages, the ABCs follow different orders, are written in different scripts. Nothing, *nothing*, in this life follows such succinct logic as simple as that song.

This is written in the budget of war, in its horror and its devastation. In the ignorance of hate. In the turn-the-other-cheek of genocide. Should one simply follow the simple rules of arithmetic and logic, it is simple to justify such things as rote. And yet, to become alive: to pull back the curtain and witness, one has to allow oneself to be more fluid. To allow oneself to become mercurial.

As a trans man, I know this better than some. As a disabled trans man, I know this better than some others. This is what I know: that life is filled with adaptations and changes, that the body is a mutable, changeable thing. That bodies are both themselves mercurial and can adapt (and must adapt) to their environment, and I must, too, have my body adapt to the environments that surround it. Some are welcoming, most are hateful.

There are different paths to this, and different angles to this.

It's a practice in hostile geometry.

In reading for this issue, I reveled in seeing so many stories that spoke of the mind's own perception of what exists and what is not there. The cultural need to have us follow along in the media and political rhetoric of the hostile geometry of what is required to sing along with their ABC's. "Darnsworth Products" does this beautifully and succinctly. "The Sun Never Sets in Our

Country” was the inspiration for the metaphor of this essay. And then “In the Loams of Hope” speaks of the mutable, changeable body. Finally, “The Other Sky” is an absurdist piece that flips our perspective on what is and what isn’t.

The poetry was an absolute delight. So delightful we added an extra poem to this issue.

We have poems of resistance (“Anticaprice/Chemical Engineering Mage”), of love lost and found and lost again (“A Record of My Emperor After the Elixir of Life”), of finding the self we need to be through games (“silksong::onechild”), a poem of bearing witness to destruction (“fox games”), and a poem about a very good frog (“Hoppers, the Wisest Frog in Space”).

The entire issue *knows* that living within simple arithmetic is a lie. That the foundations of who we are are mercurial, that the mind is more complex and more imaginative (and the world more mercurial) than we are to perceive at first glance. Not only because we, as humans, are subject to politics’ hostile geometry, but also because we, as humans, can see ourselves at our best angles, with our best parts. These stories and poems know that in order to become alive, we need to feel.

I hope this issue makes you feel alive.

Jordan Kurella



Jordan Kurella is a trans and disabled author who has lived all over the world (including Moscow and Manhattan). In his past lives, he was a photographer, radio DJ, and social worker. His work has been nominated for the Nebula Award, long listed for the British Science Fantasy Award, and taught at Iowa State University. He is the author of the novella, *I NEVER LIKED YOU ANYWAY*, and the short story collection, *WHEN I WAS LOST*. Jordan lives in Ohio with his perfect service dog and perfectly serviceable cat.

The Sun Never Sets in Our Country

by Abhishek Sengupta

Hridi's mind was a principle. A theory of waves. The first time her thoughts rippled onto my forehead, they had left scars. But not skin deep, the scars penetrated further—beyond matter, beyond minds, hearts, constitutions, borders, beyond the fractured landmass, and dipped into the salty sea of emotions. Whenever Hridi wished, she had my undivided attention.

“Division is just a form of multiplication,” she said. “Divide your countries, and you multiply the bricks and barb wires. Divide your wardrobes, and you multiply ownership. Divide the people by the colour of their tears, and you multiply emotions.”

It took me years to realise that Hridi never gazed in a straight line. Her sight followed a trajectory. A half eclipse. Uncertain of its target, until it fell onto something or someone. Entirely arbitrarily. Like it did upon me on a date that was later erased from all calendars.

I was not her first choice. Nor the second. Not even the last one. I was like the wedding gift you put to use because it'd been sitting in your wardrobe, occupying one of your shelves for no particular reason.

Yet when she put me to use, it felt good indeed. I stretched my arms and legs, heard my rickety joints crack, the sound reverberating in the empty room in which I sat. A solitary chair placed at the centre, a light bulb hanging right above me. No windows. No doors. I couldn't say how long I'd been sitting there. How long I had been hearing Hridi speak to me. Or why I was still alive. But the wrinkles on my hands told me I was way past senility and now belonged to an age unnamed.

"Return home," Hridi instructed inside my head, that day. "It's your turn to teach them."

And I saw her voice. It was a spark of lightning in the morning sky over a country where night hadn't fallen for about a decade now. It was an infinite blue ribbon unrolled until it had spread out on every street and crossed itself on every crossroad of that country. It was a sparrow dancing from one branch to another of a tree - felled, dismembered, its logs now existing as furniture in all the myriad places around the country.

Hridi's voice wore the appearance of that lightning, of that sparrow, and the blue ribbon. Hridi was many, and Hridi was one.

"Where's the home you want me to return to?" I asked her.

"It'll be in the direction you turn to," she said.

So, I turned inwards.



Once upon a time, there was a government, and the government had come upon some intel: their greatest foe wasn't made of matter. Hridi was made of time. That explained why she kept eluding not only the police but the army. (And later, the secret police as well.)

Hridi's skin was woven from the hours a group of parents spent sitting at the crossroads, in the sun's scorching heat, refusing food, their placards questioning the whereabouts of their disappeared sons and daughters. The bones of Hridi's body were constituted of the days protesting students spent in jail, often taking a beating, for asking why the cost of oil and gas shot up while the price of intolerance and xenophobia went down. The minutes it took to thoroughly insult a group of farmers fighting for their rights formed the nerves and capillaries of Hridi's body. And the seconds it took for a dishonoured person to break, to commit suicide, composed the organs that brought Hridi to life.

It made sense (to the government, at least) that a person made of time would choose to hide in the dark shadows of a labyrinthine night. So, a timely legislature banned night across the country. Morning was disallowed to end. They wouldn't give Hridi the pleasure of retreating to the comfort of night-time melancholy. No, they'd rather arrest anyone conspiring with the dark forces to allow the night to set in. All forms of pining for the night, spoken or unspoken, were deemed illegal. The government negotiated an agreement with its western ally nations to retain, on a daily basis, a share of the western sun for itself. The western nations, which pretended to agree begrudgingly—and only when they had brokered a profitable deal—were, in reality, more than happy to take the heat off themselves.

But despite the gazillions of taxpayers' monies spent to enforce the absence of night, the strategy did little to strip Hridi of her invisibility. The government forgot that Hridi still had access to the minds of their probable vote bank. People still looked up to her voice inside their heads. In moments when they felt like giving up, Hridi assured them, "I won't let the government use the sun to vaporize your revolutionary zeal, to burn your fingers pointed at their misdoings, to steal away your privacy by keeping you under the constant scrutiny of the eternal sunrays, by flooding your personal beliefs with an invasive gleam."

A set of diverse scars appeared on the foreheads of the trained Indian Classical singers. The scars defied all definitions of shapes, sizes, and patterns. Their only commonality: Hridi's voice of the lightning, the sparrow, and the blue ribbon inside their heads and outside their consciousnesses. The singers found themselves more than eager to agree to her instructions. They all crooned a certain classical *raga*. The string of notes they sang was a *bandish* of *megh malhar*, a staunch invocation to the rainclouds to gather in the firmament. The singers sang in chorus, although sitting in their respective homes in various cities, different districts, and separate states.

How could the clouds disappoint such patient dedication? How could they be anything but intoxicated by the soul of that harmony? How could they not darken the skies with their heavy hearts?

Clouds eclipsed the sun. Night extended its palpable presence throughout the morning. And Hridi recalled me.



I wasn't born yesterday. Or maybe I was. That was the thing about Hridi; she never let you know for sure. So, forgive my imbecility, but I presumed she'd be physically present back home since she had asked me to return there.

Hridi was made of time and was, therefore, independent of space. For her, home was not a place but an intent. Ever since the scar appeared on my forehead, she sat on the throne of our collective unconscious. That was her home. And I led her to "us" without even knowing that I did.

"You are a beginning," Hridi's voice sat beside me on a seashore that had just come into being. "Not an end. Nor a means to an end. A beginning—that's what you are. And the only beginnings that search for conclusions are in fiction. In life, each beginning leads to newer beginnings."

"What about death?" I was stupid enough to ask. The waves that crashed on the shores repeatedly were Hridi's mind. It went on forever, in principle.

"It isn't yours. Your death belongs to your loved ones. It's for them to experience. All you know in your final moments is suffering. All you get to leave behind is that suffering. At most, some sweet memories to go with it, like the ketchup that comes for free with the food you ordered. That's all."

"Am I dead?" I asked. My asininity was more infinite than the salinity of Hridi's thoughts.

"You were dead at birth," she said. "Now you're alive. Now, you have me and I have you."

"I was stillborn?"

"The girl who never cried, who never really left the room with no doors and windows—that's you." Hridi's

voice struck me like lightning, yet had the lightness of a sparrow and the extensiveness of a blue ribbon wrapping itself all around my wrinkled skin.

“A girl?” I exclaimed. “But I feel like a man.”

“Your body is free to pick its own gender—the absence of any gender, even—regardless of the dictates of your chromosomes.”

I took another look at my wrinkled hands. “What happened to me since I died?”

The invisible Hridi got up from the shore, took my hand, and pulled me up too. “I happened to you since then.”

Hridi folded the sea carefully down its creases and put it in her coat pocket.



Did you know that, if one day, someone felled the mahogany tree by the street corner where the road bends, the elderly might never find their way home again? Quite a few of them keep walking in the sun that never sets, in the nostalgia of their dead and disappeared children, in the sweet and oft-ignored rhythm of shoes and walking sticks on the pavements. The elderly continue to walk, forever believing the mahogany tree awaits them only a few steps ahead and they are just about to reach it. They cross their own towns, their own memories, their own hopes and despair, and later, thoroughly exhausted, they sit down on one side of the pavement, careful not to disturb the free passage of the passers-by who are always too busy to slow down. Then, in a city brimming with pavement dwellers, how do you differentiate the lost from the homeless?

In a speech that Hridi relayed to the minds of the citizens, she assured them that the government had

enough resources for the destitute, that economics is an advertisement of scarcity. A make-believe propaganda. “Economics is a legal function,” she said, “that would let them hide away all their diamonds so the seller may create exclusivity, although there might be enough diamonds to cover each finger of every woman in this world. Although there might be more money than they can shove into a cart. Although there might be a beggar sitting on the pavement waiting for one of those coins to slip off the wagon. Economics doesn’t hear him whispering. Blabbering. Screaming.”

Unsurprisingly, the government wasn’t amused with Hridi’s speech. In a universe where all energy is constant, the political recruits may only multiply by division. In Hridi’s speech, the government recognised her covert intention of stripping the powers that be of their multiplicity.

The lost and the homeless were a nuisance to them, anyway. A foreign leader was due for a visit in the coming weeks. How could he see anything but the beautifully renovated pavements—cleaned and cleansed? How could their paid news media show anything but the cleanliness, the emptiness, the trendiness? After all, there can be no beggars in a country on which the sun always shines.

The destitute were arrested, shoved into cages along with stray dogs, and transported to secret detention centres where even the light of the eternal morning was denied entry. They found themselves in a large room with no windows and no doors, a lightbulb glowing at its centre, right above a solitary chair. An ancient person sat in that chair, not quite human-like in appearance. Their long, frizzled hair would have been grey if it wasn’t so dirty. Sleep dusted in the corner of their eyes seemed to have accumulated over centuries. And the

mud in their fingernails spoke of a patient Earth that existed only in the distant past.

Despite that, the destitute recognised me. “You’ve returned,” they said. “I always knew you would.”



The voices hummed. They were all around me. But inside me, it was only you, Hridi. I spoke in your voice.

You first painted a night—yes, the illegal night—around us, then spread a forest inside it like a picnic blanket. We sat in the middle of that forest, with me at its very centre, between lines of mahogany trees amidst a mist of fireflies that danced to the rhythm of your voice.

“Welcome, dear folks,” you said, and “Welcome, dear folks,” I repeated, and “Welcome, dear folks,” the fireflies buzzed, and “Welcome, dear folks,” the wind whispered to the destitute around us, around me.

The destitute nodded. Some said thank you.

“Do you know where they’ve trapped you?” you asked the destitute sitting cross-legged on the forest floor, paying attention to every word you said.

They shook their heads.

“Inside an atom.” Your voice speaks to their minds, but they hear *me* utter those words.

They don’t get the meaning of what you’re telling them, though. They don’t know much about radioactivity. Or how elements already have a life of their own in which they search for greater stability. Or that the government has power enough to misconfigure and disfigure an atom and its further constituents by stepping inside the atom itself. They don’t know how transmutation works. They might never accept that

man will make a kingdom inside an atom one day and become the king, queen, peasant, horses, and coaches inside it at the same time. They may never comprehend that man will become a kingdom one day. And an island too.

“You’ve been reduced to become negligible,” you explained the best you could. “Tiny enough that the government will no longer need to count your heads in their national census. You no longer have the right to vote, nor are you eligible for free rations. As far as the government is concerned, you no longer exist. They are free and happy to discount your numbers from their country’s exponentially growing population.”

The destitute began speaking among themselves in muffled voices, which gradually rose to a din.

Then, one of them turned to me and said, “I no longer care for any of that, now that I’ve found you.”

Another took that cue and added, “Yes, now *you’ll* take care of us, my son.”

And the others joined. “You’re all that matters.” “We’ve much catching up to do.” “Your mother would’ve been so happy if she was alive. All she wanted was to see her daughter’s face once again. Wish you could have returned a few years ago.”

I was afraid and I was confused. “What’s going on here?” I asked you.

“They see their lost children in you. Their dead and disappeared sons and daughters,” you said.

That’s when I noticed the scars on their foreheads, defying all definitions of shapes, sizes, and patterns. And I knew. “It’s you, isn’t it? You’re whispering those things inside their heads. They’re each seeing what

you want them to see. Perceiving me the way you want them to.”

“Yes, because they need to trust you. You are to be their teacher. You will be their guide.”

“I? A teacher?” I couldn’t hide my bewilderment. “A century-old stillborn like me?”

“That’s exactly what makes you perfect,” your voice shrugged, the jerk of your invisible shoulders unmissable. “You exist on no documents. No paper trail leads to you. In that, you’re much like me.”

“Why not you then?” I argue, mostly out of self-doubt. “You yourself are best suited to be their guide.”

“I’m not flesh-and-bone. In the long run, it’s hard for people to keep following what’s formless.”

Was that a hint of pain in your voice, Hridi? I tried to put my hand on your invisible cheek, but my fingers made no contact. “I love you, you know,” I said, nonetheless.

You said nothing. Only the fireflies glowed brighter for a second or two before resuming their usual dance.

I changed topics. “What would you have me do?”

“Don’t let them fade,” you said, your voice quivering yet again.

I couldn’t help but feel concerned now. “And what about you?”

This time too, you said nothing.

“Tell me,” I persisted.

“I’ll surrender.”

“What?” A stirring ran down my spine and took a dip in the earth. “No. You can’t do that. Don’t even think about it.”

“The government will keep robbing people’s rights, keep punishing them for my deeds as long as they can’t capture me. I can’t let them do that to everyone.”

“How does your surrender help any of that?”

“They’ll have one less reason to be cruel. For example, they can unban the night. Put an end to the curse of eternal mornings.”

“But who’ll guide me?” My desperation did the talking.

“You are ready.”

I understood that you were decided, and there was nothing I could do to shake your resolve. I sighed. “Okay.” I nodded. “But I’m only doing this for you.” I gathered myself. Or tried to. “And I’ll miss you. Terribly so.”

You said nothing, Hridi. Yes, I remember you not saying a thing to the very end. You only doused the forest and the night, and we found ourselves in the room with no doors and windows.



Hridi’s mind was a principle. A theory of waves.

A sparrow perched on the shoulder of the country’s Prime Minister, disregarding the multitude of security personnel all around him. The sparrow didn’t fly away when the bodyguards pointed their guns at it, albeit momentarily. It was their reflex reaction. They soon realized they were pointing their rifles at their Prime Minister and downed their guns and their heads alike. But a scar appeared on the forehead of the Prime Minister. The scar defied all definitions of shape, size, and pattern.

At that very instant, in the room with no doors and windows I jolted in pain. An excruciating pain. I blinked. I was sitting on a seashore with the destitute. It made

no sense. I blinked again to gain perspective. I was in the forest of mahogany trees and fireflies at night. I blinked. The shore again, but dead seagulls, fish, and other creatures had amassed around us. I blinked. The forest was on fire. And I blinked. The walls of the room with no doors and windows were in flames. Splinters flew all around us. Burning columns fell. Dark phlegm surrounded us from all sides. We coughed. The destitute held on to each other.

“My daughter will save you,” someone consoled a frightened soul.

“Help us, son,” another pleaded.

“I know you’ll save us,” yet another assured themselves.

But I could think little beyond Hridi’s pain. I felt the torment Hridi felt as soon as she had stepped into the Prime Minister’s mind. The grime inside was relentless. It slithered through her being. Pierced her senses. Penetrated her sense of judgement. Violated her morality. Left her too broken to fight.

Yet Hridi fought back for those who remained. For the destitute. For me. “I’m here,” she whispered inside the Prime Minister’s head. “Let them go.”

The Prime Minister wished to say no, but Hridi fought through the reluctance, even as she saw herself fading, scattering, turning into dust.

The Prime Minister automatically pulled out a phone, dialled a number.

The burning roof and walls of our room disappeared. The smoke dispersed. We stood inside the framework of what was once a room. Outside was a street. On it, a blue ribbon was slowly rolling itself back into a ball, out of its own volition. Mesmerized, I stepped into the

empty street from which Hridi was taking herself away. Surrendering. And soon fading. The destitute followed me. Together, we followed the blue ribbon that was rolling back into itself.

Another group of people in tattered clothes stepped out of an adjacent alley and joined in following the ever-growing ball of blue ribbon. And then, there were more people. The further we walked, the greater our numbers. People joined us from all sides, from all beliefs, from all cities, from all ethnicities. I walked in front of them all, and they followed me and the ribbon. Their presence filled my heart with an inexplicable warmth. My eyes welled up. "Hridi lives," I muttered to myself. *In you.*

"Hridi lives," those around me responded.

"Hridi lives," they who were around those around me responded.

"Hridi lives," everyone chanted.

For the first time in years, night fell on the streets and shattered into pieces. We walked on the shards of the nubile night, most of us barefoot, but uncaring for the pain. We welcomed the night and focused on our destination, following the giant blue ball ahead of us. "Hridi lives." Our chants now reverberated all across the cities, all across the states, all across the country.

We inched closer and closer to Hridi, following the sound of seagulls and waves inside our hearts, and turned only at the bends where the mahogany trees stood once again in all their majestic glory, amidst a mist of dancing fireflies, in this forest of a country.



Abhishek Sengupta is imaginary. Mostly, people would want to believe he uses magical realism to write novels about world issues, even though he is stuck inside a window in Kolkata, India, but he knows none of it is true. He doesn't exist. Only his imaginary writing does and has appeared in some periodicals and anthologies around the globe, won a few international prizes, including the Bristol Short Story Prize 2023, and been published alongside the likes of Neil Gaiman (who is a little less imaginary). If you're gifted, however, you may imagine him on Twitter/X @AbhishekSWrites.

A Record of My Emperor After the Elixir of Life

by Arda Mori

(Spring | 春)

My Emperor's corpse flutters his
Eyes open; lacquer-blacks desiring

Gentleness of plum leaves. Mercury
Dots his lips as he stubbornly relapses into

A brocade of a previous life's glory. By day he
Rattled the ribcage of the imperial
court; by night he

Coagulated the gardens where he promised women
The peonies' beauty while cultivating their youth

And softness for his own. Now his body bubbles
With Death's fungus, but who dares to challenge

The son of heaven? Beneath the moon, my pulse
Alone laments his bloodless skin.

(Summer | 夏)

My Emperor grew up tracing clouds with
Wooden swords – how he resented tales of

His mountainous wrath, yet nothing spurred
Him more than a defenseless sun. Now he shivers

Under the palace caisson, shrinking from flies
Threatening to make nests of his limbs. Once upon

A summer, we penned poetry on a roof to
Preserve the passing stars; we changed tongues

In every room out of fear. Somewhere amidst his
Parchment skin and bone, there
must lie the young man

Who once gushed waterfall pride; who drew
Light from the bottom of every darkest chest.

(Autumn | 秋)

The cinnabar gates gashing the sky
Recalls my Emperor's later years when

He uprooted trees he'd raised, in hunger
For every shade of knowledge and power that

Marks a mortal greater above all. The greatest sin
I'd committed was to gift him a scarlet record

Of life eternal, drunken with old promises that
Drenched my heart yet scarcely rocked his boat.

For my Emperor, who turned war and lust upon
Faces of the same coin, there was no winning

Without sacrifice. Why question godhood, said he,
When we'd meet in every passage in history?

(Winter | 冬)

That fateful night, my Emperor swirled the potion,
Milky like the hair misting his face, a sliver of

Empresses past. He'd read my eyes the way we'd
Pored over scripture as boys – when our words

Danced rather than slashed. By a moonlit lake,
My Emperor cuts himself open on snowflakes and

Swallows the soup of the dead;
there is no more ambition
To bleed for, no yearning to mourn. He whispers

The goodbye I'd practiced over and over upon
An elderly *guqin*. Soon only winter shall remember

The dreams we'd set free to sun-dappled lands.
Did you know? We had our eternity, seasons ago.



Arda Mori (she/her) is a Malaysian writer. Her words are forthcoming or appear in *Horns & Rattles Press*, *Eye To The Telescope*, *Strange Horizons*, and elsewhere. Find her on Twitter/X at @armori_ or at ardamori.wordpress.com.



The Other Sky

by Heather Child

At the Barrazza cafe in Ghent, you must be so close to the water that you become one with it. The circling midges are your thoughts; you are their bar and they drink cherry beer from your bloodstream. The thoughts come and go, never landing. The canal is a mirror. Above you there is a respectable burble of other languages. The moorhen has been there all the while, bobbing back and forth. Now there is an intimacy between you. You wanted to be close to the water. No need to look up at the old warehouses with their grain winches, no need to lift weary eyes to the sky. The weather is spread out at your feet.

Only.

Is that blue in the water the same blue as the sky? It looks slightly different, not just a shade darker, but a touch more lilac, as though infused with something. No moon-ghost, yet it seems to promise whole new moons, planets with rings, star-tunnels to worlds of light.

The moorhen marrs the mirror.

“You’re a jumper, aren’t you?” it says, cocking its head in a way that makes you touch your cheek self-

consciously. Can it see the blush of alcohol? By rights the bird should not expect an answer, since it should not be speaking, but to stay silent would insult a miracle of nature.

“A jumper?” The word unravels in your mind. “How do you mean?”

“You’ve already spotted the other sky.”

At once you understand. Here, the idea of jumping contains no notion of plunging into water, only launching into that other sky.

“It works, but it may not work out.” The moorhen goes on, blinking its little black eyes. “You don’t know what you’ll find in an unfamiliar sky. Plus...” it says, “plus... there can be a lot of crap in canals.”

Like a forbidden door that has only just appeared, a drug you would never normally dream of taking, it becomes real all at once. Words give the idea a rickety, stick-man-like presence. You could snap them and let out their essence.

“Anyway, I have hay to collect in my beak. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Throw in a talking moorhen, and the effect is even more potent. As the bird swims away, it seems so possible to jump, suddenly. Just jump. The depth is staggering. Even the houses lean towards the canal, as though tempted—over the centuries—to topple into that blue sky and release their bricks. Beyond those roofs with their high trapdoors, grain hooks, dormer windows and black beams, there is the promise of something infinite, manifold, amorphous. What makes a person want to jump into the celestial blue yonder? It is a moment, not a plan. The sky promises different

rules, not the tyranny of roads and roundabouts and all the constraints of land.

Being a bus driver builds up in your arteries, like any job. Technically you enjoy driving and can relax. No need to rush, no problem if there is traffic because you're not really trying to get anywhere. The journey is all that matters, the destination non-existent. When you reach the end of your route, you simply turn the bus around. Maybe you get out and have a cuppa or a rollie if there is time. Fair enough, you gain a wafer of satisfaction with each completed run but, in general, direction loses its potency.

The only reason you are in Ghent is that you took one form of public transport after the next. The only reason you are at this bar is because it is right next to the canal, Ghent's transport network. Travel along the river for a day and you'll be in France. Go up that medieval waterway over there and you'll reach the sea. Ghent is a place with real directions, real choices.

If you jumped into the canal, the other drinkers would stand up in alarm. Drunken tourist! But it wouldn't be an accident. The point would be to land in the blue sky—you'd need a slight run-up. The moorhen glances back from across the water, muttering. But consider the alternative: going back the way you came. Turning the bus slowly at Liset Cross. Here, you can't turn back. It is an edge-of-the-world situation.

There is no run-up to be had, so you use your arms for momentum. The mirror smashes. Cold, but no wetness. Cold like a night sky. Is it dust or stars cascading down? A small headache must be the light pulling sensation of space—the vacuum. Have you reached the blue lilac? There is a nonsensical odour of ale-soaked wood, barley and malt. An elderly man is sprinkling sawdust in front of your eyes. There is thatch between the rafters, and for

an instant you perceive dry, raisin-like faces in it. The old man's nose is too long and his wart is cartoonish, his eyes watery green and protruding from their rims. He giggles and your head swims. This soft darkness is the fleece of a black sheep, spread on the floor. The only light filters through a broken shutter in a dormer window. He spreads sawdust liberally over your body.

“Dry it out,” he coos, “dry away that nasty old life, we don't want canal stink on you.” You are not wet. Batting him off, you struggle to your feet. The musty smells of the loft are comforting, and through the cracked window the lilac sky still looks inviting. But if you peer downwards there are the lower sections of this house, and then the water, and another less crooked but identical house growing up on the other side. You have made a grave mistake.

“Yes,” snickers the old man. “They miss! You miss!”

How is it possible? The shutter swings open and shut, like a trapdoor, and at once you picture your leap into the water, the difficulty of judging exactly what was below. There is a clink, a coldness biting your ankle.

“Nearly forgot,” says the man. “You stay with me now till you dry out, then you make nice insulation like the rest of them.” He gestures to the ceiling, to where straw-coloured faces are wizened and wrinkled, their garb mostly dresses from period dramas.

The panic is all-consuming. Surely you can get past an old man. He massages some sawdust soothingly into your skin. “You wanted the great wide yonder, but you didn't quite make it,” he purrs. “Never mind. I will desiccate you and use you in my roof, but I'll tell you what would have happened had you leaped more accurately and made it to the sky. And I'll tell you with

such vivid detail that you'll be able to experience it perfectly in your mind's eye. Eh? How about that?"

The smell of dust gets up your nose, just like when you were checking the musty seats of the bus on a warm day.

"Does anyone make it?"

He ignores this.

"Picture yourself falling," he says, "feeling the light touch on your skin, in your soul, as you meld with the watery blue, a lilac blue, a colour more dense than air, so you float as much as you fall. It allows your thrashing to get you somewhere. You drift up a little way and see the whole universe spread out below. You have so much choice. Below are the downward houses, the chimneys... but you can move onward into the blue and see other civilisations clustered on planets but reachable, just faded slightly like daytime moons. In these clusters you will find elfin creatures, near humans, ideas of humans, waterfalls, animals, and you can move further into the firmament, like walking on water."

His talk is a torrent, unceasing and heedless of time. It is so easy to travel from planet to planet. Go round the rings and they will slingshot you onwards. He describes tribes with heads like daffodils, proud and yellow.

When someone crosses the water they separate. Only a part of you comes here, he says. The other part is back on the bus, orbiting roundabouts. Driven by all the diesel in the universe. *Cheers drive, thanks a lot* and you look over and the old man's getting off the bus and you're travelling on to the next roundabout. Islands, they call them in other countries. Did he say that?

Your skin is dry, a little wisp of you going with him to fix up his attic, but these islands give your journey the

shape of a destination. On this one the inhabitants have heads like tulips, fat and berry-sour and impossibly indigo. You build up speed to reach the next. Round and round you go.



Heather Child is based in Bristol, UK, and is an author of mostly speculative fiction. Her debut novel was *Everything About You* (Orbit, 2018) and her most recent book, *The Undoing of Arlo Knott*, is about a man who can undo his last action—like having an ‘undo’ button for life.

Anticaprice / Chemical Engineering Mage

by Bogi Takács

from Jobs for Magical People (That Do Not Involve the Military)

After you come across the phrase in a popular book
about Freemasonry,
you write it on a scrap of paper and pin it above your
desk:

V·I·T·R·I·O·L·

It stands for *visita interiora terrae,
rectificandoque, invenies occultum lapidem*
– you don't like any of the translations,
make your own:
*visit the interior of the Earth,
and by rectifying it,
you will find the hidden stone.*

Rectification like the Hebrew *tikun*;
also as in *tikun olam*, repairing the world.

It appeals to the alchemist concealed within you,

the figure you imagine yourself to be
when you put on your hard hat,
visibility vest, your boots –
and begin your rounds on the factory floor.

Chemical reactions
usually run their course;
there is that sliver of a percent
when they go awry unexplained.
It adds up over time.
Your task is to ensure
nothing breaks; to stabilize reality.
It works better if you understand
what happens in every process –
it works better if you care.

Rounds, rounds on the factory floor.

The opposite of warfare – creation.
Not ex nihilo, but by means of
artifice and cunning.
In this country, this power
was studied with an intent
to disrupt; you cast that
all aside and obtained

an alchemy of sorts;
an anticaprice, a paradox,
both mercurial and anti-mercurial.
Beneficent presence.

The attributes of the Greek Hermes, the Roman
Mercury
– once you look up the Jewish parallels,
the sefira of Hod according to Rabbi Moshe
Cordovero

and you feel a syncretic frisson as you do so –
knowledge and magic, trade as in exchange,
the uncomfortable capitalist aspect of production
efficiency
that somehow also made you indispensable
in the modern economy, chemical engineering mage;
the element of the unexpected, yet of solidity,
firmness –

one possible etymology for Hermes is ‘stone heap’
and you have located the stone
within yourself; now your task is
to make sure to bring it
to everyone else
with every step you take
on the factory floor.

/end/



Bogi Takács (e/em/eir/emsself or they pronouns) is a Hungarian Jewish author, editor, critic and scholar who's an immigrant to the US. Bogi has won the Lambda and Hugo awards, and has been a finalist for other awards like the Ignyte and the Locus. E edited three volumes of *Transcendent: The Year's Best Transgender Speculative Fiction*. Eir debut poetry collection *Algorithmic Shapeshifting* and eir debut short story collection *The Trans Space Octopus Congregation* were both released in 2019, and eir second collection *Power to Yield and Other Stories* has just been published this year. You can find Bogi talking about books at <https://www.bogireadstheworld.com>, and on various social media like Bluesky, Patreon, Mastodon and Instagram as bogiperson.

Darnsworth Products

by RSL

People imagined the worst that cold December morning it arrived, fears flooding their minds; imagined coming downstairs to their TVs stolen, living rooms ransacked, their partners, pets, children gone. Nearly everyone agreed to creeping through their house with a tight chest and an overthinking mind, all of them drawn curiously to a single room in their house. With thumping hearts they peered from the safety of distance, hands shivering as they gripped the nearest wall. There, in the corner or on the countertop or on the charity shop plastic table, was the oddly-coloured device shimmering in the grey, morning light: The Darnsworth Products Coffeemaker.

It took *one* morning for Darnsworth to reach a virality of a memefied outrage or a celebrity death. Hundreds of thousands of posts across Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit. Pictures of strangely-illuminated coffeemakers of manifold shapes, qualities, and sizes. An untold number of people thought it a prank; but a great many more thought something very different. That Darnsworth had always existed, that the presence of the

coffeemaker in their kitchens was no more surprising than the direction water flowed out of a tap.

This problem is present from the very first post, a tweet:

@sarahxlowett: Does anyone else have these coffeemakers in the kitchen?
I asked my dad about it and he said we've had it since we moved in. WTF.

If the coffeemaker had been a staple of their family home, why would Sarah Lowett suddenly have forgotten its existence? This amnesia was present in the millions of posts and interactions across social media. The general narrative was: OP would report having asked their parents, or their roommates, colleagues, if that coffeemaker was new; and, upon learning it was, in fact, not new, had been an architectural facet of their kitchens since time immemorial, they had sought refuge online.

Many attributed this blank in memory to the failings of a younger generation. A large number of posters were often below the age of twenty-five.

Jessica Sinden of *The Guardian* wrote of an “obviated time”, of “moments lost to oblivion in the crushing monotony of the everyday”, blaming this mass forgetting on the spread of “corporate ontology” into almost every aspect of our lives.

The Telegraph, meanwhile, ran a story with the headline, *Zoomers: The ADHD Generation*. Journalist Steve Hackett called the youth of the day a “degenerate group” who “have their heads so far into their phones that the real world simply moves around them.” He added: “This isn’t just some Mandela Effect; this is a complete absence of reality. A mass amnesia.

These are the signs of a woefully misinformed and underperforming youth.” He even disciplined his own son, he said, for not remembering the kitchen appliance.

Both articles, however, made the same mistake: the insistence that Darnsworth has always existed. They were quick to diagnose Zoomers as part of a problem and yet neither of them critically assessed the ominous implications of millions forgetting a supposedly household name.

There were two potentialities: either Darnsworth had always existed, and millions simply forgot, or Darnsworth manifested only recently, implanting itself in the minds of an even larger group of people (since those who could not remember Darnsworth were a minority).

The UK Government, among many others, was eventually petitioned to address the issue. Multiple countries contributed to a global taskforce to investigate Darnsworth Products for malpractice, for invasion of private property, and for possessing potentially nefarious technologies uncleared by patent registries.

A week after the petition reached its record-breaking number, the head of this taskforce addressed an anxious audience with their findings.

“There is no such company on any financial registry,” she declared. “Darnsworth Products doesn’t exist.”

Conspiracies flooded the internet. Theories that Darnsworth was a secret government program gone wild, or was a mass delusion brought on by world events, invaded minds and thoughts with that virulent ease of flu in a chicken pen across all online forums. Some even argued the government arrested the Head of Darnsworth and harnessed whatever malevolent technology they possessed. Nasdaq shook like a

seismograph as rumours spread about which companies might benefit most from this House-invading tech, stocks tumbled and rose in equal measure.

Everyone missed the point, though. So caught up in the back and forth they failed to see that all this arguing and rumour-spreading and general calamity only served to benefit one entity: *Darnsworth*. A week after Sarah Lowett's viral post, *Darnsworth* was now a naturalised aspect of existing in the universe: solid as the carbon bonds of diamond and as unknowable a black hole's innards.

A scroll through any social media platform to relax became a futile exercise. Facebook, with its higher word count, was flooded with essay-length testimonials. One father made a post explaining how he had locked away the phone of their youngest son (no doubt on account of the Hackett article) and now was keeping him and the boy's mother on a 10-coffee-a-day diet. His reasoning? "Darnsworth refills my DarnCups for free! We can't turn that service down." Another had a video of their four-year-old daughter unabashedly hugging the coffeemaker, saying without a lick of irony, "Darnsworth is a family product."

Some abhorred these posts, though that *some* were a minority. The vast majority of posters enjoyed taking part, to not feel left out. A comment left on that aforementioned video espoused a "genuine connection to all those following Darnsworth," going as far as to refer to the girl and the father and others alike as "Darnsfolk," who knew their "Darn Worth."

Darnsworth's virality spread to the listicles as well. A BuzzFeed post bore the title *10 Reasons Darnsworth Shows Us Our Darn Worth*. Number one read as such:

When I was younger, I always wanted to use the coffeemaker. The logo warmed me. Held me like I was a baby in his father's hands. That's how I imagined coffee to taste. Togetherness. Dad never did let me have a coffee—not even a small one! But now, at age thirty, I take the time in the morning to have a Darn fine cup of coffee. Because I need to know my Darn Worth!

Darnsworth grew with each mention and, like all mutating viruses, made the leap to more profitable mediums. Whether you were waiting for an already-late bus, in the queue at the bank, lifting weights at the gym, or sitting in the cubicles of public toilets, everyone talked about Darnsworth. Even those strangers who once walked blindly past each other at shopping centres now stopped, and paused, and talked to anyone returning their newfound enthusiasm. People made clubs, had meetings in bars and pubs, had quiz nights about the Darnsworth Patented Coffeemaker.

Young children especially were fixated with Darnsworth. It was as though they could not unplug themselves from the product. As though they were born with Darnsworth already in their heads.

This author's children spoke of nothing but Darnsworth, some nights refusing sleep, sitting instead in the kitchen, staring at the coffeemaker. They were asked one evening what was the matter. Impatiently they replied, "Shush, Daddy. The programme is on."

The author thought it a game. Yet another fad or trend they could not follow.

How wrong they were. How stupid. How--

This author apologises for the intrusion of subjectivity into what is supposed to be an objective accounting of the Darnsworth cascade. It has been a difficult time, and there is not long left before the *change*, so continuing on from my notes:

Darnsworth's growth took place over three stages, all of which made use of viral trends of some kind. The first began with the post from @sarahxlowett, which continued engagement for the first week and a half. It was during this period that the posts moved away from the coffeemakers themselves and toward Darnsworth's logos and the strange phenomena of the "Two Sides" effect. Tweets, and posts on Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and TikTok really took off at this stage, as people responded to each other about what their own Darnsworth logos looked like. Here is an example of this effect in an exchange on Twitter:

@pokemepls: I knew this shit was off for so long. Look at the logo! Its eyes follow u around the room.

@honeydue: Eyes? What eyes? I see a donut with empty black sockets sliced into it.

Both individuals looked at the same image and saw different things! Picture a coin with two observers either side. One will see heads, the other tails. Neither reports are incorrect. They are simply two sides of the same coin. If millions of onlookers see something entirely different when looking at the Darnsworth logo, the only conclusion to draw is that Darnsworth is far more consistent with the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle

than with Euclidean geometry. Perhaps it is our human conception of three-dimensional space limiting our perception. In three-dimensional space, Darnsworth is a collection of items across the world bearing a logo, but if humans could perceive four-dimensional space...

There is still the matter of how and why observers see the “sides” they see, the logos. Children often saw smiling cats with big eyes, the letters D and P overlapping to look like an open mouth biting on a lollipop, or dancing coffee beans. For the average bigot, the logo was St. Georgian shields defending a sovereign England, or a racist caricature.

The image, then, always comforted the onlooker. Darnsworth knows how to placate a person, much like how advertisers mine your data so as to better control the products a customer is exposed to.

This author’s own experience: the Darnsworth logo is the face of a man. A vague impression of a kindly uncle, or maybe even a mixture of several. When this author looks upon him, he sees the same memory every time.

They walk through a bedewed meadow, mist billowing through overgrown reeds, and a low-hanging sun scorches the sky in a crimson blaze. To the east, where the tomb door of night is sliding shut over the open vault of sky, alien asterisms shake. The man from the logo is beside the bearer of these memories, me, whistling a tune that—

Actually, only now as I recount the memory do I recall where it’s from: my daughter’s favourite TV show.

Forgive me, but I—when I look to the horizon, to the sun on its controlled descent into the earth, shadowy forms stand huddled in a scrum, silhouetted in the dying light. These figures I know intimately. I have

seen this memory—if one can even call something a memory *before* they have lived it—since the arrival of Darnsworth and its logos. But I did not—could not know its significance at the time when I was still with them. With my husband, with my daughter, my son.

When I was not alone. When I was not sat here in the dark pulling fevers from my sleep, to speak out loud the fall of this world, its Darnsworthification. I have so little time now but I can't—I can't think. Darnsworth not only shows what the observer wants most at that very moment; it knows what the observer will want—no, what they will *need* for the rest of their life.

Again, I'm—*this author* apologises. The clock ticking away behind the camera keeps smiling. It's odd, to know it is coming. Not even a death but a change.

I should just get on with it. How the second trend began when another slew of Darnsworth Products manifested. Except this time, fewer people woke with unease, fewer people cared, while more people (mis)remembered the objects. One poster remarked that their Darnsworth Patented Fridge had been a reliable shoulder to cry on through their divorce, where it had always stocked a healthy number of beverages whenever the poster needed to decompress. Another sang the praises of their Darnsworth Patented PotatoPeeler: “Ever since I was a child I wanted to peel spuds. And I remember my mum getting me this Darnsworth Patented PotatoPeeler for Christmas and all morning I washed and I peeled them! With each slice of potato skin I shaved away the stress of the day. Each cut, each spray of starch across my hands, was a cuddle I lost myself in, where I could forget Me.”

While these aforementioned manifestations are fairly quotidian, a larger number of them went by the “Rule of Ridiculousness”: the more odd and strange the item, the more mileage it had on social media when

subsequently posted. No longer were Darnsworth's products manifesting in the living room as something as average and normal as a pine table, instead came fish sculptures made of discarded bottle caps, realistic models of moons that stank of rotting flesh, pet fish that choked in water and needed to swim in Diet Soda (which eventually became Darn Soda). One person even found a seashell in their living room. Its conical opening gave off the impression of infinity, and when lifting it to the ears, it susurrated in deep, dulcet tones, "The Black Ocean hears you."

At the height of this nonsense, rumours began to spread in the media about the leaked findings of an article soon to be published in *NATURE*. Reports, newspapers, Tweets, TikToks, everything posted wild speculations on what the article could be. The more incensed followers of Darnsworth argued that it would be an article on the benefits of the company to the mental health epidemic. Those who often didn't remember Darnsworth, however, suggested it might have led to a breakthrough in quantum mechanics, or in the many worlds theories. Much like the groundbreaking revelation that the universe is not *locally* real, in that photons decide their spin when observed, Darnsworth's logos collapse into a static logo by being observed by a psyche. A war broke out across all platforms between the Darn Folk and the then-dubbed Darn Haters. Just as protests began brewing in city centres, as online vitriol oozed from digital spaces and into the unkempt and weed-ridden roads of broken metropolises, the paper was released.

A spate of remains were discovered, north of the Cradle of Humankind. Carbon-14 dating placed the remains in the Upper Paleolithic era, over 40,000 years ago, when a nascent humankind was crawling from the

womb of the world. On the front page of the article stood a lab-coated scientist pointing toward a scribble on a boar's jawbone. A zoomed-in image of this spot shows all: an in-depth, engraved Darnsworth logo.

At its most basic level this statement is flawed. How can a company predate companies? Even mercantilism? A vocal minority questioned the evidence, while many, many others argued that this was simply an immutable fact that, like Fukuyama's declaration of the end of history, humanity now faced the end of *want*. Humans have always been cared for, had their desires met, and they have always been part of one big corporate family.

People were too tired from their jobs, too worried about the end of the world to be concerned with something as odd as this. After all, what harm was Darnsworth doing? All they did was give out products for free. They gave impoverished homes food-packed fridges and massage chairs for fatigued, ever-working parents, even going so far as to entertain the children with an endless supply of distracting devices. At multiple places in the world that did not even have the facilities for electronic appliances, fridges and TVs and phones manifested all the same, working curiously without power.

Darnsworth's imperialist aspirations reared their head. Why would it take after a westernised neoliberalist practice? What was stopping this corporate entity from simply being a socialist one? Why not simply provide endless accessibility to heat, water, internet, and allow humans to never be without *while* letting them maintain agency? Why did it have to do what it did next, when everyone, including *me*, took the change?

Do not judge us too harshly, future reader. Humans have short memories and weak wills. How many times do we walk past an empty field, even remark on its

purity, its blankness, only for one day to come across that same field to see that, seemingly overnight, it's been turned into a muddied wasteland of ruination, where pyroclastic flows of rubble and concrete ejecting constantly into foul, grimy air? We might feel a detachment at first, a feeling of alienation as our reality is slowly overwritten, the neuronal pathway burned, branded with this new image. And sure enough over the coming days we will no longer remember the field, only the housing estate that has always been coming slowly into existence. Try to remember it now, if you can, a place that preceded a place. Try to remember the hilly promontory where now stands a supermarket. Try and recall the windswept willows and poplars where now sits two-hundred houses. Try to remember the home you once had.

I remember my children, Alyssa and Stephen shouting for orange juice. Adrian still in bed, laughing at me as I give in to our children's demands.

Memories are like mist. You breathe them in, feel them condense, turn solid, only to evaporate again a moment later, never again to be attained.

I suppose there's no point.

I suppose things should just be accepted.

I suppose those silhouetted figures, that kindly uncle of a logo, knew all along. I suppose *Darnsworth* knew all along.

My family knew that, even tried to tell me. But I was obstinate, as always. And now, who am I to judge, sat here alone, this tattered house tearing itself apart day by day?

My husband, my two children, they didn't know what would happen. No one did. They were caught up with the craze. Who doesn't get caught up?

I tried. I really did. To be objective and to account what I knew but I—

I'm a person.

But Darnsworth understood. Darnsworth *knows* what I want before I want it, knows what I need before I need it.

And it is only Darnsworth who can bring my family back.



That's pretty much how we all came to join the Darnsworth Gang. It was at the end of the second phase, when everyone wanted to get in on the craze of getting new products, the hashtag #TheDarnsworthMakeover making the rounds. All you had to do was use this tag and post on any social media platforms a picture of your room as a kind of 'before' image. The 'before' posts were always messy. I even want to say *misaligned* for some reason. It's hard to cater to so many people with so many odd quirks, so many eccentricities and idiosyncrasies. So Darnsworth went about amending that. I see that now. It's not so much homogenisation as it was a unification. A coming together. An interweaving of separate cloths. It was only like a day ago that I did the same old Darn thing and look at me now.

Ha! In my previous notes, I wrote, "all of a person's unique qualities and intimate touches were wiped away come the 'after' image." Darnsworth isn't boiling away uniqueness here. Darnsworth loves the unique, the odd, the strange! That's the Darnsworth ethos.

Better yet, in these “after” images, we always see the cheek-eating, face-stretching grin of our lovely OP. Before that, they never smiled. Or if they did, it wasn’t genuine. And you can tell. But now, they all smile exactly the same way, enthralled by that same oneness and connection I now feel. If I listen carefully, I can hear all our heartbeats thumping as one.

But again, my notes are silly little scribbles. I wrote:

These ‘after’ images had empty smiles, the nothing-behind-the-eyes curl of the lips, the I-have-been-emptied-out-and-repurposed bearing of the too-white-to-be-real teeth. Who in the world-as-it-is remembers not this smile? It is everywhere: shopping centres, stadiums, hotel lobbies.

But now those smiles nourish me! To look at them is to be held. To be reflected in the smile of another. I once deplored them because I hated what they showed me: a mean, tired man.

Wow. Again, in my notes, I even say, “Why did people continue to post? Surely they saw the difference.”

Of course they did. That’s why they did it, dummy!

After the success of this viral trend—with many, I suspect, seeing how beautiful those smiling faces were!— other corporations jumped in. Financing and marketing firms, fast food empires, even blockbuster movie studios who wanted the rights to tell the glorious rise of Darnsworth! All of them tweeted #TheDarnsworthMakeover.

The following day, every corporation had been welcomed into Darnsworth. Twitter was no longer Twitter, Reddit no longer Reddit. Upon loading any social media site you’d see the Darnsworth logo

sparkling into your mind, and the words *Darnsworth Feed* squirming slowly on a blank page.

Finally, everything had become one. And the Darnsworth Web—sorry, the Darnsworth *Family*—grew.

People didn't have to go to their boring old jobs at stinky fast-food joints. They got to work at a fantastic, enterprising corporation like Darnsworth! Who would want to be anything *other* than a Darnsworth employee? Why be a nurse, or a teacher, a builder, an architect? *Phooey* to all that degree nonsense. Darnsworth makes more-sense. I've never seen so many people smiling.

But for some dumb-dumbs it was just too darn much to handle. They tossed themselves away like a three-week-old ham! What a waste of good meat.

Other Darn-Haters got annoyed by the Darnsworth family. Tried to organise and go to the woods, to the ruined shops that had somehow slipped past our forever-loving embrace! They'd sit there and whine and shout about their rights. They have rights! They claimed—oh my, I can't believe it, even in *my notes* I claimed the same thing!—that we'd taken away their internet access. We did no such thing. We just want people to sign up and post a picture of their room, using the fun new feature on DarnsFeed, called the #TheDarnsworthTakeover. And by the very next day, you'll be a part of the Darnsworth Family—because you're Darn Worth It!

But these angry people, these confused people, they thought we were all one big brain. Even I say as much here. Ha. Look at this:

What follows is an estimation of the
events, pieced together from half-heard
jabberings in the night beside dying fires:
Many who were in these communes, then,

had organised themselves in stores that survived the Darnsworth Cascade. They were safe havens, procuring supplies and foodstuffs where they could, from farms that had also survived the Darnsworth Cascade. These bastions of rebellion were seen as sores on the surface of the world, of Darnsworth. Whenever any of those “corporatized” by Darnsworth interacted with someone who had not been, there was always a kind of foul air between them in conversation. When one of the corporatized stopped to speak, the foot traffic surrounding them also slowed. One corporatized individual was a string that would shake, disturbing the rest, until they would all turn their heads. It was like a web. People tried to avoid the corporatized for this very reason. They were not sure for how long they could keep shaking the corporatized before whatever hung in the dark corners of that web came crawling.

When speaking to these corporatized, the conversation would circle with platitudes and Americanisms (with even a bland, vague imitation of a generalised American accent, a composite of every voice it seemed). They would say phrases like, “Why don’t you just have a darn good day?” or “Ain’t it a darn shame,” no matter the reply. No actual conversation would take place. Never. Try as one might, anyone who tried to break that barrier would only be fed this bot-like chatter, a forever frustrating trial. Eventually the corporatized collocutor

would walk away, smiling still, and then the disturbed web, the shaking tendrils of thin white string that tied them all as one, would settle, and the once slowed foot traffic would resume normal pace.

Wow-weee. Who is this Darn-nincompoop that writes so stiffly? (I kid, it's me!) Wowser. What a darn shame I used to be such a so-and-so. Such a hose on the fire. A stick in the mud. Hole in the head. Break in a bone. Knife in the eye. Suppurating sore. Comet toward a planet. A solar flare across the Black Ocean. A—

Whoops! Got caught up in myself. Like I tuned into the wrong radio for a moment. Where was I? Oh, yeah. The *Family*. We're all a big family—that's what I was missing, what we all were really. So the Family released this post on DarnsFeed saying that we'd release a Product Recall Squad for those who were still avoiding our shindigs online. The old (boring, tired, lonely, angry) me said this:

A post on DarnFeed posted by DarnFeeder #84h38dab78x spoke of a “Darnsworth Product Recall”, and of an “Order decreed by the Council of the Black Ocean”, supposedly “predating man's inception”, which gave Darnsworth Products the right to reclaim any and all technology that did not appear to be updating to “working requirements”.

The day after, there came the Darnsworth Product Recall Squad.

The Squad, seemingly everywhere at once, manifested as randomly as did the products in people's homes, and they would indiscriminately capture anyone who had

not yet at this time been corporatized. They would appear, it is said, from back-alley doorways into the large factories, from the side doors of shops, and in one incident there were six of them who emerged from a singularly small bush beside a small Darnsworth Convenience store, where they promptly grabbed a passerby who screamed wildly as she was pulled in and swallowed by that bottomless greenery. They would collect those who gathered at these independent stores with an inhuman strength. It did not matter where one was, they were always liable to be taken.

What's this pishposh about being "corporatized" anyhow? If anything we're *familiarised*. *Familified*. *Darniated*. Or better yet, *Accepted*. The Product Recall Squad is well within their rights to collect those who feel misplaced and disconnected. You wouldn't want to keep a faulty phone that couldn't charge, would you? Always got to be plugged into that main source. Into the Family.

Look at me! An hour ago I couldn't stop looking at that kindly uncle and seeing the silhouetted huddle and imagining the faces of—what were their names again? oh, who cares. By Darn am I glad I signed up for that Darn Internet. I didn't even introduce my own Darn name did I? Well that old downer Me ain't me no more, and those names, whatever they are, are no heavier than a feather on my heart. And if I don't remember them, it ain't a *Darn* worry! I gotta remember my Darn Worth.

Already everything feels clearer, better. It's like slipping into a hot bath after a cold day, where you can't feel you no more, where the meat of your arms and your head, heck, your whole body, slides from those old

bones like bacon from ribs in a slow cooker. With every second you smile, it all oozes out of you, that virus, *pain*.

And you feel okay.

You remember your Darn Worth as you close your eyes and you're gone.

The End

If you enjoyed this DarnTale from DarnFeeder #6h5rr54k321, check out his other work: *There's No Darn Way Out*, or *My Darn Shame*, or his best yet, *That Darn Time I Lost My Darn Family*.



RSL (he/they) is a writer and academic of weird, absurd fiction. They are doing a PhD on the importance of New Weird fiction to mental health in marginalised communities. When he isn't avoiding his PhD work, he's writing about his nightmares and playing games, and is also an associate editor with *Haven Spec* magazine. You can find him at @RSLjnr on the blue bird (now the terribly named X), or read his fiction in *CHM* and *Vastarien*.

Hoppers, the Wisest Frog in Space

by Seth Wade

Tell all the truth but tell it slant— Emily Dickinson

Poor little Hoppers does not wish
for this title, for space is dumb
because space is empty.

Space is sad.

Instead, he dreamt of muggy swamps,
from the tank of an enthusiastic
kindergarten class (gulping
beetles and dragonflies,
diving beneath cattail roots
then basking on lily pads,
joining the trilling chorus
of so many others
just like himself)

until he was flung into orbit when the school exploded after intrepid innovators broke Earth's core.



Seth Wade is a tech ethicist studying and teaching at Bowling Green State University. You can read his fiction and poetry in publications like *Hunger Mountain Review*, *Strange Horizons*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *HAD*, *Apparition Literary Magazine*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, *BAM Quarterly*, *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *The Gateway Review*, and elsewhere.

fox games

by Emily Y. Teng

the foxes have come out to play,
redfur russet shadow
swiftly here then there then gone.
see the twist of nine tails,
hear the soft bark of laughter
womanly, manly, nothing human at all.
a tap of the paw, and pebbles transmute to pearls
water to rice wine.
hands dipped empty into pockets
surface lacquered in gold, lacquered in old dreams.
dappled brush of smoke on stone
sink to earth and rise again and they are
never where you think they ought to be.

the foxes have come out to play.
moonbright dusk against the curve of
starship skin, they have slipped aboard,
made space for themselves
between metal sheen and the abyss of stars.
map every inch of vessel and still
you'll never catch them in the act.
they loosen bolts, lick the rustproof from plating,
riddle the AI pilot until it, all confused,
swings the ship's nose sunward.

like ghosts their giggles lick down your neck as you
curse, sweat, chase down the
leavings of their mischief.
in space, all that stands between you and nothing
is the thickness of a fox's pelt.

the foxes have come out to play
and you should have known the
night belonged to them,
should have known better than to
cross their shadows with yours.
laughter spilled out from behind the gate of teeth is
laughter nonetheless.
all that's left now is to run
and run and run, and tell yourself
the claw-pricks on your ankles are
stones kicked up in flight,
the rasp of little tongues is sweat-sting
and nothing more.
run and run and
run your hope into the ground.
nothing eats the heart like the hunger
of a fox's whims.



Emily Y. Teng is a speculative writer based in Seattle, Washington. Her writing has appeared in *Uncanny Magazine* and in *The Book of Witches* anthology. She currently works full-time as a narrative game designer and is known to get way too competitive about casual game nights

In the Loams of Hope

by Jorja Osha

You were born on the first day of Decimation Season when the hateful sky god Yadoh swallowed the fifth star, his daughter Mafuah. This is a story that will always follow you, you who came from the heaving swell of your Fourth Mother, planted by your Second Father. No matter what they tell you, none of these things matter. They will not determine your end. Even in your infantile state, you somehow know this truth as the great shamans speak over your small, squirming frame and declare your birth an ill omen. They deem you cursed.

It's on this night that you're born you learn your first pain, your first lesson on how to bear the things that are sure to come. They prick your brown skin eliciting a wail from your fragile form, using the blood of a slaughtered sheep to draw wards along your tiny, innocent limbs.

These wards will serve as protection but not for you, for them. This is another thing you seem to know as if a secret has been whispered to you in the darkness.

They call you Bhutami, sometimes Soppo. When you earn their praises, or bring them good tidings that make their souls fat and satisfied, they might call

you *Sweetling* or *Child O'Ears*. These are the sweetest of names that they call you and so freely and stupidly you give to them until you realize that they have two tongues. This is your second lesson and it comes for you quickly.

This is the day you learn to use your ears.

You hear the angry gnashing of their teeth as they speak behind your back. In the shadows they give you names like *Foolish Girl*, *Easy Bird* and *Unclean Child*. But you always knew this, didn't you? Even before you understood language you heard their voices on the wind stirred on by the one who devoured Mafuah. Nevertheless, you smile.

Yes, smile. You keep it firm on your face even when they finally take your birth name from you and you let them because you've been taught to cause no trouble and so you don't. You do run however, fast and far into the forest on the outskirts of the village where you press your hands into the wet earth in front of the black tree that has existed since the beginning of time. It's no wonder you think to bury yourself beneath its roots and sleep under its shade for eternity. A place to protect your head full of dreams.

Second Mother eventually finds you here, knelt in the dirt and drags you away with worry on her tongue. When you grasp her hands, smooth like blown glass, you feel her thundering heart and for the first time, but not the last time, you kill your dreams. When the black tree's roots seek you out urging you to return, you don't. Not yet.

On the eve of Prospering Season you slip from sight and stand at the lip of the same forest daring yourself to listen to the whispers calling to you. It's a small thing that you do, grabbing a fist full of dirt and swallowing

down the loam. A sweet taste lingers in your mouth when you whisper your dreams against the bark. You don't know it now but this simple act will be what saves you. This will be the one thing that will never be taken from you.



A rough patch of skin forms along your left elbow just two months shy of your fourteenth year. The right one is covered a week and a half later before the rest take shape, peppering your gangly arms like unsightly wild weeds. Each one of them is misshapen and dark and, to your dismay, the other children quickly take notice of them. Their lips curl back as they hurl assaults like spears in your flank, their hateful gleaming teeth showing them for the jackals they are.

When you sleep that night you dream of her. Who you come to call Dead Sister, and it's in these dreams where she teaches you your first trick. In the morning when the dark rings about your wrists itch, you blunt your nails until you feel the same numbness in your lips spread along your fingertips.

Almost a year passes before the rough patches finally go. They peel off like apple skins, now soft. The velvety spirals slip down your throat with ease when you bring them to your lips. The new skin on your arms is just as soft, an enviable shade of carob that glows golden when the sun illuminates you. Though it's no longer necessary to blunt your nails you continue to do so. A trick no longer. It's a part of you that cannot be undone.

The other children turn more vicious because of this. Some of your teachers as well, though their infractions are more subtle. Regardless, you still hear them.

Your Dead Sister hears them as well, this sister who isn't one of your fourteen siblings, and when she comes and cradles you in her many black arms cooing a lullaby she brings with her another trick. Her spindly star-stained fingers push a new lesson into your scalp between the braids she weaves down your back. The stars become a bead, each becoming an anchor to steady you on your journey.

This time when you wake you know how to bite your tongue without drawing blood.

You do bleed eventually but this is inevitable as a girl. The pain that follows isn't one you can absorb because it's already inside of you, making your limbs curl and your back bow at this new hurt. All the while your four mothers celebrate as your knees buckle and bile threatens to clog your throat. Had you kept your eyes open when you threw your head back to howl, your hurt thrumming through your core, you might have seen the fifth star watching you.



The next five years bring a century of wars you never asked for. They tear through your flesh, leaving a million and one pockmarks. War wounds. Only when it becomes too much do you figure out how to stretch yourself around this unwanted pain.

For each spear and notched arrow that hits its mark, you weave yourself around their broken shafts trying to make them a part of you. Foolishly, you nurture them, thinking of them as just an extension of you, like a tree with a great many branches in which you'd bloom the most beautiful of flowers and fruits. The pacifist in you is too complacent to contemplate the consequences for what you've done so when the moment arrives it's far too late.

It arrives in the form of the now-grown children who renamed you, the great shamans who warned against you, the strangers who eyed you and your four mothers, two fathers and twenty-nine brothers and sisters who speak of you but not to you. One by one they take from you, plucking your ripe fruits to satiate their hunger. And you let them feast. You feed them, never hesitating to bear more of your harvest, not until the brambles and burning arrows build a black pyre in your throat.

Because of this it isn't long before Dead Sister returns. She comes to you when you cough up black plumes, thick enough to block out the angry sun that now scorches your bones. She comes when your First Father speaks of marriage and your second, your future.

Only once the moon is high above everything does Dead Sister whisper conspiratorially to you about a thing she calls fire. A different fire. It appears in her many-closed fists and roars in her eyes and mouth like a million suns. This, of course, scares you until she shows you how to bring it to heel. You, however, can only manage a spark between trembling fingers. She wears a proud grin at this. It stirs something within you, wakes it and makes it hungry. Starved and greedy you swallow this new feeling and burn.

This is how you die the first time.

In death you dream as Dead Sister collects your ashes and throws you into the stars above the village. Here amongst the blackness that warms you into a great inferno you are remade under her gaze. Your unformed mouth opens and your hands float constellations apart to search for something. For *anything*. Soon enough you find it in the shape of teeth you cannot see. Suddenly you remember the story of the fifth star and all your terrible wounds that came afterwards.

Then just as swiftly you take shape and now reborn
come down with the rain and thunder. Violent and loud.

Nameless and alone in this rebirth you take naming
yourself *Naawa*, she who heralded in Reckoning Season.



Voice now forged with the same fire that serves as
both your weapon and shield, you cast your fury down
unrepentant. You scorch the old dirt paths you once
travelled in fear and shame, the rain unable to smother
your rampage. Twenty-nine brothers and sisters
become fifteen, become nine, become five. The great
shamans fall powerless and the now-grown children
turn into smoldering cinders when you spit back all
the hurt you've swallowed and made part of you for too
many years.

No new season comes after your arrival, you don't
allow it even when your four mothers come to you with
their hands outstretched and tear-stained faces. Your
two fathers come to you as well, faces painted and
weapons in hand. They're prepared for battle and so
you greet them in kind. They call you daughter, in turn
you call yourself vengeance then set everything ablaze.

For a time this is how you live, with none to stand
against you, not because you want to but because you
must. While unfortunate it's inevitable when you
become fire itself, all lashing flames and inferno
passion until your tears and woe extinguish you one
night.

Fourth Mother finds you in the aftermath, naked
and burned to the bone keening for both your death and
birth. 'Bhutami' she calls you but you don't know this
name. Nor Soppo, Sweetling or *Naawa*. Trembling like a

frightened child with your knees against the cold damp earth you've forgotten who you are.

Inconsolable, you shriek within your Fourth Mother's arms until your noises are drowned out by the bells that toll for Drowning Season.



'Breathe.'

A single word greets you like a prayer as you lay prone under a black shroud, soon to be reborn once again.

'Breathe and let it go.'

They tell you this while burning oils with mint and eucalyptus. The scent suffocates you until fat salty rivers run down your cheeks.

'Be docile.'

You sag in defeat, back to appeasing them once more even when a great heave breaks your ribs.

'This is good', they sing in jubilation as they finally dare to reach out and touch you.

'Let it out, cursed child, it's the only way.'

Tired, you believe their words because they are all you have now with Dead Sister having long gone quiet. And so you find a hate you've never had and hold it in your heart for her, convinced it was she who hurt and led you astray. Not like your mothers and fathers. Or the grown children who named you things you can't remember. They are the ones here with you after all, they with their strong bodies and even stronger voices.

'Here', they say, *'we will make you better if you just listen.'*

It takes some time but soon enough your tears finally dry up. Lessons of how to start a fire no longer interest

you. The hot magic that once set your blood alight shrivels in your veins and cracks your skin with angry fissures as pain becomes your new song. You swallow every note down, never letting out the melody that courses through your bones because you've learned that silence is better.

'Good', they croon and pull your shroud away.

This is your third life and in this new life they call you *Good Woman*.



The village presents you with your first lover when the last sliver of earth, once scarred by your rage, is once again covered in green fertile fields.

'A gift for the *Good Woman*', they all insist.

Something deep inside you screams sacrifice as you reach out in the way expected of you and bow your head to speak your gratitude. But these words aren't yours. Nevertheless, you take the man. Or rather he takes you. These particulars aren't something you teach yourself to remember for he is not the last.

Over the Harvest Season many come to you and you take them. No. *They* take you. He. She. They. All of them sink their hooks into your flesh and make you dance. Sightless, you feel them reap your favors and feed from your freshly grown fruits once more. You've returned back to your old ways and therefore don't feel the pain as they pick your bones clean.

Though you smile at this new life over time your teeth grind with the effort.

When a would-be husband caresses your scalp with mint and claims your bed as his own, you throw up wet dirt behind his back. And when a would-be wife kisses

you with eucalyptus on her tongue, you exhale hard enough to spit up two ribs. This, you also do behind her back. You endure these things, drowning in sharp tastes that burn your eyes, nostrils and innards unlike the fire you once called down and wielded with ferocity. The fire you can't remember ever having.

Months come and go before your secret ritual is complete. When you're finally empty you slip unseen from the bed you never claimed and underneath the door. Quick and silent you slither blind with an urgency you don't recognize but command as if it has always been within you. It has. You think you know this when you make it to the foot of the village boneless and ragged intent to rest. To sleep.

'You can't rest here', you tell yourself. And you can't, they'll come find you and take you back. You must move. You must live, if only for now.

Tired, you slip into the high grass grown from the dregs of your anger and pain and hide there for many days, maybe weeks or months or even years. The thick scent of familiar loam in your nose lulls you into an unawaking sleep.

Once more death greets you and for the first time in a long time you dream.



Your last and final rebirth comes now as you break free from the cocoon that was once your corpse, a body that has long not been your own. The labor is long, your cries scare the birds and sways the grass that weaves towers around you as the body that was once Bhutami, once Soppo, once Naawa, once Good Woman stares dead-eyed up into the sky.

This is the sky that you, *No Name*, reach towards as you crawl from the rotting husk.

On foal legs you suck in air smelling new blood and flesh, all yours, finally yours and sprint down green slopes with your head tipped back towards the sky. You don't stop until you reach the same forest your Second Mother led you away from. The place where you killed your dreams.

As you stand before the black tree with its powerful roots an old hunger pulls at your guts dropping you to your knees where you stab bony fingers into the damp, black earth. Fervently you dig until you can see the welcoming roots and their magic. There too are all the dreams you killed, you who was born on the first day of Decimation Season. You who had uttered your first breath into the night as the hateful god Yadoh tore the fifth star, his daughter Mafuah, into nothing to sate his evil belly.

But what if I were to tell you that this tale is a lie?

That Yadoh took his daughter from the skies to hide her from the hurt he'd seen taking shape in her constellations, the same thing which I have endeavored to do for you? Will you believe me? No, I suspect not for they never allowed you a chance to be anything but what they deemed you unlike I who let you dream. I who showed you your strength with fire.

Yes, dig further, unearthing my bones and a face not quite yours but this should not worry you. I should not be you who kneels before me staring into my face for one day you shall see me as I have seen you. Now, give me your hand and unravel me from these roots, we have work to do sister and I've waited too long in the loam for you.

My name?

I think for a moment keeping your hand firmly in mine as I inhale the crisp, night air.

Hope. My name is Hope.



Jorja Osha is a speculative fiction writer living on the East Coast. When not writing about otherworldly beings, troubled characters and everything else in between she can usually be found playing video games, listening to music or baking. Her short stories have previously appeared in *The Dark*, *NIGHTLIGHT*, *A Coup of Owls* and *Martian* under the pen name Bibi Osha.



silksong::onechild

by Marina Cooper

sharp white medical routine
and the form asks what lore I hold:
no bloodborne backstory? no marrow-deep wisdom?

(press 'down' to know the secrets of the world)

screens in parallel boyfriend says I'll
like this game so we venture
down the fallen kingdom lush with story.

take the vessel, fill it with hope, seal it away
from the world

seals three like the trinity,
the father, the mother, and the missing son
(the son she is not)

(the sons they'd all prefer)
trinity again, the father and son
she is not,

and the holy spirit of the mother:
wholly imagined and blameless, mythical
mother of half the sky.

my girl, fill yourself, drink up the life you will
have far from here

in america's stew, fast cars and violins
and violence and shopping malls and
blue skies and plastic sugar burning sweet

the form asks family history
of take your pick but you have to write
unknown

unknown
unknown
unknown

unknown
and tell the receptionist the lore's long lost
somewhere far underground in the kingdom.

little ghost, where did you come from?

(press 'd' to dream, to ascend, to go home)

little vessel, did you know there are thousands like
you?
discarded and empty their skulls in a pile, shrine
to a hubris that sees every girl as just like the next
and the next

one child only, lonely, for your king and country
(party and chairman) the castoffs for foreign
long-fingered ghosts to pluck from the heap

(press x to lash out)

for players to gather 'til even the seeker of relics who
buys
the bounty groans and didn't he just
see another baby girl? he doesn't want them any
more.

wouldn't it be funny if we all rose up at once?
floated as shades back to the source untethered
brigade
root-severed army little ghosts around the world.

at a bus stop an npc full of fear warns
careful, traveler, not many return:
can you ever, truly, go home again?

my girl, dream on

vessel after vessel, sent out of the abyss
can you ever go back to the source?
can our creators be forgiven?

(press 'z' to jump)
(press 's' to fly)



Marina Cooper is a poet and fiction writer from northern Virginia. Her writing is often inspired by her experiences as a Chinese-American adoptee, as well as her love of mythology, folklore, and the occasional video game. She can be found on Instagram @marinamcooper

Mercurial As Your Skin

by Moriam E. Kuye

Iused to persistently think about skin as a child. I grew up on a council estate where, in the summertime, we turned the concrete ramps and driveways into racetracks; us cyclists and scooters were sugared up on pastel ice cream. The kids were catching the breeze in shorts the colour of grass and football teams. I was amidst the heat, daydreaming: watching myself in shorts, too, imagining a pair of smooth legs to wear them. I knew that skin was a mercurial and fluctuating thing: sometimes dry, or itchy, or growing spots, but I had an unsettled mind: one too preoccupied with the circumstances of my own skin.

At eleven months old, an accident left roughly twenty percent of my skin with second- and third-degree burns. And when I was eight, I watched *Courage the Cowardly Dog* on a heavy CRT television—the purple dog, over and over again, was inundated with unpredictable circumstances: one time wedged inside a door, another time hurtled far away from their strange and liminal world. The ease at which *Courage* got hurt, to then change back into their ordinary body had me thinking about my own reality.

On planet Earth, anything can happen, and there are

instances where there is nothing you can do about it. So how, then, do you not persistently grasp for control? Given my age, I lacked the words for these vague notions, and I did blame myself, even without any memories of that afternoon. How did I not realise that water isn't just for cleansing or nourishing, but that water, or anything, could also be volatile; that anything could be mercurial?



I think mercuriality is the spider spinning our web. We were born and trapped in the centre. There are patterns in the construction, yet no two spiders spin the same. When the spider silk pours: we cannot know, exactly, if it will go left or right, up or down, around or around.



Burns can heal in an erratic fashion. I have hypertrophic scarring, which means large areas on my hands and legs are slightly raised, like seeing flat islands on a sea. There are thick tributary-like scars and ridges. And there are rectangular plots where skin was taken and grafted onto a new place. I wore snug, not-so-flesh-coloured pressure garments, and at school, I hid my legs under shiny, opaque tights. Sometimes aunties would hold my hands, fretting as if I'd spilt Coke over my birthday shirt, telling me, "You're still a beautiful girl." I knew they meant well, but I also got the sense there was something irreversibly wrong with me. And every once in a while, my hospital would summon us up (our group of young burns survivors), they took us camping to adventure by the fresh lakes; they sat us down and taught us how to navigate the world bravely and with confidence; their insight rubbed on me like a kind of salve that, over the years, would sink through all the muddled spaces of introspection.

My scars had solidified into what they would be for the rest of my life: so I acknowledged this, packed it in that bag we carry with us through adolescence and braced for the rest—all the other mercurial things.



I think mercuriality is the spider spinning our web. If their silk is stronger than steel, why are we floundering? There could be beauty tangled in these threads. We can see it, or if we cannot, we are yet to.



One day as a teenager, I realised it was irrational to expect an infant-me to understand caution (how could I have escaped the hot tap of a bath when I could barely hold a plastic cup, drink, and remain dry). I turned my attention inwards and outwards as if my whole body were made of magnifying glass. The newspapers and televisions were saying anything could happen at any time; you must be careful. Schoolteachers and family were saying listen; learn from your own and our mistakes; the world is feral.

But life is far too unpredictable to be truly prepared. Even as adults, we can list our moments of shock or confusion and all the *hows* or *whys* we relentlessly question.

Our sense of the mercurial can displace us, even with our efforts for understanding or meaning-making. I was a teenager, and scars are permanent, and no you cannot change them, but you want to. Sometimes when we are unsteady, we accept the circumstances and sometimes we look for control.

As a teenager, my control tactic was to play video games or read in the library after school; I was entering worlds where the 'I' had smooth skin or magical skin

or was a no-skin god. At the same time, London's gentrification was ongoing. Our neighbourhood had spread itself high and low: into flats, and maisonettes, and temporary housing. There were Myspace pages to manage. There were AOL statuses to amend. The world was unfolding, and I was restless impulse and angst. I told my mother things, youthfully assured, "It's emo. I'm not changing! This is who I am."



I think mercuriality is the spider spinning our web. If all parts cascade from another then all parts are interconnected. To understand how a new-spun thread stands, we must acknowledge those that came before.



Later (no longer 'emo'): I spent a lot of time on an Emergency Admissions ward. I walked with a clipboard in my hands, working as one of the clinical pharmacists. And in some sense, it was as though a lens had been flipped: where I was the face talking with a patient admitted after their own circumstances. I worked with my hands and forearms on show eight hours a day. And on no particular day I can remember (somewhere between the therapy sessions and the late-night cheerleaders of club toilets), I realised that outside of my critical mind parroting *why* and *what if*: no one was thinking about my scars anywhere near the amount I was. I realised this with all the freedom and embarrassment of someone learning if you get a question wrong, you should try again. I put that lesson in my metaphorical bag and took it through my career changes and location changes and began to let go of the things, the mercurial things.

Because there are times when acceptance is the best way to tame the mercurial. And these days, I find myself on a seesaw. On this seesaw is a bold printed “SCARS”. On one end is a shadowy body of the *pseudo*-acceptance, and on the other is the *genuine*-acceptance. More often than not, the latter is higher.



I think mercuriality is the spider spinning our web. If we choose to keep still, we may notice how natural it is, watching it spin away.



Years are passing and I think about how there are patterns to chaos. Out there is a yellow dwarf star; a raging ball of hydrogen and helium. One day, it will expand and lose heat as a red giant. Current estimates propose dates that vary by the billions—so someday it will happen; we know the signs in the data to analyse. On planet Earth, terrible, mercurial things might happen to us, and hopefully (eventually), we see the signs and accept them when we need to. Once we cool off, we might tell ourselves that things have changed, but things will settle someday. Or we tell ourselves that scars are an interesting mosaic of healing. We may say things like, “it is what it is”, or in my community, we might say, “we move”. We spin together around the sun and share our stories, and as if by osmosis, all that mercuriality and all that chaos shows itself in the prose or plot or structure.



I think mercuriality is the spider spinning our web. When we zoom all the way out, we can see ourselves: the billions and billions on one giant web.



I'm an aunty and a godmother. Sometimes, children will ask what happened when they see my hands. I explain what I know and tell them to be careful around stoves, and kettles, and other hot places. Sometimes, they ask if they can touch the scars. When they do, they tend to ask if it hurts, and then I say no, it doesn't hurt at all. Because eventually, the mercurial things become a remembrance. And in this present time, I'm thinking about the sun peeping through an emptied cloud. I'm thinking about the moment we notice we can put our hoods down or pack our umbrellas away or play outside again. And before the next thing happens, a spider, somewhere between the branches, is checking on its web, while the rest of us sky gaze and dry off our skin.



Moriam E. Kuye (she/her) is a Nigerian-British writer from London, UK. Her work has appeared in *Worlds of Possibility*. She often wonders at night whether she will regret staying up for another hour. You can find her on Twitter at [@moriam_emi](#) or on Bluesky [@moriamekuye.bsky.social](#).

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- Guest editor Jordan Kurella
- and our talented and hilarious associate editors: Marie & Maria
- Font and Logo/design integration by the ever-supportive Seen R

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