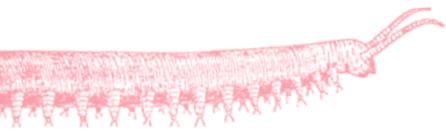




WORM MOON ARCHIVE!

volume 1



Salutations,

and welcome to the inaugural quarterly issue of *Worm Moon Archive*. We'd like to thank our contributors for their wonderful/haunting/beautiful/terrifying works, and you, dear reader. We're excited to keep you company for the duration of this book.

All the best,
Your Archivists and Editors

Under the Knife

Lori D'Angelo

Kate woke up excited to see her new face. She had been looking forward to this procedure for months. According to the flashy brochure with beautiful after pictures that she had devoured, "the facelifts of today" were different and more natural looking than the facelifts of the past. Kate's need for this enhancement had gone, in the last two years, from want to need. She had all the telltale signs of an aging woman: sagging skin, deep lines, and the dreaded double chin. But recently these once barely perceptible flaws had gotten worse, to the point that Kate could barely stand her own face. Now, when Kate looked in the mirror, she saw a figure that she no longer recognized. A witch. A hag. A crone. A forgettable background character.

She still thought of herself as she had been in her twenties: young, pretty, desirable, the kind of woman that both men and women stopped to gaze at and admire. Things had changed for Kate when she reached middle age. The gray hairs, she could cover up with dye. But there was only so much that modern makeup could do for the skin although that, like everything else, had gotten both more effective and more expensive. She had seven different kinds of anti-aging creams on her nightstand, and none of them had made her look as she had in her twenties: radiant, sultry, youthful.

As for the feeling, her face felt bruised, but this was to be expected, according to what she had read. And she had read so much. Online. In print. Whatever she could get her hands on. New face, new you, the brochures had read. Kate was ready.

Kate waited impatiently for the young peppy nurse to remove her bandage.

"Oh my," said the nurse, as she lifted the gauze. "This is quite impressive."

Kate practically grabbed the handheld mirror. When she saw her face, she nearly dropped it.

She knew to expect bruising, but this. Was this some kind of joke?

"Is this?" Kate began.

The nurse pulled out Kate's chart and read Kate her own damning words. "You said that you wanted to look memorable."

"But I don't look memorable. I look terrifying. My face looks monstrous, like something out of a nightmare," Kate said.

"Aren't nightmares memorable?" the nurse asked as she handed her a plastic hospital bag containing all her belongings. The nurse no longer seemed nurturing or young. She seemed like an evil villain from a black and white film, the veneer of her sweetness fading. Kate didn't know what to do.

"You'd best be going now," the nurse said. Her voice had a terrible edge. Kate quickly changed out of the thin gown into her innocuous middle-aged women casual clothes and walked down the hallway toward the front door. When she entered, everything in this hospital had looked so bright and beautiful. But now everything seemed to be tinted with a terrible green-gray color, as if it was rotting.

Katie felt it best to exit and exit quickly. When she turned back to look back at the entrance, which had only a day ago had seemed so fancy and new, the building looked vacant and crumbling, as if it had long been abandoned. Kate was afraid to pull out the pocket mirror from her purse. Instead, she walked into the diner across the street. "I wouldn't mind a piece of pie," she thought as she looked for a server. But, once inside the diner, she saw that here too the welcoming façade was an illusion. This wasn't a diner but a hall of mirrors. And on every surface, Kate saw her own magnified face: old and scarred and imperfect. Kate took a breath. Then, she let out a long slow scream.

The Clock Strikes Twelve

Joshua Merchant

and here I am, hoping for a break-
through as I whistle for the attention of mice.
the moon pretty though. I can only see one side
of it but I'm lackluster in comparison now that
I've lost a shoe. ignore the trail I left behind.
somebody might need that foot later.
a pendulum swung an ear to my corner
and would you believe the noise we shared
was counterfeit? I'm so lost now. in the comics I
read there's no sound effect for wounds closing.
all I know is the waiting. or to run. when I go do
the wings flapping where a blade kissed cease? or does
the afterlife have a suburb where pumpkins crash too?

Looming

Portia Yu

The OverQueen and the UnderQueen met where the weaving stopped. — It was a flimsy fable — every fibre ragged underfoot — every meaning obvious from the outset, — if it were colour-coded that would complete the pattern — but the red ran out — frayed into grey. — Nonetheless, — both queens had wings and hooves and teeth — more than enough to be seen, — yet they struggled to look each other in the eye — looking down — away. — Still, — each brought their gifts — equidistant between stitches laid down — nothing lower than anything else — nothing higher — nothing touching the air more than anything else — lined up all in a row. — Then the OverQueen said to the UnderQueen: — how can this be — I have given you all these things — these dewdrops and sunflower seeds — glass bells — baskets full of epiphanies — now look what you have foisted upon me. — This she said, — and cast her eyes down — away . A second passed, — then the UnderQueen lifted her eyes up to say: — how can this be — my gifts are as good as yours — these shards of shadows — ink stains — little bowls big enough to fit tiny deaths inside — I have given you all these things — how can you ask for more. — Then the queen was quiet — and the other queen was quiet — was silent — already the lines have been spoken — words spilled loose — a hush filled the air in filaments of dust — being breathed in. — At last — the two queens looked each other in the eye — each gathered their gifts — not caring which was which. — For in truth there was nothing — nothing lower than anything else — nothing higher — all equidistant between stitches laid down. Now — they were stepping back — slowly — grey gave way to green — and then — there was the world — a gleaming bead — on the needle — on the thread — it went on — and on — and on ———

The Boatman

Shrutidhora P Mohor

There is a cold, slithery sleepiness about this room. I sleep here for long hours. I sleep until my pillow curls up under my head. A soft wet patch appears right below the centre of my head. For quite some time after I have woken up and sipped my lactose-smelling morning drink, the back side of my head remains moist. When the attendant wipes my mouth with a tissue paper her hand touches the moist area to the back of my head and I find her pulling out another leaf from the tissue roll to wipe her fingers before she turns to pick the medicine files up.

I call this room my sleepy world. On days when I wish to amuse myself, I chuckle and ask my wife, "Did you spray the sleeping pill dust?" She is unsure of what to say but seeing me smile, she too does. Her hands holding a flask, about to pour a cup of warm water for me, or her tired stick-like fingers shuffling through freshly printed medical reports brought in by the receptionist minutes ago, seem to enjoy the humour for a little while. A stale half-eaten slice of a teacake lies next to the warm papers. She looks young for a moment. I look at her from another world and tell her, "You still carry lilacs between your eyebrows. They are still as pink as ever." I smile at her again. Her fingers move slightly on the sheets of paper held in her hands. There is silence as the stem of a lilac bows down and kisses her eyelids.

I shut my eyes and fall asleep.

The sweeper enters after some time, trashes the remains of the teacake, cleans the table, and arranges the medical papers on it with undue care as though these are my next meal.

Even when my eyes are open I look sleepy and feel sleepy in my sleepy world. The attendants who come in from time to time ask me with varying degrees of concern if I am feeling sleepy.

Each time I nod my head both ways and murmur “no” and then fall asleep even before they have finished their task and left the room. Room 816, they say, is the number of this world in which I have been living for the greater part of the last five months. In between when I have sometimes gone home escorted by my remarkably strong-willed septuagenarian wife, I have missed this room, its sleepiness, and complained of lack of sleep on my own bed of over fifty years.

I don't remember feeling so sleepy ever before in my long life of eighty-one years. But you know, his brain is as active as ever, I have heard my wife whisper to occasional visitors or to close relatives. He dozes off most of the times during the day but his thinking, reasoning, memory, and all other brain functions are perfect, he isn't one bit senile, I have heard them observing with a sense of amazement. As though someone who is as weak and cold from inside as me ought to vegetate and can't be expected to open his eyes and feel the season outside, or name all his medicines accurately, or, as it had happened the other day, correct my flustered wife, handling large sums of cash with a medical supervisor, when she had made a small error in subtraction. Three twenty-three, not three twenty-seven, I had uttered as loudly as possible, causing the officer to hush up in shocked disbelief and recollect himself after a good two minutes or so, arrange the notepads in his hands looking at me askance all the time, and leave a little too quickly.

I am also sometimes led to believe that maybe after all I am not all that unwell. The seasons change right in front of my eyes here outside the large glass panes of the windows. I can feel the fire of the scorching sun from the world out there. Lying inside an insulated air-conditioned room and listening to its slow soft monotonous buzz of cooling, I believe I drag my sticky fingers over my sweaty body. Invisible drops of sweat cling onto my wrist. I wish to wipe them off and look around for a napkin to do so. Sometimes I feel I can see the dry-as-timber greyish brown leaves of tall trees, life sucked out from them. One or two of them, I think, have come floating down upon my bed. They adorn the sides of the bed as used ribbons from the previous night's party. I try to extend my hands to touch them, but they fly away as I attempt to partially lift my body from the bed and stretch towards them. Plastic tubes inserted at various places of my body pull me back and I, unable to muster the strength to sit up despite them, fall back on the pillows. At times I can see the crack of lightning tear the sky apart. I play the typical child and want to bury my face in the lap of some beloved elder. As I move my head in a hurry pretending to do so a needle arranged somewhere on my body pierces my skin. I wince and moan in pain. On occasions I can also see with some effort on a clear night some of the stars arranged as designs on the gaping black hole above our heads.

The world outside looks like a silent motion picture to me. Trees sway, clothes flap on the rooftops of high-rises, youthful teenagers run to balconies to watch gathering black clouds or to pick up a kite torn and fallen and helplessly stuck between drainpipes and on window sills. I can see it all from here when I am not sleeping. A moving train passes through my body, its speed and traction weigh me down. I watch the film happen in front of me, shot by shot, but miss hearing the dialogues and the finer non-verbal exchanges between actors on screen, stuck that I am to the bed on wheels with limited manoeuvrability and blinkered vision.

There is always some tremendous amount of movement within my body. I can feel the traffic as also the congestion at junctions and main nodes. Traffic merges, roads diverge, diversions are marked out within my body. Vehicles rush all along. I feel the movement up and down. My veins vibrate under the impact of the traffic with cars chasing one another, overtaking, turning upside down, getting stranded for a while after being hit and overturned. Billowing horns tear my ears apart. Impatient abuses at vehicles blocking the way pound my blood vessels. I try to toss and turn in the hope that I shall be able to silence the vehicles or immobilise them. But alas, nothing changes for the better.

My doctor says, with the indifference that necessarily accompanies professional expertise, there is a war! A war is raging inside of you. Can you feel it? I wonder which reply he is expecting. Yes, I can feel it, doctor, I can feel the indescribable pain. It is to feel death. Yes, doctor, I can feel it well enough for sure. Or, no, no doctor, it's all still and numb inside. I can't feel a thing. I wonder which response is the ideal medical response. What is expected of a terminally ill patient, I speculate. The injections push up the platelet count for a while, he says with a strange smile of satisfaction hanging around his moustache. But, he shakes his head, you have got demons inside. Live demons! They are looking to gobble up whatever they get on the way. Plasma, platelet, white blood cells, red blood cells, everything. The soldiers inside your body are all decapitated one by one, in a whirl, whoooosh, like that they are devoured by the demons. It's a fight, a desperate fight. The drama of his speech spreads like ketchup spilled over from a bottle carelessly left open by a callous diner. Its red colour and thickness gradually seep into every corner of room 816. I turn my head slightly to catch a glimpse of my wife with tears cradled on the lower rim of her eyes. My soldiers need food to fight, I tell her. Can you get me some warm soup now?

One day my college friend comes to see me. You can see me, but you can't see the real ones, I tease him. Which real ones? He asks, curious. The soldiers inside. Beheaded, blinded, their skins scathed by molten ash, nonetheless they are valiant fighters! I try to raise my arm to my forehead by way of signaling a salute. An intravenous drip channel line gets tugged forcefully and almost snaps. My wife, I hear, shrieks in nervousness.

Of late I have a regular visitor here. I have not exactly seen his face but I know he comes often. Every time there is a shadow at the door, I know he has arrived. Someone is standing just outside, I tell my wife one night. Her face is a tiny worn-out artefact of aged bones covered by pale yellow ragged skin. She looks at the door a couple of times uncertainly and then drags herself up to bolt the door. The door swings shut. The shadow outside disappears.

One night the visitor escapes my wife's alert presence and steps in.

Isn't it quite a sight? I ask him with a smile. Observe the room carefully, mate. You have an amazing constellation of objects and goods. Look at the arrangement! It is a room with the dead peace of well-arranged orderly chaos. Innumerable pipes of varying diameters and lengths hang around the bed. Bottles upside down trickle their contents into the veins of my hands. A long and narrow slit on my waist is meant to hold a tube in place and collect the residue of metabolic functions, the acid often reaching the brim of a steel pan, spilling out on the bed if I groan and whine and attempt to even slightly turn. Layers of sheets and plastic covers peep out from all sides below my body, a bright green in one corner oddly dominating over a faded much-used magenta. Isn't it quite a sight?

It's clumsy, he says.

I agree.

How I long for a neat and sparse room!

I can take you to one such place. Neat and bare, he assures.

I clasp his hands in gratitude. Yes, please! I plead.

Tonight then? He asks.

Yes... I feel fresh and light at the prospect

Be ready then...

By all means...

"Remember honey, our cruise on the Mediterranean? How many years ago was it?"
I ask my wife one evening before dinner.

She is not ready for a chat though.

The smell of butter on freshly made toast is dripping down the sides of the dish.

"The toast is well done today." I approve of the meal.

She gets up to bring me medicine.

"Remember how green the sea was and how we travelled to the islands on small bobbing boats? The trees were blue against the sky. And one of these was a midnight journey. Thrilling!"

She looks at me with an unnamed expression in her eyes.

"You remember everything, isn't it?"

"Everything! Like it all happened yesterday."

It is late at night. My wife is deep in slumber.

I am throbbing with excitement.

Outside in the night sky the adolescent moon shines with fervour. A silvery path extends from its surface right up to the torn fluttering cobwebs outside the window creating splinters of moonlight. It looks grand, inviting, a journey worth the promise.

He finally arrives.

I have been waiting for you since the day before, I complain.

Come now, he ignores my complaint and helps me out of the bed.

We proceed. I suddenly stop and remember to ask him, you never told me who you are.

Me? He pauses. I am your boatman. The one who comes at midnight on moonlit nights so that my passengers can see their way as we move.

I smile, satisfied.

In front I see his boat wobbling in water. He stretches his hand to help me get in.

Thank you, boatman. Please row safely. I want this to be the most beautiful journey of my life.

It will be so. It always is.

His oars cut through the splashing waves and soon our boat is a tiny dot far away somewhere under the glint of moonlight.

Better Not Stay Dead

Tinamarie Cox

I walked before I crawled, and
I crawled before I learned to roll over.
Falling onto my back was easy.
Playing dead was safe.
The panels of my coffin were
soft and shiny satin lined.
I was a comfortable cadaver.
My cold shell, preserved.
But one night,
I dreamed beyond the catafalque, and
with the taste of fresh morning dew,
I dropped to the ground,
running.

this corridor belongs to

Lara Torea

the ghost house. It grows larger, emptier, more dangerous, each time it rejoices in its own recalcitrance. Some nights it seems the weeds outside and the salt and the hand-me-down empyrean are starting to swallow it whole. And they never do. They never do.

I always tell my enquirers how a house is a house and the ghosts don't happen to resort to rotting it by some divine force of power. Ghosts are vultures. They are attracted to resounding decadence, the deciduous liveliness of a carcass. Which is exactly what we fed to it. My advice — and take it from me of all people, me, with a house infested of ghosts and nothing in it but a few old bottles of wine and the lingering, searing touch of transcendence turned infimum — is to not get lost in eloquence. Feelings talk and they ramble and they promise before they do what all feelings do: decompose. To keep them too close is to be left with their remains all over your body. Ghosts, as they do, will come to feed themselves.

Don't try to leave the ghost house. One doesn't know they are tethered until they hear the rattle of titane, cold metal biting down their skin. Just open the door and leave, they will say. What do they know, them, the outsiders. The ones with an unbeaten heart, still red, still willing to give itself to a pair of strange hands just for the sake of warmth. So inviting, so aureate, warmth. It talks and it rambles and it promises. And what are you now, orphan. Now that the evening is turning shallow and the second a muddled weapon of grief. All the ghosts swimming around you and singing a few old tunes you used to play when the burning was still at burn, steady and slow. Your throat welled up in longing as you try to sing along. Under your feet hard wax and unearthliness, you, a prisoner of the land you once conquered. Don't you miss when it would smolder. You do. You do.

Belonging

Lori D'Angelo

Claudine wakes up panting, broken, not sure how to reattach the displaced bones. At first, she only had 206, like most of us, but it quickly became clear that the patrons in Row I needed more assistance than she could provide with just the factory warehouse number.

"I'll get right on that," she said in response to their request for extra seat cushions, not too cold ice water, and a 15-page color Sciatica brochure.

They looked so common in their khaki pants and pullover shirts. Who would have predicted they would be so Sunday matinee penny candy diva asking for such odd extras but refusing to pay concession stand prices? And then, of course, no tip.

In her mind then, she was reading a Ray Bradbury novel about Martians and gathering mint leaves by the backyard pond before the overzealous local mowers, who had also sliced a hole in the underground hose with their blades, plowed through the precious plants like they were run of the mill, even though it should have been clear that leaves are not weeds and hose line is not grass.

At least 20 of the original bones hurt. The new ones she felt less kinship with, since they were only temporary, transitory, hers for now on interlibrary bone loan, and if she didn't return them to the bone depository promptly by 8 pm Wednesday (the seemed an easy enough time to remember, still she set a Google calendar notification) her credit card would be charged \$24.99 per bone. At 32 bones, the number was staggering. And, if she didn't get the bones back on time, her needing it to get through the day caramel latte would be a thing of history, like the artifacts found at the Lost Colony.

How do you lose over 100 English settlers? How do you make what you can't keep feel like it should remain there for now, part of the school field trip tour group when it's really only that kid from the homeschooling co-op with the unruly hair and cracking lips, the one your mothers told you to include but you really never did because you knew then that even the spectacular visitors you can't keep, can't file

and categorize the here for the day gone tomorrow along with the rest of the elementary aged kids? No matter how much you close your eyes and wish for thunder, the gods' failures aren't yours. You only have so many bones to break.

Blasted Hallways

(based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccinni's Daughter")

Zary Fekete

My Dear Thompson,

Allow me to convey to you some unpleasant news. The corridors which I inhabit have lately become overrun and damaged as a result of a corrupting incident, one that you prophetically foresaw and one of which you warned me... a warning I sorrowfully neglected, and I now am the sole possessor of the guilt. This will undoubtedly be my last correspondence with you.

You perhaps remember that in my purview I oversee the high security computer lab where certain task-workers labor in my service. They bend all their time toward soiled code... corroded and twisted content, containing within it the awful depths to which mankind is capable of reaching. These servants endeavor all day and every day to scour social apertures of degraded constructs. It is not-to-be-helped that these jobs leave them deeply, sometimes permanently, scarred.

Fortune would have it that an advanced purifying machine was installed in the chained inner vestibule of my security quarter. The inner chamber can only be accessed with one card. The device possessed a cleansing structure several quantitative degrees higher than its weaker brothers.

This machine is sanctioned to be used by only one authorized with a higher flight of clearance... the one who has the card. This sanctioned worker in my quarter is Miss Bea. She was biologically the closest match to the original code. This was crucial because the system is designed to sync with its user and use a portion of the operator's brain-width.

For many months Miss Bea delved deeply into the blasted hallways and revealed deeper and deeper net-acres to be overturned and culled. What happened to her next left me amazed. Where others may have fallen after encountering what she witnessed, her gradual descent into those depths allowed her to incrementally acquire an increasingly greater degree of packet immunity. It was soon clear that she could spend all hours of every day at the lowest reaches without succumbing to

the attacks from what the mainframe had recently cataloged as roving horizons, for whom the blackest darkness is reserved forever. The sparks and flashes which emanated from Miss Bea's screencast were horrifying. It is difficult for me to imagine the raw and ragged substance which she must have encountered. I was resolutely glad that only she possessed the card.

Two weeks ago we received a notification. Miss Bea's inner sequencing system was bolstered with the a new overlay. The Overlay had been in discussion for many previous months. It granted a purer reach and sequestered admittance to the deepest flowered gardens of the net... areas where tendrils drip with secretions. It was clear that Miss Bea was the only possible choice to take administrative point. She proceeded. All was well for perhaps a fortnight. But then Miss Bea became unable (perhaps unwilling) to leave her secure chamber. She was unresponsive to any pings.

Mr. James, one of my trusted workers, had been monitoring her cognitive waves. He began to electronically petition Miss Bea to programmatically disentangle herself from the harrowed depths. Through their correspondence Mr. James was able to confirm the degree of Miss Bea's mortifying enmeshment.

The most dismaying moment happened just a few mornings ago when Miss Bea opened her chamber long enough to admit Mr. James to the sanctum. He had lingered at her door too long. She opened her chamber, and he was drawn in. Within moments spent at her screen he became harnessed to the wailing stream. Even though his biology did not enjoy the luxury of her gradiated exposure, she was somehow able to impart to him her rare invulnerability through a direct bypass download. By granting him access to her portal she was able to briefly share with him her analog amplitoxins. The nectar was therefore now fatally housed in them both. I saw the transformation happen with my own eyes. It was a humanitarian violation.

They stayed in this way, both deeply wedded to one another and completely succumbed to the darkest strands within the web. They responded to no outside stimulus. I was obliged to reach for emergency assistance from the 3rd Floor. Management suggested help in the form of a single serving of cured code. The amount had to be administered during the morning screen refresh which briefly provided us outside control of Miss Bea's and Mr. James' portal. We uploaded the dose yesterday at 8AM, and they interfaced with it at 8:01.

Both fell to the ground. The outer door immediately unlocked, as the protocol designed it to do. The medical staff rushed in. Within moments Mr. James had responded favorably to the dose. Miss Bea, however, could not cohere to it in any successful way. There was shaking and foam. She was dead by 8:05.

My office has been sequestered. The authorities came and requisitioned all the wares. Miss Bea, I have learned, had no family of her own. Her body has been interred in the company tomb.

My good Thompson, the last thing I did before the shutdown was to take Miss Bea's card. I hold it in my hand as I write to you these words. Only you know this. When I touched it I believe I felt it move. I immediately locked it in my safe, but the sensation will not leave my hand. And now

After authorizing this e-post I intend to enter the inner chamber myself. There is no telling what remains of Miss Bea's digital shoring and maintenance, but without an operator it cannot hold. The barotrauma I will encounter will be rigorous and unyielding.

After I fall, which is certain, there will be a sum of perhaps 7 days before the social and societal outbreak. Take necessary steps.

Your trusted friend,
Adam Goodbody

Zombie

Joshua Merchant

some john thought
I owed him my foot.
blood was spilled. can't
you tell? I trip

over my own steps
and remember I
wasn't born but
raised. thinged

so many times
I almost slit
my wrists but
instead I said
I could

do better- a blowjob
machine. a dead women's
reason to fight. a dead
man's discarded

child. accept

I have me right now.

What Falls like Rain

James Grimard

#

The balanced sun, surrounded by a host of clouds, shone upon Burnt Seed Lake. It was a calm afternoon. Most of the boats had already escaped the heat. The few that remained had either failed to register the humidity, or were still there to defy it. On one of the more weathered boats, an older man was throwing out a line with a young boy. He threw the line with the confidence that comes from an avid fisherman.

"Don't rock the boat too much, Sammy. You don't wanna scare the fish."

He offered him a water bottle but the boy refused. Michael shrugged and finished the water.

"How much longer do we need to be out here?" Sammy whined. He fidgeted the tip of his pole into the water and dropped his shoulders. They dropped from humidity's hot weight. Michael reeled in his line and checked to see if the worm was still on. He threw it back.

"Not much longer, kid. We can head in soon for lunch."

"You always say this, Grandad. Can't we just go back now?"

Michael shook his head and wiped his forehead with his drenched t-shirt. "If you wanna head back now," he played with his line a little, "you could always swim..."

The two had been out in the boat for most of the morning. They would have gotten out sooner, but Michael had trouble pulling his grandson away from the television. Michael liked to spend at least three hours on the water. He liked how quiet it was out on the lake. Things got too loud in life; on the water, all you felt were the waves rocking you back and forth.

The boy threw his fishing pole down. "Can I have a drink of water?" He asked.

"There's no water left." Michael scratched his chin. "I just offered you some."

Sammy scoffed and looked away.

He had been taking care of his grandson for the greater part of three weeks. Although Sammy only came up to stay at his place to give his mother a break, he welcomed the opportunity to grow closer to his grandson and to be a part of the boy's life. His mother, Rebecca was constantly worried that Sammy did not have a strong male figure to look up to. Sammy's father had died when he was an infant.

"I bet you're real excited to see your mom next week," Michael changed the subject. "I know how much she misses you."

"Yeah I guess..."

"Aren't you excited to see her?" Michael asked.

"I don't see her much anyways... She works a lot."

Michael furrowed his brow. "But you are excited to see her though? You realize how hard she works to keep things together."

"You always say that, Grandad. I know how much she loves me and stuff—"

In Michael's hands, the line jerked a little. He watched the bobber drop below the surface. Slowly, he pulled on the line. There was resistance. Michael yanked the rod up to try and hook the fish. "Think I got one Sammy." He reeled the line in. "Quick, get the net for me."

Sammy reached for the handle. Somehow, it had become tangled in his fishing line. After wrestling with it, he began to breathe heavily. He looked back at his grandad empty handed.

"Come on, hurry up. I don't want to lose it." Michael pulled the line closer.

The young eyes darted. "It's stuck. I-I don't know what to do!"

Michael swore under his breath. "Alright, alright, here, trade me." Quickly, he gave the pole to his grandson and snatched the net. "Now just do what I taught you,

remember? Just let the line go out a little and pull up as you reel it in. Simple as that. Keep pressure on the fish and tire him out.” Michael turned his attention away and smiled. Maybe this was the one that his grandson would catch. Then this whole day would be worth it.

The line yanked and twisted in the water in front of the boy. He held meekly onto the pole and hoped for the best. Sammy had never caught a fish; he never had hooked one, either.

“Aren’t you reeling it in?” Michael asked. Sammy nodded, but the resistance was gone.

He gulped and continued to reel it in. It was almost to the boat when Michael noticed the bobber.

He shimmed closer.

“Woah, woah easy Sammy, you don’t want it to—” Before he could finish, the end of the line rose from the water and in front of the two was nothing but a silver hook.

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The boat sped back toward the dock. Michael tried to focus on the motor. The boat had been giving him some trouble lately. There had been a couple of small leaks in the wood and the motor was getting old. Somedays, it would fail to even start up and they would end up having to row much to Sammy’s dismay.

Michael’s lake house was on the southernmost portion of the lake. It was the side with the most trees, so usually by mid-afternoon there was a fair amount of shade. The fish were usually found on the eastern side of the lake as it was the side that received the most sun. Although the lake house was not on the lake proper, it had a good look over its entirety from atop a small hill. Michael could just make out the house from where they were in the water.

At the front of the boat, Sammy hung his head. Each bump of the waves rocked it which gave it a lifeless, doll like manner. Michael took a deep breath. The loss of the fish must have really bothered him. Although he couldn’t see his face, he felt that

Sammy was crying. He was always quick to tears if he felt frustrated. He had never seen Sammy so defeated.

He reached out to touch his shoulder.

Sammy lifted up his head and turned, a big grin was on his face. Michael saw that he was playing a game on the phone. Immediately, he cut the motor.

"What are you smiling about?" Michael's voice was a shotgun.

The tone shocked Sammy. "Huh?"

"I said, what are you smiling about?" He reloaded. "You lost the fish. You think that's a good thing?"

The boy furrowed his brow. "I'm just hungry." He crossed his arms. The boat rocked awkward, against the shifting current. "I want to go back and play my game."

"Aw Jesus." Michael threw his hands up. "Really? Hungry? Come on kid, you need to man up."

Sammy's frame tightened, he put up a wall. "I'm trying, Grandad."

"No, you're not. You just sit inside all day and don't wanna do anything! You've never hit a baseball, or rode a bike or even learned how to fucking swim!" He splashed the water in rage. Sammy stood up to meet the height of his grandad. Although unfamiliar with many things, he was already fluent in the art of confrontation. "I said I'm trying, Grandad!"

"How? How are you trying?" Michael shot back, "Come on! Out with it! I don't see you trying, I only see you sitting inside and wasting your whole summer."

Sammy took a step. "How? I don't know what to do!?" The boat shuddered.

"Damn it! Something! Anything!"

Sammy took another step and stomped. His foot came down hard on his lifejacket and he slipped. He tried to keep his balance but only wobbled to the other end of

the boat. Before Michael could reach out, Sammy slipped off the boat. It rocked from the displacement.

"Grandad! Grandad! Help!" Sammy called from outside the boat.

Michael stood over him and watched him try for a moment. "Come on Sammy!" He yelled. The boy looked like he was treading water. "Keep kicking!"

"I'm drowning!" Sammy yelled back.

Michael picked up Sammy's life vest to hand to him. Suddenly, he froze as a realization washed over him. He turned back and a shudder climbed his spine.

There, five feet in front of him was his grandson, floating just above the lake.

"Grandad! Help!" He yelled again.

Michael stood dumbfounded and tried to understand what was happening before him. Sammy's whole body was out of the boat and the only place where it naturally could be was in the water. But somehow, the boy was neatly, almost gently above the water.

Michael jumped upon an oar and held it for Sammy to grab onto. The boy wrapped his body around the oar and Michael pulled him along the top of the lake. It felt as if he was dragging it over a carpet. The water beneath him was tranquil and still. Michael then picked Sammy up and tossed him back in as easily as he was tossed out.

In the boat, Sammy thrashed around and kicked a fishing pole into the water. His eyes were closed and he was still screaming. "Sammy!" Michael yelled and grabbed his shoulders, "Sammy! You're alright, you're back in the boat. It's okay. It's okay, you're safe." The boy opened his eyes but was still shaking.

"Grandad, I-I almost drowned." And he began to cry.

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#

After sunset, Michael was outside by the porch. It was built in the house's shadow, hidden from the lake. Once it had been completely white, but the paint chipped due to weathering. The only light came from a few tiki torches that didn't help the mosquito problem.

He had just finished making dinner. Michael enjoyed cooking because, like fishing, it took his mind off things. He had spent the day in an uncomfortable stupor made worse by not having anyone to confide in about the phenomenon, or "what he thought he saw." He told himself that there was no way the boy could have floated above the lake. Sammy was just swimming, treading water and it looked like he was floating. He was just a natural swimmer. That was enough to get him through cooking.

He decided, after his third beer, that the best thing to do would be to apologize to Sammy for yelling at him. That way, they could at least save these last few days of summer and end on a good note. He knew Sammy would accept his apology and he would let him play his game on the television downstairs. He hadn't seen him all day though. When they returned to the dock, Sammy ran up to the house and shut himself in his room.

The screened-in porch had a small table that Michael had set up with hamburger buns and potato chips. They did not go to the farmer's market that afternoon, it felt too far away. Luckily, there had been some frozen ground beef and hamburger buns in the freezer. He had left them out to defrost. They left little puddles on the sunken countertop and some got on the floor. Michael plated the patties and sat down.

Sammy appeared as an outline by the backdoor. Lit from the tiki torches, his face seemed cast by moonbeams, pale with eyes deep as lunar mares. The night air was still humid, but the wind had picked up which gave a rhythm to the blur of trees around them.

"Hey, bud." Michael straightened up. Sammy ignored him. He found a place at the table and stared at the plate of hamburgers. "Help yourself." Michael sat across and pushed the plate towards him. Sammy slowly took one and added lettuce and tomato.

"Mustard?" He muttered.

Michael shot up and ran inside. He returned with a simple bottle of yellow mustard and handed it to his grandson. Sammy nodded his head.

"Thank you." He muttered again, this time into his burger. After applying a liberal amount of mustard, Sammy took a big bite. Yellow paste oozed out, some dropped onto his plate. Michael smiled.

"Is it good? I burned them a little, just the way you like it." Sammy sat slowly chewing. "I also got some of that chocolate ice cream in the freezer, I'm not going to eat it so you can just finish the tub." Sammy answered with another bite. "There's also cherries in the fridge, maybe I could make you a sundae." The boy simply stared into nothingness. He looked through a spot on the table. Michael took a deep breath, "Look, Sammy—" he started, but a loud slap interrupted him. His grandson had smacked a mosquito that landed on his wrist. "I'm sorry about today. I was a total asshole for saying those things. I don't know what got into me, I just want you to learn how to swim so you can enjoy the summer. I want you to learn, but at your own pace. If you had drowned..." He put his head in his hands.

"I wasn't going to drown." Sammy said and took another bite of his burger, more mustard fell out.

"I know, I know. I was there, I wouldn't have let you. Still, if things were different—"

"I wasn't going to drown because I can float."

Michael met his grandson's gaze. He was patting mustard off his face. "Excuse me?" Sammy's mouthful went heavy down his throat. "I...I floated on the water today." The big moon eyes searched anxiously for a place to shine.

"Sammy, that's ridiculous, you know you didn't float on the water." Michael grabbed a burger and put it on his plate in an attempt to be final. "That's crazy. Come on now, how can you think like that?"

The boy looked down. "I... I didn't get wet, Grandad. I don't get it."

Michael looked away and jerked his chair, it made an uncomfortable noise on the decking. "You were wet. Your arms and pants were all wet from splashing." As soon as he uttered it, he knew. It made no sense, after all day of agonizing over the details it didn't make sense. His hair and skin were dry, the most his shirt suffered

were just a few splashes. There was tense silence for a few moments as they both confronted the impossible.

“Look, kid. I don’t know exactly what happened today either but I don’t think you floated on the water, alright? Let’s just forget about it and finish eating.”

Sammy put his half-eaten burger down upon the puddle of yellow mustard. “I think I can float on the water, Grandad.”

Michael slammed his hand on the table. “I said, let’s forget about it.”

Sammy gave a start and looked down. The two of them were silent for the rest of the meal. When Michael finished, the boy excused himself and ran off to bed.

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#

That entire night, Michael tossed and turned. His only relief lay in the soft murmur of the fan as it scanned the room. Michael was angry at himself for not being able to sleep. He rolled around, frustrated, trying to find the right spot. He took his anger out on the pillow, punching and fluffing it only to toss it aside for another. He told himself that he had no idea why he couldn’t sleep, but deep down he knew. When he found stillness, his mind flashed back to the afternoon.

Falling out of the boat,

FLASH

Crying,

FLASH

Arriving at dinner,

FLASH

Those eyes.

Those eyes...

He reached out to turn the lamp on. The room was lit through a fine film of dust in the air above him. It spread like thick smoke from a fire. He coughed and stood up to stretch. Every surface of Michael's bedroom was covered in dust. It was a black dust mixed with dirt and whatever else it had absorbed. Cobwebs floated down from the corners of the ceiling, some hung from his nightstand. It wasn't exactly squalor, the things in the room were nice: a king-sized bed, a mahogany nightstand and big television, but it felt like a mausoleum.

He faced the dark window which by the light of the room had become a mirror. There was a paleness in his face that he hadn't noticed before, something beneath the gray hair and sunburn, a ghostly sort of hue. His eyes met his own in the mirror and he jumped back. In the window were Sammy's eyes that he had made earlier, the eyes that Michael couldn't get away from. He fell back onto the bed and shook it off. No way. There was no way he was going to let the kid get into his head again. He knew that what he saw wasn't real. It wasn't. It was just his mind playing tricks on him.

In the hall, a door shut and Michael heard the sound of footsteps creak. Puzzled, he stood up and listened for a few moments. It was silent. He was about to question whether or not he was hearing things when he heard the front door open. Michael threw on a shirt and tiptoed as quick as he could down the stairs.

The deck creaked softly under his nervous weight. Michael scanned the yard and the road. When he couldn't detect any signs of life, he sighed. He turned toward the door and shook his head at his foolishness, when suddenly his neighbor's motion light flickered on from across the street.

There, cast in fluorescence, was the unmistakable outline of his grandson.

The boy looked back toward the house, Michael panicked and flattened himself against the door. His chest burst and he struggled for the air that had been kicked out of his lungs. Sammy turned to disappear down the road.

Every instinct in Michael wanted to call out to him. He wanted to do the right thing and get him back inside, back to safety. Those instincts were overpowered by his latent curiosity. He took a step forward and stopped. His heartbeat was in his throat now. He took another step. And then another and another until he found

himself lightly running on tiptoes after Sammy. He passed his neighbor's house and went around the floodlights to stay in the shadows.

The public beach at the end of the road was much different in the twilight. Although small, it felt endless in the darkness. Michael found the figure of the boy standing at the edge of the lake. He hid behind a bush and watched his grandson in a choked, agonized terror. He had to know. Did he really see his grandson float? What if he could float now? Should he try to stop him?

The lake was calm. No sound came from the water other than boats hitting the dock in the distance. Sammy was shaking all over. The yellow safety light made him look small against his looming shadow cast upon the water. The air became still and waited for him too. It felt as if nothing moved, nothing breathed until... Sammy took a step.

An electric spark shook Michael. The fear kept him hidden. Fear kept him frozen behind the bush, unable to see what happened. He listened. At first, he was confused, he could hear his ten-year-old grandson softly cursing to himself. He heard water splashing, like someone was wading around in it. Michael slowly stood up; he could see the shadow of his grandson flicker.

He was kicking the water onto his shadow.

As quickly and silently as he could, he ran back up to the house. He was so happy he almost laughed to himself. How could he get carried away like that? Of course he couldn't float on the water! That was ridiculous. He bounded up the front steps to his home and felt a wave of exhaustion hit him. His lungs burned with fire and his knees ached. In his room, he turned out the light and waited for Sammy to creep back in. When he heard the front door open, sleep overcame him.

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When dawn broke, Michael was in the kitchen. He ran his hands under the faucet and wet his face. His head hurt and his knees felt sore. The last time he ran like that escaped him. Still, despite the pain he felt somewhat relieved. Yesterday's

terror felt laughable, like the memory of some bad TV show. He chuckled to himself.

His kitchen was worn. The appliances were old and the counters were cut up from when he was too lazy to use a cutting board. It was the room that got the most sunlight and sometimes the sun was so bright it hid the damages. In the center of the room was a big window that overlooked the lake. Burnt Seed Lake was always present. Today, it seemed closer than usual. He didn't want to go out on the lake today. He would wake Sammy up in a few hours and take the kid into town, maybe go shopping or return a library book. Whatever was necessary.

He went to the cupboard to get coffee. When he shut the door, Sammy was standing beside the refrigerator.

Startled, Michael nearly dropped the coffee. "Hey, bud," he said with a playful voice. "How'd you sleep?" Sammy sat down at the table. He looked rested; his big moon eyes were eclipsed by sunlight.

"Grandad, can you teach me how to swim today?"

This time Michael did drop the coffee. Beans spilled over the unwashed floor and stuck to patches of grime. "Yeah... yeah of course I can." He reached for a broom.

"How about after I clean this up and make you breakfast, we can head down and I can show you how to swim. It's real easy, I feel like you'll be—"

"Grandad," Sammy interrupted him. "I didn't float yesterday."

Michael frowned but quickly laughed it off. "Of course... of course you didn't."

#

#

After they ate, the two walked to the shoreline. The sun was up over the trees now. The sky was bright, but there were many clouds. Some clouds in the distance had the dark look of rainfall. The air was becoming heavy with humidity. A few robins swam through the dense air above them.

Michael purposely avoided the beach. They went to the dock where his boat was tied. It was a small dock that went out five feet from the shore. Shielding his eyes, Michael could see a few boats floating through the glittering haze. He stepped out onto the dock. Sammy stayed behind on the shore. "Okay kiddo, the first thing about swimming is to get into the water."

Sammy stared. "Just think of it as a big puddle."

The boy approached the water. The lake was calm. It gently rose up to the embankment only to recede again to expose the brown earth beneath. The water was clear, you could see straight through to the sandy bottom. It swirled with every faint ripple. It seemed to be not a hard, exact bottom but a swirl of loose dirt. Sammy looked straight ahead out past the tree-line at the opposite side of the lake. He took a deep breath and stepped into the water.

There was no sound of splashing.

"Am I... am I in the water yet, Grandad?"

There making the slightest ripples upon the water were Sammy's feet. He looked down and jumped in surprise. The feet bounced on the surface and settled down again to float just above it.

"Grandad! Grandad! I told you!" He pounded his feet in a mad dance. "I told you I could float!" He ran around in a circle. "Look at me!" His laughter's high pitch sent the birds scattering.

Michael looked in disbelief and horror at the transformation of Sammy. He stood up and ran around the dock. "Sammy, get over here!" He yelled. The boy approached and Michael put his hand underneath the boy's foot to feel if he were actually floating. He yanked his hand away. "Sammy... how are you doing this? How is this happening?"

His voice was mad with joy, "I don't know! But I bet I can run out into the middle of the lake!" He laughed and sprinted out past the dock. Michael watched him helpless as he sprang lightly across the water. Sammy kept running, it was like he was going to join the group of dark clouds that surrounded the sun. Every leap was in wild abandon, was in pure joy and in the recklessness of youth that Michael had never seen in Sammy before. He seemed like an angel.

The sun had fallen behind more clouds. Michael's hand that he was using to shield from the light dropped to his side. Sammy stopped suddenly in the middle of the lake. Michael could see him look down and then start to run back, it looked like he was losing his balance. Something was wrong. Dark blue and gray swallowed the last of the sun's light. The sky grew dark and Sammy fell into the water.

"Sammy!" Michael yelled. The small figure splashed in the water about an eighth of a mile off shore. "Help! Help!" Michael yelled. He turned and ran to his boat. He untied the rope as fast as he could. The figure heaved and tried to stay afloat; the sky was still dark. Michael kicked off from the dock and tried to start the motor. The motor rumbled and then nothing. He adjusted the choke and pulled the crank as hard and as absolute as he could. Through the gathered sweat on his face, he checked the primer bulb and pumped it with more fuel. On the lake, the splashes were less now. He was getting tired. He pulled the crank again and again. The motor made several small putters and then gave out. The smell of gasoline surrounded him. He had flooded the engine. He turned pale.

"Help!" He called out again. "My grandson is drowning!" A few neighbors, after hearing the first cry, looked on in alarm. Michael grabbed the oars and started to row towards his drowning grandson.

His shoulders ached and his back was wet with sweat. He looked over his left side, the splashing had stopped.

"Sammy!" He called out. "Sammy! I'm coming!"

He paddled to where he thought Sammy had been. A few boats had surrounded him and wondered what the commotion was. "My grandson!" He cried, "He went under!" Michael jumped in. The water roared around him in a cool tempest. He looked down and swam a little to the left, the water stung his eyes and his chest began to burn. Suddenly all around him the lake was lit up, he could see nearly to the bottom. He swam up and breached. The sky was full of light, the clouds had passed. He looked to the other boats and they didn't even see him. They were watching something else.

Michael followed their stares and found the body of his grandson floating just above the water.

#

After the ambulance left and Michael answered all the questions from the police, the neighbors watched him as he sat alone on the dock. No boat was out on the water out of respect. Even still, there wouldn't have been anyone out there regardless because the sky was dark now and it had slowly started to rain. Michael stared out onto the lake as the raindrops made little ripples upon the water.

The Release

Tamiko Dooley

I opened my palms
Secrets I had been keeping
Flew into the sky

te akeruto
ore no himitsu ga
sora ni tobu

Biography of a Librarian

Maddox Emory Arnold

Rain splattered against the iron-laced window panes high overhead as Devon hurried through the library. Shadows stretched away from him down the hall, gathering in corners and towering over his head, getting caught in the gaudy chandeliers that watched over his flight from above. He held his single candle aloft, shielding the flame as best he could with his free hand and taking care not to move too quickly, lest it burn out and invite the shadows in to do their worst.

It was difficult. He needed to move. Needed to *find it*. To find *her*.

He reached the end of the carpeted hallway and entered the main chamber of the library. The open space was at once inviting and disturbing; the shelves seemed to lean in towards him, books threatening to rip themselves free of their confines. The ceiling here receded even higher, until it crested into a large dome, covered in gilded portraits and stained-glass panels. In the darkness, the faces on the dome were hidden. But Devon felt them watching.

His footsteps echoed through the cavernous space, and he shoved down the urge to run. The dream foretold this. The hollow rattle of his steps on the cold, tile floor rang in his head, the echo ricocheting off the walls in the same clattering rhythm he heard each night, in his sleep.

The dream. It was finally complete.

He quickened his pace, despite the risk of darkness. The dream showed him bathed in light, always, and so he knew he would be. The candle flickered, throwing warped shadows across the floor, figures draped in velvet robes of night that mirrored his every move and made a mockery of his pursuit. Yet still, the flame burned on.

He reached the other side of the library chamber and held the candle up higher, searching for the gleam of the brass doorknob that separated the librarians' door from the rest of the mahogany paneling on the wall. The glint of metal caught his eye, and he practically dove for the knob and shoved his way through the door into the narrow corridor beyond.

He turned to the right, following the dream's instructions down the hall to the stairwell. The images swirled in Devon's mind. He saw himself, descending the stairs to the archive levels below, where the air hung thick with dust and well-hidden secrets. The book. The woman. His future penned on a page in a cramped, scrawling hand. Her face, eyes locked on his own, a hundred questions in her right eye, and each corresponding answer in her left.

The images that had been plaguing him for months, each night becoming clearer, lasting a few moments longer.

This night would bring the dream to fruition.

Devon scrambled down the corridor to the stairs, descending as fast as he dared, trapped in a balancing act between the burning need to push forward and the threatening sputter of the candle's flame, the smooth glide of his slippered feet against the stone steps beneath. He passed one door, another, a third. None were the door he saw each night when he closed his eyes.

He reached the bottom of the staircase, his heart leaping into his throat and settling there to scream his pulse into his ears. This final door was exactly as it had been in the dream. Ancient, heavy, hinged with iron. Devon reached out, tried the handle. Unlocked. Just as he knew it would be.

The dream did not lie.

He threw his weight against the door, which he knew had not been opened for many years—the dream had told him so. Metal screamed as the hinges cracked open their jaws after remaining clenched shut for so long, gathering rust. Ever so slowly, the door gave way under the force of Devon's body, the intensity of his desire.

He stumbled forward, and found himself in the room he knew held the book. Only six rows of shelves separated him from his prize. She was here too, he was sure of it. Her hands, he always saw her hands. Running her fingers along the book's spine, taunting him with its contents.

The future. The world.

He stalked through the maze of dusty tomes and rotting wood, so intent on what lay before him that he didn't notice the wax dripping down the length of the candle he still held in his hand. The tall wooden shelves gave way before him as he approached the end of his journey.

The back of the room jutted out to form a small alcove set into the wall, deep enough for a person to kneel inside of it, before the stone altar set within the recesses of the cavity. She stood within the alcove, the book held in her nimble hands. She looked up as he approached, and Devon was met with the same piercing stare that had woken him just hours ago. Eyes dark and regal, an unexplainable force behind her gaze.

The woman's grip tightened on the book. Devon held out his candle, and the flickering aura of golden light he carried washed across the burgundy spine, the gilded lettering, the royal blue vines snaking across the cover. His breath caught. Here was the dream, the book, the revelation bound in leather and stained with ink.

The melting wax finally oozed out from where it pooled at the bottom of the metal candlestick, dripping onto Devon's finger where it was hooked within the handle. He didn't even flinch. His entire being, every sense, was ensnared by the mere presence of the woman whose hands haunted his dreams, and the treasure she carried within them.

"I should have known you would end up here eventually," she said, her voice deep and full of the wisdom of those who have lived longer than anyone should.

"You know of me?" Devon's question sounded hollow, lacking substance. "Then, you have the same dream?"

The woman grimaced, then shook her head. She stood up straighter, tucking the book under her arm and reaching for something leaning against the wall beside the alcove. "No, Devon. My kind doesn't dream, for better or for worse."

Devon's eyes followed the book hungrily, even as the woman tucked it away. "How can that be?" he asked. "I've dreamed of... you. Of this night. Of that book. It's been here, all this time, waiting for me. Waiting. The dream..."

He finally realized what it was that she had plucked from its resting place against the wall. A scythe. Blade sharp, glittering in the candlelight and throwing its own set

of spindly shadows across the room, thin bars of darkness cutting through the candle's dancing flame.

"I'm sorry, Devon," the woman said. "This book has been luring people to their deaths for centuries. It's my fault, really. I thought it would be safe here."

Silence. Devon searched her face for some sign of a trick, a game, but found none. She did not break his gaze. "To their deaths?" he said, incredulous. "That book is meant to show me my future!"

The woman nodded gravely. "And it did." She looked down to the floor, behind Devon. He whirled around, following her gaze, and let out a strangled yell. His voice broke, his mind split. The dream had not shown him this. He saw himself, lying on the floor, motionless, pinned beneath a fallen bookshelf.

"It was the candle wax," the woman's voice sounded from behind him, as sharp and metallic as the scythe she now held in her hands. "It's the one thing that wasn't in the dream. It startled you, and you fell back into the shelf. The book foretold it. But it chose not to show you."

Devon stared down at his own lifeless form, his mind frozen in time and space. The body he had been in just moments ago was broken, spine fractured. He was dead. And yet, a part of him was alive enough to recognize his own death. He saw it now, felt it now. The book, the dream. The lie. It was all a lie, from the very beginning. The images in his mind shattered, the shards slicing into his skin.

He turned back to the woman, an icy chill seeping across every inch of his incorporeal form. "Who are you, then? If I really am dead."

She gave a small smile. "You are, I'm afraid. I'm a Reaper, I would know." "A Reaper," Devon whispered.

She nodded. "You followed the book before. The dream. Now, you follow me." She motioned with her scythe to a haphazard pile of books, fallen from the very shelf that had taken Devon's life. The stack was just high enough that he could kneel before it and place his head atop the aged leather covers without overarching his back. He did so.

It felt right.

The Reaper approached, setting the traitorous book on the floor to Devon's right. He turned his head to stare at the spine of the tome that had led him to his fate. His cheek scraped against the gritty leather volumes beneath him, histories that had remained hidden for hundreds of years. The Reaper hefted her scythe, silent and precise. She lifted it high above her head, the curved blade ringing as it scraped against the ceiling.

Devon could not make out the words written in gold foil across the spine of that treacherous book, amid the blue vines— deceit, painstakingly scripted and bound. The scythe whistled as it fell. In those last few moments, through the layers of stone and wood and stories told and untold, Devon could just barely hear the rain, still pounding against the dome of the library high above.

The Jig of the Dead

Ivan de Monbrison

There are mass graves everywhere in the city mass graves where bodies are burned mass graves where corpses are burned there are mass graves everywhere in the city we see the bodies of women children men mixed with dogs we can no longer distinguish the dogs from the men women and children they are nothing more than a huge heap a heap to which we set fire and the city is filled with mass graves on fire and smells of flesh burning everywhere the flesh is burning and you have an empty head and a naked empty body you watch these fires burn in the night there is a smell of death floating in the night we would like to be able to close the door we would like to be able to go somewhere else to a place that does not exist to a place located outside of time and space far from mass graves far from holocausts far from génocides What is your name ? I don't have a name How old are you ? I have no age Who are you ? I don't know Where are you from ? I don't know I am like a character on an old film reel on a silent black and white film reel where grotesque puppets move in a macabre dance in the dance of the skeletons the skeletons like to dance at night in the cemeteries if you get up in the middle of the night that you cross the city naked that you climb the wall of the cemetery naked that you fall back on the other side that you sit with cold buttocks on a grave you will be able to see the skeletons dancing it is the most beautiful dance in the world the dance of the skeletons you can only hear the sound of their bones slapping against each other there is no music the music they dance to is the witches' sabbath the witches' sabbath they only hear it in their skulls so maybe if you raise your head if you look at the woods not far from the cemetery you will be able to see the witches the witches who sing during the sabbath and you will be able to say to yourself I have seen everything I have beholden everything and I'm naked in the middle of skeletons and witches in the night I'm naked the others sleep in caves caves they built with cement the immense skyscrapers that rise towards the sky and yet all the graves are open at the feet of those towers the graves are open the skeletons are dancing and in the city are burning the bodies of the women of the men of the children of the dogs mingled at a some distance from each other they are burning a smell of death floats in the city holocaust there should not have been human beings they should never have been taught to write they should never have been taught to think human beings learned nothing by themselves they were taught

everything this "One" who is it ? « One » it's these cells it's these genes it's the bricks that form our being the human being himself is like a house in this house live thousands of bacterias millions of bacterias millions of cells millions of parasites and when you look at yourself in the mirror that you think you see a single body a single thing in fact it's an illusion there are millions of beings inside you that spend their time eating each others that devour each others you yourself are an immense biotope you yourself are a virgin forest the mirror does not reflect anything and you never see your real image people in the city who put on clothes of different colors who go to the shops who come out of the shops who buy useless things in the shops that they will soon throw away what are they doing ? they deceive themselves all day long they try to forget their waiting of their death the philosopher was right we only entertain ourselves while waiting for the end while awaiting death we entertain ourselves so as not to see the bodies burning so as not to see the skeletons dancing so as not to see in the mirrors our body decaying and ourselves burning we have set our own body on fire à long and long time ago it keeps burning in the dark of night like a living torch.

Purgatory

Portia Yu

Purgatory is an island in the middle of the sea. The sand there is the colour of snow. The flowers grow fur. On the high branches of trees there are crystals that sing. And down below, there are sins languishing on the shore. They lie on their backs in the mud and dream of better days. And then there are the regrets, scuttling by on thousands of little legs. They curl into balls and roll. They roll down the slope to where the dust piles up, away from the sea, toward the centre of that island in the centre of the sea, roll down to where the angel waits— the mossy-mouthed angel with marble skin and golden eyes.

Repent, says the angel. *Repent*, it says to me.

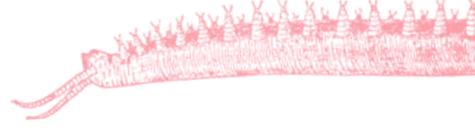
I stand staring, not sure whether to tell the truth, or to bury everything in the sand and lie.

So I ask, “Repent? What for? I can’t repent if I don’t know what I’ve done.”

Repent, it repeats. *Repent*.

Then I flee, scurrying over the sand. My words scurry with me. We are fast. We have tens of thousands of legs among us. We tip ourselves into the rowboat and off we go. Dark water laps at the oars. And as we head toward the horizon, the sun begins to set. My regrets shiver, huddle by my feet.

Soon, I tell them. *Soon we’ll be free*.



Contributor Notes

Lori D'Angelo's work has appeared in various literary journals including Blood Moon Magazine, Drunken Boat, Gargoyle, Hawaii Pacific Review, JAKE, Literary Mama, Reed Magazine, Suburban Witchcraft, and Word Riot. She is a fellow at Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences, a grant recipient from the Elizabeth George Foundation, and an alumna of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. You can find her on Twitter @scly21.

Joshua Merchant is a native of East Oakland exploring what it means to be human. A lot of what they explore is in the realm of love and what it means while processing trauma, loss, heartbreak. They feel as though as a people, especially those of us more marginalized than others, it has become too common to deny access to our true source of power as a means of feeling powerful. However, they've come to recognize with harsh lessons and divine grace that without showing up for ourselves and each other, everything else is null and void. You can find their work in Anvil Tongue, Spiritus Mundi Review, Rigorous Mag, and elsewhere.

Portia Yu lives in Hong Kong where she likes to write about dreams, memories, and unstable realities.

Tinamarie Cox lives in Northern Arizona with her husband and two children. She writes to escape her mind and explore the universe. Tinamarie's poetry has appeared in *Nevermore Journal*, *Grim & Gilded*, *The Sirens Call*, and others. You can follow her on Instagram@tinamariethinkstoomuch and Twitter@tinamarie_cox.

Lara Torea is everything in between a high school student and an aspiring poet. Her words have been previously published or are forthcoming in *Limelight Review*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *VIBE Magazine* and *INKSOUNDS Collective*. Otherwise, she owns a newsletter, thecustody.substack.com, and tweets @melarancholic.

Shrutidhora P Mohor (born 1979) is an author from India writing literary fiction. She has been listed in several international writing competitions like Bristol Short Story Prize 2022, the 20th Bath Flash Fiction Award, the George Floyd Short Story Competition 2022, the 16 h Strands International Flash Fiction Competition, the Retreat West monthly micro competition April, September, and October 2022, the Retreat West quarterly themed competition March 2022. Her writings have been published by oranges journal July 2022, Fiery Scribe Review Magazine April and August 2022, National Flash Fiction Day Flash Flood June 2022, Ayaskala February 2022, Friday Flash Fiction September 2022, Courageous Creatives anthology September 2022, Spiritus Mundi Review September-October 2022, Contemporary Jo October 2022, Erato Magazine November 2022, The Lovers Literary Journal (forthcoming), Flash Fiction Magazine (forthcoming, November 2022), Vestal Review (forthcoming, December 2022), Bullshit Lit (forthcoming, September 2023). Mohor (she/ her) is the pen name for Prothoma Rai Chaudhuri, MA Ph D, Faculty, Department of Political Science, St Xavier's College, Calcutta, India. She does social science through literary fiction. Her Twitter handle is @ShrutidhoraPM and her Instagram username is @shrutidhorap

Zary Fekete has worked as a teacher in Hungary, Moldova, Romania, China, and Cambodia. She currently lives and works as a writer in Minnesota. Some places she has been published are Goats Milk Mag, JMWW Journal, Bethlehem Writers Roundtable, and Zoetic Press. She enjoys reading, podcasts, and long, slow films. Twitter: @ZaryFekete

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Tamiko Dooley read Latin and French at New College, Oxford. She was the winner of the BBC Radio 3 carol competition 2021. Twitter: Tamiko_Dooley

James Grimard is a writer currently living in Southern California. An English student at California State University Channel Islands, he is currently exploring careers based in the publishing and education field. He writes mainly short stories and poetry. His prompt page can be found on instagram at @grimm.gram

Maddox Emory Arnold (he/they) is a writer and translator based in Southeast Michigan, where he is also a full-time graduate student and Spanish teacher. His work has previously appeared in The Viridian Door and Cloudy Magazine. Most of his free time is spent thinking up story ideas, some of which eventually become something, while others are still pending. You can find him on Twitter @maddox_emory

Ivan de Monbrison is a bald ape with a sagging belly. He tries to write what he feels he should in order not to throw himself over a bridge. He shall if the gods allows him to be publishing a collection of poems in Wales next year "Brambles", and a pamphlet in the UK too called "The Other Self". The later title he tends to overuse in general for some strange reason, probably he's speaking here about himself. Twitter: IvanMonbrison

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