

Cocoon

Winter 2024



DANDELION REVOLUTION PRESS

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MESSAGE FROM DANDELION REVOLUTION PRESS

We launched Dandelion Revolution Press (DRP) in 2020 and published three anthologies of short fiction within three years. We had a wonderful time discovering the publishing process, especially the championing stories that featured memorable, dynamic female characters.

2024 marks a change for DRP. We've expanded our editorial team so we could produce two online collections of creative works. We remain committed to our mission of sharing female-forward stories with the world. Now, we've diversified the type of pieces we publish — short fiction *and* creative nonfiction.

For our winter issue, we chose "Cocoon" as the theme since it can mean many things. Rest. Home. A period of waiting. A place to hide. Solitude. Isolation. A dance between retreating from the world and releasing oneself back into it. Winter months are a season of hibernation, the natural retreat into a state of dormancy. But is it? From the outside, the caterpillar appears inactive in its own cocoon. Yet, this phase is paramount for its growth.

We selected pieces from global contributors that have interpreted the theme in different styles, genres, and voices. For our creative nonfiction, we have an insightful story centered around real-life experiences. We will always publish stories with complex female characters and narrators, providing you, the reader, with stories that are soulful, humorous, powerful, and unforgettable.

This month's artwork is sourced from The National Gallery of Art public collection, and we selected pieces that resonated with our stories. We are including links to the website where more details about the piece and the artist are available.

We hope you enjoy this collection. And we would love to hear how this journal found its way to you!

DANDELION REVOLUTION PRESS TEAM

Co-Founders	Editorial Team
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Ashini J. Desai	Natalya Bucuy
Paige Gardner	Jessica Kaplan
	Jules McLaughlin
	Swapna Padhye
	Scarlet Wyvern

Cover Art: Poor Artist's Cupboard, c. 1815

Artist: Charles Bird King

Charles Bird King painted this still life in the tradition of trompe l'oeil, French for “deceive the eye.” An alcove holds the few possessions of fictional artist C. Palette: a crust of bread, glass of water, palette, and stack of unpaid bills.

Other clues also suggest Palette’s sad circumstances. A calling card from a cheap would-be patron, Mrs. Skinflint, invites him to visit her after tea. Another records his debt of \$5. In the upper left, an advertisement lists an artist’s property for sale: a few articles of clothing and a peck of potatoes. While the painting seems tongue-in-cheek, King and many of his fellow Philadelphia painters struggled to earn an income.

There’s more information about this painting at the [National Gallery of Art website](#).

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Fiction



[The Repentant Magdalen](#), by Georges de La Tour, c. 1635/1640

Two Healthy Brains *by Grace Nask*

HOUR ONE

The zombies are coming. There's nothing I can do about that now. But I'll be damn sure I'm not going down without a fight.

Our house is small: the kitchen, living room, and dining room make a pod on the left, and a hallway from the living room leads to the cluster of bedrooms and bathroom on the right. Two doors. Eleven windows. When we first bought it, Matt said it was 'cozy'; I said it was cheap. At the time he laughed and kissed me, calling me "Casey my Curmudgeon." Now it's defensible against the people we once called neighbors.

I lock the front door in the living room and back door in the dining room and throw both latches. All the shades go down and lights go out, pitching the deceptive sunlight into a dark haze. The dining room table scrapes against the hardwood when I push it up to the back door, rattling the vase of violets in its center.

The beige loveseat calls to me, but I resist the urge to push it against the front door. Matt will be back soon. I'm not leaving him behind.

For the time being, I move into the kitchen and throw open the cupboards. Eighty-four cans stare back at me, stacked three high. When it first began, I went to what used to be our grocery store and grabbed anything that would last, beans to peaches and back again. Now, I count the cans, just to be sure, checking each meal for dents and openings as I go. No contamination. I breathe a sigh of relief.

My hands linger by the sink, eyes flitting from the faucet to the stove to the fire extinguisher before inevitably resting on the same drawer I always reach for. I open it, briefly resting a finger on each cold handle of our seven knives. They're designed to scrape against the crust of bread or butterfly a chicken—something Matt or I have done hundreds of times on a weeknight. But that was a different life, one we'll have to adapt from.

I tear my eyes away from the knives and close the drawer once more. My fingers twitch and feet shuffle. With nothing better to do (and feeling a bit absurd), I make our bed. My half of our bedroom has everything in its place; even though the white curtains are drawn, I can still find the bedsheets on the right-hand corner of the top shelf in the closet without issue. Matt's side is...well, Matt's. Clothes litter the floor, and there's a ring of balled up papers around the wastebasket from where he shot from afar and missed. For a man who worked an office job before office jobs became no more, he sure doesn't understand the concept of a filing cabinet.

With a small sigh, I begin to pick up his dirty clothes. Then stop. I swallow. Gently, delicately, I arrange each article of clothing back into the position it was in. He can put his own dirty clothes in the hamper when he gets back.

HOUR FOUR

Before too long, my stomach rumbles. Luckily, we still have electricity and running water, for now. I crack open the fridge, risking a bit of the bright light in the darker gloom. I don't risk the stove, instead eating a peanut butter sandwich in the dim hallway. The smoke detector's red-light blinks merrily at me from the ceiling, not at all concerned at the end of the world.

Not for the first time, I wish Matt and I had a bunker in the countryside where we could live off the land as long as we needed. Heck, I'd settle for a basement with a stairwell at this point. Instead, I have one internal hallway. One internal hallway and eleven windows.

I sigh. At least the relative stillness seems to be keeping, even if the clenching in my stomach tells me it's the calm before the storm.

A few minutes later, the silence does break, but it comes in the strangest form. In the distance, kids laugh and shout. I wince. Why on earth haven't their parents taken them inside?

Unless their parents are already zombies, and the kids don't know how much danger they're in.

I rush to the front door, sandwich forgotten. I could race outside, bring them here, and lock everything up again. We could keep them safe; Matt wouldn't mind the unexpected company.

Even as my fingers brush against the knob, I can't get myself to turn the latch. Those kids are too far out from our house; any zombie in the area has already heard them.

I rest my forehead against the door and beg them to go quiet, beg them to hide. Their laughs peter out, until I'm left with nothing but the hum of the fridge and my own gasping breaths.

I fill containers with water in the kitchen in case the tap cuts off or the water system gets contaminated and keep my mind carefully blank.

HOUR FIVE

I'm on my eighth Tupperware when the doorbell rings. My breath catches. I'm on my feet before I realize Matt would've used his key.

They're here they're here they're here—my breath comes quicker and quicker, but my hands hum with focused energy. I ease the butcher's knife out of the drawer and cross into the living room. My

heart tries to outdo my breath; my chest tightens. Brandishing the knife, I stand on my toes and peer through the peephole.

Nothing leers back at me. No dangling limbs, no rotting flesh, no staggering gaits. Just a brown box with Amazon's signature blue tape on the welcome mat.

It could be intel; it could be a bomb. It could be anything, really. The zombies could be lurking just out of sight, waiting to pounce. Except stealth isn't really a zombie's style, and if it is intel, I need it, badly. If I have to prepare for the worst—if *we* have to prepare, I mean—we'll need to do it before nightfall.

The handle of the butcher's knife is warm from how hard I grip it. The deadbolt sticks, but I shimmy it open. I press my ear to the door. No moans or grunts. With a deep breath, I open the door, grab the box, take it inside, and lock and deadbolt the door again in only a few seconds.

I slide to the carpet, blinking sunspots from my vision. It's only now that my hands begin to shake. The butcher's knife slides across the tape in two scraggly lines.

The new work shoes Matt ordered a week ago stare back at me. I put a fist in my mouth to avoid the laugh strangling my throat. Even in the apocalypse, Amazon delivers.

HOUR SEVEN

I finish filling the rest of the containers in our house with water and stack them with the others. I recount the cans, just to be sure. I secure the shades with bits of twine, double and triple check that the deadbolts are in place. I don't think about Matt. I don't I don't I don't.

When I wander through the bedroom again, I see my phone powered off on the nightstand. I could call him, and he might pick up. But they could trace it, could make it more dangerous for the both of us. If Matt picks up at all.

The light piercing the shades grows dimmer and dimmer, until I travel more by touch than sight. The vase of violets on the table, the photos of our honeymoon to Disney, the mess of Matt's CDs by the TV all dissipate into shadow. And with the dark will come the monsters.

My fingers run against the scratchy armrest of the loveseat. I swallow. A dog barks, and I jump. I swallow again. With a grunt, I shove the loveseat across the floor, jamming it forward against the door. My feet skid on the carpet, and my head smacks against the armrest. I curse, and once I start cursing, I can't seem to stop. I curse the loveseat and the carpet and the headache. I curse the zombies and our house and our neighbors. I curse Matt. Boy do I curse Matt.

I don't have time to cry, but the tears escape anyway. I pace the living room, watching the front door, and wait for night to fall.

HOUR EIGHT

The rumble of a car cuts through the unnatural silence. The living room is pitch black, so when a headlight filters through, I have to squint against it despite the shades. My breath sticks to my throat. Zombies can't drive cars.

A whistle comes closer and closer to the house, singing a tune I know by heart. I clutch my chest, blinking back tears. Matt. Matt Matt Matt. I'm going to kill him right after I hug him tight.

His footsteps are heavy, his whistle loud. I wince at every sound. He unlocks the door, but the knob only rattles.

I need to shift the loveseat. I need to throw the latch. I don't move.

He knocks, once twice thrice. They boom in the quiet. The dog starts barking again, and I flinch. Did she bark because of the noise Matt's making, or because of something else neither of us can hear?

Matt knocks again, louder, and faster than the last time. "Casey, open the damn door!"

I jolt. I lean over the loveseat and throw the latch. Instantly the door jerks, but because of the loveseat it doesn't open more than an inch. The door jerks again, giving another inch. "Oh, for heavens' sake," Matt mutters.

I move into his line of vision, drinking in his suit and tie. A laugh hiccups in my throat; who cares about ties at the end of the world? Too soon I'm looking past him into the night for movement. Matt has his phone light on, horribly exposing us to the shifting shadows. I listen for moans but can't hear anything over Matt's curses and grunts. A zombie wouldn't have to work very hard to see two healthy brains ripe for the taking.

Matt's breathing hard, hands clenched. His words are clipped and too even. "Ok, I'm going to count to three, and you're going to move whatever the hell you have against the door and let me in. You understand?"

I need to tell him to keep his voice down but fear it might make him louder. He'll go quiet if I move the loveseat. They can't get to us if I let him in. We can fortify the perimeter again, keep our defenses up for when they attack. I need to move the loveseat. "Where were you all day?"

Matt throws up his hands, and his light becomes a beacon to the sky. "At work!"

"Work? To get supplies?" I suppose staplers and filing cabinets as barricades might be useful—

“No! To do my job? Remember that place we go? The magical office that pays the bills?” He rubs his eyes. “I’m sorry; I’m tired. You should’ve called me if it was getting this bad.”

My voice comes out in a whisper. “What if they’re tapping the lines?”

“Who? Who would want to listen to our calls?”

I don’t answer. Suddenly, I don’t know.

Matt sighs. “Baby, no one’s tapping the lines. I promise no one’s out here but me.” He leans his head against the door and looks at me, eight hours of work sunken into the lines on his face. “Open the door? Please?”

With trembling hands, I move the loveseat, and Matt gets the door open all the way. The full moon glows amidst a cluster of stars overlooking our neighborhood, turning our grass silver. Three streetlamps highlight nothing more than wooden fences, a rickety sidewalk, and the occasional flower bed. I strain my ears, but all I can hear is that dog barking and the chirping of crickets.

Matt’s gaze bears through me, and even though I know he hates the pinch of his work shoes, he doesn’t come inside. Instead, he steps off the front step into the grass.

“What are you doing?” I hiss.

He holds out a hand. “Come on,” he says. “It’s a beautiful night.”

My chest tightens. “Matty, get inside. *Now.*”

“Why? There’s nothing out here.” He sweeps his phone light over the empty street, our small yard. Nowhere for anything to hide. “For heavens’ sake, Casey, help me out here. What are you so afraid of?”

He’s so loud. He’s so bright. We’re so exposed here.

I step outside and jerk back in again. “There. Happy? Great. Let’s go.” My hands are shaking; I pretend it’s anger. I go to slam the door. Too late, I see Matt coming up behind me, fingers on the frame, and hear the crunch of wood on bone.

“Shit.” He yowls and curses, shaking his hand. “Damn-*it.*” The bone white of his skin has shifted to stark red. His ring finger starts to swell around his wedding band. But even as I watch his hand, I watch the grass and the car and the fences and the street and listen for something I can’t hear, look for something I can’t see.

I think of those kids earlier, shouting and laughing in the sunlight. For the first time, I wonder what game they were playing.

My chest has become a gravity well, compressing each breath into a solid core against my ribs. I’d

just wanted to stay safe. I'd just wanted to keep us safe, and now I hurt him.

I grip the sides of my face in both hands. "I'm sorry." My voice turns into sludge when tears splatter my shirt. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry..."

"Oh gosh." Matt's good hand strokes my hair. He wraps himself around me, stilling the trembling. "It's ok. Don't be sorry; I'm sorry for pushing. It's ok, baby...."

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry...."

Grace Nask is content to live under a nicely decorated rock, complete with her quirky characters and half-baked fantasy lands. In 2023, she published a collection of fantasy short stories, *Twisted Fantasy*, and in 2024 she published a YA novel-in-verse about mental health, *Don't Call Me Broken*. Both can be found online at [BarnesandNoble.com](https://www.barnesandnoble.com). She's pursuing a Bachelor's in English Education at Lycoming College, where she is a poetry editor for their literary magazine, *The Tributary*. In her free time—whatever that is—she enjoys taking walks in the park and stealing her friends' cats.

Isle of Fenrir's Heir *by Hayley E. Frerichs*

There is no better smell than that of the salty sea air and a fresh pelt. The droplets of water gather on the thick fur creating an earthy aroma even out on the ocean. Squinting into the dense fog for the first sign of land, I adjust the wolf cape over my shoulders.

It's not long before I'm pointing at a streak of green on the horizon and the bottom of the longship scrapes along the shore. Splashing in the surf, I land on the pebble strewn beach.

Walking to where stones meet the edge of the wood, the land is covered in rich green moss. Ferns curl over each other like spindly fingers. But there! I push aside the underbrush to the dirt beneath. A paw print. A triangle pad and four oblong toes. The Wolf.

"Oye Dauðamaðr!"

I look over my shoulder. Our captain Bjørn whistles and waves me over to help unload supplies.

"Can't even wait until morning to start thy hunt," Njal says as he wraps Sten's hands, chafed from rowing, with salve-soaked cloth.

The men laugh, and I'm absorbed into their circle of pungent body odor. Troels, his one eyebrow burned off from a fire when he was a lad, tends to a popping driftwood fire.

"So eager to get back home to Revna?" Troels teases, staring intently into the flames.

"Ack, I've told thee," I say. "No."

Njal loops an arm around my shoulders. "She's a hard worker."

"I know that."

I had told Revna one last hunt. But I wasn't so sure. Even if we claim this island for our growing village, I'm not sure I wanted to grow it with her.

Njal humphs. "It would do thee good to settle down and cool thy blood."

"My blood is plenty cool."

"Just thee wait," he laughs. "A lass will come along and stir thy feelings so thee can't keep thy mind in order."

"Not to worry." I laugh with him, clapping him on the back. "I won't find one on this island."



Seeking fresh water the next morning, a couple of us go towards the edge of the wood. I spot its tracks again. The Wolf walked this edge last night, silently stalking us. As I step fully under the canopy of the wood, cool air hits my windburned cheeks. The trees are old, larger than an arm's width around.

There's a trickle of a stream but it's too low and muddy to refill our water skins. We follow it uphill to find its spring. I point to a glade up ahead. Sunlight breaks into the canopy as we get closer. A path appears and widens and then...a house?

The sod roof is thick with growth and the edges of the birch bark create an eave over the log siding. It's quaint with fences that corral a kitchen garden on one side and a flock of sheep on the other. Their gentle *baas* weave through the grasses they eat. A sliver of thin smoke oozes from the northwest corner.

We are not alone.

I gesture for the men to hide, ducking behind a pine myself. Someone exits the cottage. Bare feet. Skirts of linen. A leather belt hung with tools slants across wide hips. A curvy chest. Long flaxen hair with thin plaits.

I stand, leaning against the tree and staring. My body reacts. A tension in my lower abdomen clenching. My jaw loosens as I watch her close her eyes and tilt her face towards the sun.

I step. Another. And another. Drawn against my will.

Her eyes open and her chin drops. I hold my breath. But she turns and goes into the garden.

My shoulders relax and I look down at my boots. Tracks. My eyes follow them. Around and around the house the Wolf circled. I loosen an arrow from my quiver. It might not be asleep after all.

Behind me, the men unfold from the trees, drawn as I was to the hope of something warm. Even so, another possibility crosses my mind. Another man could be here. Their family. I nock the arrow, and my other hand grips the bow.

The sound of our party draws the woman's attention, and she stands from where she was bent below the edge of the fence. Her head and neck are visible now, eyes wide with surprise. She doesn't cover her mouth in fear or trip over her feet. Just stares like she can hardly believe someone else is here.

"Fair maiden," I say.

She wipes the back of her hand over her brow, sweeping back her golden hair. "Greetings, hunter."

“Are thou here alone?”

“Yes...” She takes my measure with pursed lips.

I stalk forward, not lowering the aim of my undrawn bow, and glance around for the Wolf. “I can protect thee.”

She smiles and it glows with mirth. Her eyes dance along the wooden shaft of my arrow pointed towards her heart, tracking it from the stone tip up to my fist. My lungs seize and it's like I've walked out of the feverish longhouse in the dead of winter. Her nimble finger touches the base of the arrow and pushes it down towards her feet.

“I don't need protection.” She seems annoyed. Not worried or scared.

“How do thou survive here with the Wolf?”

“We live in harmony on this island.”

“We've come to defeat it,” my chest puffs out, “to rid the land of this plague.”

“Many have tried and none have succeeded.”

“But I will—” My words are cut short when her bare feet step in between my booted ones. My eyes roam up from the dirt squished between her toes over the length of her body to her breasts that almost brush against my chest. She takes my measure, gaze lingering on my biceps and then my lips.

“Take heed, hunter,” she warns. Our eyes meet. Hers as dark and as blue as the sea. “It cannot be killed.”



The tales of this place being haunted by none, but the Wolf could be—were clearly—wrong. Later that evening, I visit her again, drawn by something I can't name.

Her garden is empty, so I go to her door and knock. Runes are drawn in blood, long dried black, on the wooden frame. I dare not enter beyond.

Summoned by my knock, she opens the door with a quirk to her brow.

“Tell me thy name,” I blurt out.

“Ulfhild.”

“Ulfhild.” I sigh and almost step forward. “Don't thou want to ask after mine?”

“Perhaps if thou are here long enough for me to learn it.”

Her thinly veiled insult doesn't deter me. “Tell me how to kill the Wolf.”

"I told thee... It cannot be killed."

"How did thou end up here?" I ask, leaning against the frame and crossing my arms. She stares at my forearms and a jolt shoots through me. I rub the back of my neck, and my arms drop to my sides. She doesn't stop looking.

"I was banished," Ulfhild answers at last.

"Why?"

"For trying to set the moon free." She gazes up at the sky as if she can see it now. As if it would bathe her skin in sea foam.

I try to look into her cottage, but the setting sun doesn't illuminate the interior. "Are thee a witch?"

"No, but I have power."

"What are thee?"

"I was a god."

"A god?"

"Fenrir is my grandfather." Loki is the father of Fenrir. And Fenrir's own son Hati chases the moon across the night sky.

"So, you tried to set thy father free?"

She nods. "He who can only visit on the new moon when there is nothing to chase."

"So, they locked thee on an island with a wolf?"

"Yes."

I wonder what power she has but before I can ask, a long *baaa* cuts into the space that had shrunk between us. Her head turns towards her sheep. Ulfhild darts past me and I follow.

She curses at a man in the paddock, waving at him to get away. Troels' only eyebrow furrows, but he doesn't move. As I peer over the fence, a slaughtered sheep lies at his feet. It's a clean cut across the neck and blood soaks into the wool of its coat, thick curls of hair preparing it for winter.

"Bastard! Thou had no right to take what is not thine."

I shake my head, ashamed. "We are guests on this island, Troels."

"But she has plenty of animals to spare," he says, talking to me and not to her. "And we need—"

"Thou does not *need* anything."

Troels steps over the dead animal in a nimble leap and grabs Ulfhild's forearm. He pulls her to the fence, drawing her towards his chest, where blood splatter dots his tunic. "Don't tell me what I *need*."

"Troels," I warn, shame rising in me.

With another glance at me, he lets go. But my stomach flips knowing what he would probably do if I wasn't here. He grabs the sheep's ankles and begins to drag it away.

"I would have invited thou all to dine with me, but thine greed means none are welcome," Ulfhild spits.

"I'm sorry," I say. My apology is thin in the wake of what happened. "I won't let any of the men near thy home."

She huffs a laugh. "Do thou think this is the first time I've been threatened by a man?"

"I can protect thee," I promise again.

"I don't *need* or *want* thy protection."

"What do thou want?" I ask without thinking.

She ignores my question and goes back to her house, feet stomping up the worn path of grass. I watch her go and wonder how I never noticed that hips could swish angrily. How I wish she was wearing her belt with all the things hanging off it so I could watch it move with her. I shake my head and go back through the woods.



After a second night on land, we're restless to explore the island. For those of us who refused the tantalizing smell of cooking mutton—afraid, perhaps, Ulfhild had cursed it—we are eager to catch fresh meat, a welcome change from the barrels of salted fish and smoked jerky. We helped the other party set off this morning to row around the island and scope the land for our new village.

The humid morning has given way to a dry afternoon, crisp with autumn wind. I easily spot the deer trail, its thin brown line meandering through grassy patches and berry-ripe underbrush. We set our hare traps along it and eventually make our camp by a creek, the nearly full moon reflecting on the water-slick rocks.

As twilight gives way to evening, a herd of deer appear, and the men push towards them. Their white tails flick up and it's all I can spot in the late hour. I draw my bow with two arrows. I exhale. The arrows whir into the night. A low grunt means I've hit my mark, and their hooves bound heavily into the shadows.

I rejoin the men, and fear makes my belly clench. We're not alone. What signs there are—the hushed night creatures, the wind exhaling a forlorn chill, the sharp cut of white light through the cover of needles—I do not know, exactly, what warning we perceived.

We grab daggers and bows. Our backs shield each other as we form a circle.

We wait there, poised and tense, waiting. Waiting. Waiting...

Some men shift their weight.

Someone whispers into the dark. "Do thou think—"

A yell. Muffled cries. Metallic heat infuses the air. I turn to chaos.

Sten holds Troels by the armpits. The rest of the men flank them and aim towards something low. Low and dark. A gray jaw snaps. Tufted ears flatten on its head. I shout as recognition flares. The Wolf.

"Now!" I yell. A volley of arrows and daggers fly. They thud one after the other. It does naught but scare the Wolf away.

We fall back, and Troels seethes between his teeth, clutching his leg. Blood weeps from deep puncture wounds. Marked by the Wolf's bite.

In pairs, we have hour-long watches throughout the night. But night eases on towards a normal dawn.

It doesn't take me long the next morning as we pack up to find the trail of blood. It leads me to the remains of our deer, caught by the same sharp jaw that caught Troels. The fresh meat is torn to shreds; blood and entrails a massacred pile in the cavity of its belly. I yank my arrow from the dead deer's flank and look at the paw prints around its midnight meal.

Why would the Wolf attack a man first instead of the easy meal of an injured deer?



Before we reach the beach carrying the islands' spoils and a limping Troels, I slip away. What I encountered this morning and what Troels did two evenings before, does not sit right in my belly. It's like I've swallowed a wish bone, and its prongs are lodged behind my chest.

I go up to her door frame again, wait beside it, and tentatively call her name. Quiet steps make their way across the cottage before her bare feet deliver her to me. She's wrapped in a large patterned shawl that covers her from neck to ankles. Motifs of ferns and leaves crawl along the border and the start of the moon cycles disappears onto the back.

“What a beautiful wrap,” I say, the reason for my coming here forgotten.

She tells me how she wove it herself from the yarn spun of her own sheep’s wool and dyed with roots and plants. As she talks of her loom, there’s a feeling in my belly again. But it’s not stuck and lodged like a bone. It tingles and spreads.

“The design is as intricate as I’ve ever seen,” I tell her.

“I’ve had lots of time to learn my craft.”

A blush rises stubbornly to my cheeks. As alone as she is, she has created a home here—one where she grows and forages and makes all she needs.

“I came to help thee as repayment for Troels killing your sheep.”

“I appreciate thy offer.”

“Tell me what I can do,” I say before she can deny my request.

Ulfhild laughs. “I wasn’t going to refuse thy help. Thou can split that wood over there.” She points to a pile next to a fallen tree, half cut into smaller rounds.

“Good,” I reply and head over there. Pulling the ax from the closest log, I get to work.

Ulfhild doesn’t leave her doorframe as she watches me swing the ax. I feel like I can’t breathe as she stands there. By the time the sun has started to descend over the tops of the trees, there is a great pile of split wood waiting to be stacked. She finally leaves her door and goes back into the cottage. I wipe my brow and start back towards the beach.

“Hunter!”

I turn around as she catches up to me, handing me a cloth wrap. Our fingers brush and pink blooms on her cheeks. As I take the food from her, fresh cheese and fragrant fruit waft from within.

She looks at my sweat soaked tunic, clinging to my chest. “You’ve earned it.”



When I get back to the beach, Troels is laid out on a blanket, seemingly asleep. Njal whispers that he thinks the wound is festering. As the man whose wife is the village healer, Njal is the most equipped to handle any injuries during our travels.

“I put honey on the bite... But it’s not even that deep.”

When I put the back of my hand on Troels’ forehead, it feels hot, so we put him in the water to cool

his fever. His mouth slackens as the sea washes over his skin and the saltwater sinks into his wound. But then his mouth starts to foam, and his body starts to shake.

“He’s convulsing! Get him out.”

We drag him onto the shore as he shivers with fever or cold or something else, I don’t know. He hugs himself, rolling and screaming. I pin his chest down to keep him from hurting himself. Under my palm, his chest hair seems to grow, and I blink rapidly, unbelieving. But no. His arms sprout rough dark brown hair, too. I let go and jump back.

I can do naught to help but watch in horror. His bare feet shrink, and I shake my head thinking it’s the surf threatening to drag him back in. He groans in pain, and I look at his face, skin turning white. He thrashes onto his stomach. Sand sprays and sticks to a mat of thick hair on his neck. His back hunches. The fingers digging into the ground are now paws.

Someone chokes on a sound. I realize it’s me. My mind can’t make sense of what’s before me. A great dog moves. Ears flick, taking in the sounds. It spots me and flees, bounding into the woods on four legs. Brown fur is mottled with water and sand. Its tail points towards the moon. I realize it’s not a dog at all. But a wolf.



I don’t know what power she holds over me—if she has any at all—but I am drawn again and again to her little cottage. We talk in her garden or by her doorway.

After a time, she lets me inside. It’s a cocoon, spun of her own hand. A protective shell from the outside world and from the night. It’s snug with layers of rugs on the ground. A cabinet of ceramic jars full of honey, herbs, vegetables, and fruits. I spot the corner of a bed behind a curtain. We sit by the fire with a cup of tea or a mug of wine and I share tales of my travels or of my village life. She shares about her complicated family and her banishment from Valhalla.

She didn’t disbelieve my tale about Troels, just shrugged and said the island has its own ways to deal with those it deems dishonorable.

When I asked again how to find the Wolf, she asked me a question instead, “Is it not better to live with those that call this island home?”

“No one can make a home here, have a family, while it lives.”

“Yet, I thrive here.”

“How can thou thrive when there is no one here like thee?”

She sighs then and looks forlorn. An edge of loneliness crosses her fair face. “There is no one like

me...”

“No.” I cup her tender cheek.

She lets me, leans into my touch. Maybe I realize through her how lonely I am, too. How she offers only what is gentle and sure. How we could be more than simply man and woman. She lets me kiss her and I understand, then, what Njal meant when we first arrived on the island.



The moon shines bright, cutting through the line of pine trees that bow like ribs over the deer trail. My steps are soundless as I head into the heart of the wood. The men follow wordlessly even as crickets and other midnight bugs yelp their alarms of warning.

I follow the Wolf's prints which have pressed sure wells into the mud. The water collected in them reflects the long shadows of the underbrush.

I breathe in and out through my nose. Elbows raised in readiness. My thighs work with the uphill climb, but I barely feel the strain in my muscles. We reach the peak of the mountain, and it flattens. Rocks and short pines are all that can survive at its harsh, exposed height. Filing onto the open summit, wind swirls around us.

Like a flash of gray lightening, the Wolf strikes from the trees and snaps at the ankles of one of the men. My arrow flies off my bow and sinks into the ground over its back. Snarling, it retreats like fog, low and drifting.

I whistle and the men fan out and create a semi-circle in the glade. Its yellow eyes pierce the shadows. Weapons glint in the lavender light of the moon's glow. Tarnished bronze with sharp hewn edges glint with the promise of violence.

The Wolf strikes again, but we push forward. It retreats and we keep pressing into the wood with the open glade at our back. The underbrush is dense here on the humid side of the mountain, but any movement of the ferns and vines is eclipsed by the trees. Our breathing is loud, louder than the crickets and bugs which should be a chorus in the canopy. My chest vibrates with my heartbeat.

A yell. Ears ring. I turn my head, my body taut. Behind us! Knud's back bows from a swipe of claws. Then he is dragged. The Wolf has sunk its teeth into his meaty hip. He cries again. His survival instincts try to bat the snout away, but the Wolf is latched.

Before I can decide to shoot, there's another cry from the other side of the semi-circle. There are two! This one isn't gray like I assumed but a mottled brown. It bites Sten's arm and his dagger drops. The wolf lets go, muzzle curling as it prepares to strike again. I draw an arrow in my bow and as the

brown wolf rises on its hind legs, I shoot. It falls back with a whimper and lands on its side. My arrow protrudes from its chest.

Sten cradles his arm and stoops to get his weapon with a grateful nod towards me. A howl from the gray wolf behind me, and I turn to see two more men injured, but not fatally. The gray wolf slinks back. When I go to look at the brown wolf, I find instead Troels lying there with an arrow in his heart. My arrow.

I fall to my knees and place a hand on his naked ribs. His pale flesh is still warm but there is no more rise and fall of his chest. His skin will soon be cold. Cold by my own hand. And the thing I can no longer deny is here. In front of me under the full moon's laughing light.

My chin touches my chest, and I close my eyes. I can hear the other men come close. I open my eyes and gaze around—four men. The cold terror at knowing what the Wolf venom will make them suffuses through my body more potent than the strongest berry wine.

What I can no longer deny ripples through the men, too. They kneel beside me. Wordlessly as when we arrived, we reach out and carry Troels back down the mountain. It's more than an hour in such a procession before we reach the beach. Whoever is on watch by the fire stands, a glowing silhouette against the sea.

The gray wolf—the Wolf—howls again as we lay Troels down on the cool sand. The sound seems too keen as if its brother, not ours, was taken this night.



“We should leave before the ice forms on the sea,” Bjørn commands. He's a bear of a man, all shoulders and neck, who captains the ship and can catch salmon with his bare hands.

“Yes, or we'll be trapped here all winter,” one says, while someone else adds, “Next Spring we'll find another island.”

They are saying things, avoiding the truth of the thing we witnessed. What the Wolf can do to us.

“But we found *this* island,” I say.

Men shake their heads, still unable to utter the thing I know all of them are thinking. Ire rises in me. If only they would blame me for killing Troels.

“It's not worth it...”

“We're close to getting the Wolf,” I say.

“Too close!”

“Thou have someone to warm your bed—”

I growl at their brash words. What I wish was true.

“There’s time yet.”

Bjørn cuts in. “Dauðamaðr, it’s done.”

I stand. “I stay.”

Some of the men nod like they knew it was inevitable.

“Who will stay with me? The fight is not over. We can take this island for our village. For thy growing families. Where there is fish and food aplenty here.”

“We’ll return six moons from now.” Bjørn’s unspoken words are clear enough. We’ll return to see if there is anyone left.

Njal takes me aside. He pulls up the side of his tunic and a great gash of claws racks down his side. It wasn’t four men the Wolf got, but five.

“It’s barely a graze.” I choke on the words.

He is calm. Resigned. “Thou know it does not matter.”

Ire makes my cheeks heat like with fever. The injustice of it. “This is some trick of Loki!”

“Perhaps...”

“We can find a cure for this.”

“Dauðamaðr, go back and tell my daughter—”

“No! I will not leave until this is done.”

His ruddy cheeks are almost white. “Leave us here on the island. I don’t want to die. It’s not so bad to live as a wolf.”

“I refuse to leave!”

He sighs. “If thou won’t kill us then you will become one of us.” There’s an inevitable promise in his words. A truth Njal doesn’t want to utter but falls from his lips anyhow.

“There has to be a way...”

Njal just shakes his head and turns to look at the sky, at the moon setting on the other side of the mountain. His last night to look at the blanket of stars through his own eyes. My gaze turns downward to the tree line and the line of smoke I can imagine curling up through the wood.

I sprint. Brought to her front door, I call out. Emotions toss inside me, but I can't grasp any of them. Can't put a name to what has happened tonight. I crave something in my control.

At her doorway, I knock on the frame filled with runes. They don't bar me from entering. When I venture back to the bedroom, fumbling my way through the dark, I find her pallet empty.

"Ulfhild?"

There's another howl. Close. Too close. I run out the back door and she emerges from the woods, naked and pale in the darkest part of the morning. There's blood on her. On her nose and around her mouth. It drips down her neck.

She shivers, not noticing me yet. I can't seem to feel anything at all.

"Ulfhild."

"Dauðamaðr! I—" Her voice is harsh, strained.

A cold settles over me. It's like my throat is an icicle and it slowly drips into my center. How she can live on this island with the Wolf. Her mysterious power. The ancestry that runs through her veins.

"Thou..." I start, unable even to speak it out loud. What she truly is.

She walks over to me, curves fully her own. Bones and breasts and skin. "Will thou kill the Wolf now?"

"Ulfhild." I grab her forearm and drag her to my chest. Ire radiates like a bonfire.

She does not resist my touch but the way I hold her to me, a brutal blow buried in my masculine muscles, makes me let go.

I fall to my knees before her. What she told me those weeks ago, that it cannot be killed, comes to pass. Because I won't kill the Wolf if it means killing the woman I love.

She falls on her knees and hugs me.

"How can we break this curse?" I ask.

"There is no way to break it for it is no curse to be strong and to run beneath the moon."

Njal's words return to me. It's not so bad to live as a wolf.

"Then let me run with you," I plead.

"I can give thee this gift so thou can run with your brothers again," she offers.

I could protect this island. Protect her. Have a family. Start a village here, one we could defend.

“How?”

“Thou must take its power so I may be fully human. I must give up my magic, my God-hood.” She gazes past me to the sky with a far off look on her face. It’s a look I imagine she's done alone so often.

“Would you do that for me?”

She nods. “To be with you and have a family.”

I brush away hair from her face, staring into her stormy eyes. Tears spring to my own.

“Will I ever be human again?” I ask.

“At first, I could not turn. It took time, but eventually I could turn every morning.”

“And now?”

“Only when the moon is at its fullest.”



The next evening Ulfhild walks me into the woods. She undresses me, kissing me along my collarbone, my neck, my jaw line. She holds my face in her calloused hands, and I exhale a sigh.

We kiss and I tuck her into me, wishing I could hold her this close forever. To never have to let go or have the moon rise. She smells of home.

It’s not long before I unwrap her from her shawl and she is naked before me. I spread the shawl on a soft bed of pine needles, and we lay on top of it. Our night unravels faster, all lips and pressing fingers and groans.

When I’m buried inside her, Ulfhild’s spirit emerges in the form of a wolf. Her beastly form glows around her like the ring around the moon on hot summer nights. The Wolf leans forward, its teeth sharp and as white as wool. They sink into my shoulder. Pain flairs and my muscles tense. I howl into the sky.

Her hips writhe with abandon, distracting me from the bite and shooting sensations down my legs. My heart races and pleasure lights my blood ablaze. Sinking my claws into her back and holding her on me, we finish together.

Our damp, slick foreheads touch. She cups my slackened jaw and kisses me deep.

When I go to stand my knees buckle, and I fall onto my palms. I watch as hair sprouts on the backs of my hands. I gaze up at the moon, knowing. Pain crackles through me next. Skin stretching, body shaking, bones breaking. My vision goes black.

My eyes clear, and I look up at her. I know her, but my instinct is strong, too strong. I snarl. She backs away then stretches out her hand to me. Sniffing, a flood of smells sweeps through me, registering all at once: fire smoke and fabric, herbs, and rich butter, sweat and a salty smell from between her thighs. I shake my head, unsure how I know all these smells by name.

Then there's a howl and my ears perk up. It echoes over the treetops and my body is pulled towards it. Towards them. I run.

There is no time. Just a cold winter. Days of snow and ice. Hunting and walking as a pack. There's an awareness sometimes. Like a calling or when my skin feels taut.

When bunnies breed and the grass tickles my paw pads, I find a place that feels familiar. I wait at the edge of the woods where she can't see me, watching with my eyes still yellow, and dig my claws into the dirt. She stands there with arms wrapped around her as the spring nips at the heels of winter.

She looks up. I do, too. The half-moon ducks behind a cloud and glows behind its gauzy tissue. I lower my snout and watch her gazing up at it. The moonlight reflected in her eyes. The delicate hand she places on her lower belly. My body shivers. Bones crack. Pain squeezes my muscles.

Then I am walking on two legs instead of four, pulled like gravity towards her. My legs shake as I stumble past the cover of trees. I open my arms, and beneath the moon, she runs into them.

Hayley E. Frerichs grew up in a log cabin nestled in the woods outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she cultivated a love of atmospheric fantasy and romance. She holds degrees in English and education and, following graduation, taught in southern Spain for a year. While she loves to travel, she is also content to stay at home with her sewing machine, tea kettle, and books. Hayley is co-founder and former editor of Dandelion Revolution Press, and her historical fantasy short stories have been published in anthologies. She is currently querying her romantasy novel and lives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and works in marketing in higher education. You can learn more about her on her website hayleyfrerichs.com.

Baby's First Christmas *by Natalya Bucuy*

The clock on the wall counts seconds. *Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.*

I align my breath with it just to stop my mind from spinning. With nothing but darkness around me, time passes with a deafening drag. Over time, when one sense goes, others strengthen. Blind people see the world with their touch. The deaf have better visual attention. Imperfection brings superpowers. I keep the lights off, so I don't have to see anything that reminds me of him. But everything reminds me of Michael. Especially the darkness.

This used to be *our* home, our castle. Its walls held the joyful chatter of holiday parties. The old floors squeaked under the footsteps of neighbors and friends. Light fixtures eavesdropped on conversations about the future plans for our new little family-to-be. The Christmas tree—always a real one—lit up the living room the day after Thanksgiving, its crispy pine scent dancing with that of baked treats.

“Michael and Abigail,” once read a wooden sign on the wall of the front room; it bore the signatures of our wedding guests. The sound of breaking wood under my feet as I kicked it to pieces marked the day the divorce papers arrived in the mail. Those only bore two signatures—his and mine, no witnesses.

Now, it's only me and the clock measuring time, fulfilling its purpose. I stare into the void with no purpose at all, wondering what superpower will spring from the embers of my razed marriage.

I dive under the covers, burying my ears, a trick my mother taught me when I was little to get warmer quickly. Or, perhaps, just a way to hide. I close my eyes. *Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.* I shoo away the “whys,” the mind's search for explanations. I pray for relief. *Tick. Tock.*



The scent of the dark-roast coffee filled the house. Michael made the coffee for me, each morning without fail. He always got the color of it just right—a shade lighter than caramel, measuring the cream, clouds of it still turning as he placed the mug on the coaster on the nightstand. He didn't stay to drink his cup with me on that particular Sunday morning. I didn't wonder why.

The day before, a chatty neighbor on her stroll with her terrier had asked me, “When are you planning to have a baby?” The list of appropriate topics for small talk demands revision. People could connect to one another better if they asked instead, say, “What made you happy today?” or “What is your favorite color and why?”

I did like knowing people's favorite colors, but the truth was, I was annoyed by the pesky question.

I wanted to hold a child in my arms. Our child. One that had Michael's hazel eyes and my light chestnut hair. One that would smile at me and melt my heart. If we were lucky, she'd be born at Christmastime, a bundle of warmth in the cold season. But many Christmases had come and gone. "Maybe, it's not meant to be," Michael said. It felt like a betrayal. I kept looking at a lonely blue line. On the other side of the bathroom door, Michael just looked lonely.

I drank my coffee alone and walked through the house. Carefully selected wall paint colors made the rooms feel calm and efficient. A vase of lilies sat by the front door. Not a thing out of place. I felt out of place.

When we first moved in, we spent every Sunday together, playing card games on the back porch, making lunch together, and taking strolls through the neighborhood, even though we did not have a dog to walk. I couldn't recall when the walks stopped. Or the games. Or spending time together at all.

On that particular Sunday, I found Michael on the front porch on the phone.

"Yes, I will. Yes, today," he said into the receiver. His eyes met mine, then darted to the ground. "Okay, I have to go."

He hung up the phone and turned to me. The deep wrinkle at the center of his forehead told me he was about to lie.

"Is everything ok?" I asked. "Who was that?"

"No one important." There was the lie, followed by a "I have to talk to you." A shiver went down my spine.

Time slows on the curves of life. A strand of his dark brown hair moved in the breeze across his forehead. The cool autumn air smelled of wet leaves from the morning rain. His hazel eyes used to be those of a friend. Now they looked at me from the face of a stranger. I searched for him there, for my Michael.

"I am just going to say it."

He did.



How do *our* people become strangers? We know someone's greatest fears, secret dreams, and childhood stories. We share memories of Christmas parties and hiking trips and that time a drunk tourist almost broke into our hotel room in Miami. We recall that weird joke about kangaroos on scooters when one of us feels overwhelmed and needs a laugh. We remember that kiss in the forest that no one else in the world felt. Of all the billions of people on the planet, we knew one another the

most. And then one day we weren't each other's people anymore.

Michael was gone. He walked away into the world without me, carrying a part of my soul in his pocket.

As I lie here in the dark, listening to the clock tick, I'm afraid to turn on the lights, for more memories made in this house will sting me inside and out.

I can picture his shirt's specific shade of teal that day as he moved quickly between the closet and his suitcase opened on the bed. He offered forgettable excuses of why he had to leave to avoid any further conversation. Whatever he said or didn't say only filled my chest with numbing shock. I couldn't move. I simply watched him, not knowing what to say. It felt like a dream. Wasn't it?

I never heard from Michael again. The lawyers took care of everything. Except for the heartache that killed me slowly. Where does the love go when our people become strangers?



A small cardboard box arrives in the mail. Inside the package, a flat round ceramic piece with a golden string is wrapped in bubble wrap. (*Pop, pop, pop*—no one can resist popping plastic bubbles, even when we're sad.) "Baby's First Christmas," the ornament reads.

"Cute," I say out loud. The sound of my voice startles me with its raspiness. I realize I have not used it in a while. I feel sad for the new parents, who won't get this gift due to a mailing mistake. I flip the envelope. My husband's name is on it, next to another woman's name. The address is correct.

My heart beats faster as I type the two names into a search browser. A tenth of a second later, I get the answer to the question of the last three months of my life. I click the link and read every letter slowly. A baby registry. A due date a week before Christmas. Baby's first.

I've wanted to know the story and now I can. One dive into the ocean of pictures and posts online and I won't come up for air until spring. I will obsess with the story—the one of what happened to my marriage and how. With enough pieces, I'll invent the story that happened after. All the whens and the hows and the wheres—I can have them all. I want those details. For me, and for all the sympathetic souls who tilt their heads and ask softly "What happened?" It's a matter of dignity, knowing the answer to that question. Maybe it could justify that sorrow, that black hole in my gut.

The cursor blinks with the invitation, again and again. I can always know more. I can never know less. I walk away.



For months, as I lie awake, cold bedsheets beside me, I replay scenes from my marriage in slow

motion. There, Michael smiles at me the first time we see each other on that city bus number seventeen. Here, he carries a box up the stairs when we move into this house. Over there, right next to me, he sleeps in this bed, that deep wrinkle on his forehead—did he lie in his sleep, too? Now there, suitcase rolling behind him, he walks away in that terrible teal shirt towards places where I am not. Does he remember our song? Do kangaroos on scooters still make him smile?

These images constantly spin until unrestful sleep overtakes the exhausted mind. I fall into a shallow dreamland where Michael holds a baby who does not look like me. He holds a toddler's hand on a walk in a park. He play-wrestles with a child in a meadow. How can nightmares be this beautiful? Time splits into before knowing and after. The uncertainty of before turns into the rage of after. Blame is a poisonous weapon.

The season sweeps the neighborhood. Mother nature, as if she knows what I need, brings one snowstorm after another, swaddling me in the house, a cocoon of grief.

When I make it out of bed, I eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Crunching on little bits of peanuts with more force than necessary, I wish I had creamy peanut butter. There isn't any. The jelly is grape, which is the worst kind. Grocery shopping has never been my thing. Now, with no motivation to eat, and even less to drive anywhere, I survive on clearing out the pantry shelves. A couple can accumulate a surprisingly large collection of non-perishables with an oversized pantry and a few years in a house. "Some good will come of this," I say to a big can of sardines. I dislike sardines more than I dislike crunchy peanut butter. I wonder what will come first: putting on pants for a grocery trip, or a sardine feast.

Weeks go by, maybe months. The clock ticks from the wall, but time has no meaning. I get sick of peanut butter and sardines. The reflection in the mirror teaches me that eating leftover pantry items out of their cans while lying in bed can turn one's face an unsightly color.

On the kitchen counter sits the package with my dream addressed to another woman. The cursor still blinks with the invitation. I have to make the choice. One path continues to lead through dwelling on the impossible unfairness of what became of my life. The other releases the explanation into mystery.

Most of life is a mystery. Leaving my story with the truth is accepting that mystery. That might be as close as I can get to reality. There isn't much explanation for the story. Even if I had my story of what happened, even if I knew all the facts, that would be *my* story of what happened. Not his story of what happened. Not her story of what happened. It would just be the way that I use a story to survive sorrow. I decline the cursor's invitation and put on some pants.



The following spring, I place the clock in the last of the cardboard boxes that sit by the curb next to the realtor's "SOLD" sign, each holding a piece of our marriage. *"Tick. Tock,"* it says as I walk up to the house one last time.

Footsteps echo through the empty rooms that still carry the scent of our life. I'm convinced that Michael hums when our song comes on the radio. He remembers our Sundays playing cards, and the color of the perfect creamed dark roast coffee. And he is happy.

At least, that's the part of my story I choose to believe.

I open the window to let in some fresh air and pick up my purse off the kitchen counter. Inside sits a bundle of keys, one key lighter. Next to them lies a small box with a round Christmas ornament in it. Baby's First Christmas. Imperfection brings superpowers.

Natalya Bucuy is a Siberian human. She was born at the top of the world and after moving around a bit, she has settled in Bucks County, amidst Pennsylvania's rolling green hills, inspiring art scene, and never-boring seasons. She's been a writer since the day she was born, but did not truly write until Journalism school. (Temple Univ proud!) Over the years, she has dipped into various forms of writing and publishing. Her short stories have been published in Dandelion Revolution Press's anthologies, *Not Quite As You Were Told* and *Every Breath Alight*. Natalya's one rule in life is to say "yes" to new experiences since she believes they sculpt the inspiration for good writing. Non-fiction and memoirs bring her joy in life!

Heene *by Dylan Orosz*

From Julia Heene's journal, recovered at Bellevue Cemetery.

Jules Marigold Heene, born in Boston, Massachusetts on October 1st, 1995.

~ Ghost hunter, livestreamer extraordinaire, inquisitive mind, resident cat lady.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 20TH

GREETINGS & BON VOYAGE

Greetings all,

Our journey into my underworld begins! I want to thank everyone who watched for a wonderful first subterranean stream inside the tomb of my great-great-grandfather Heene the First!

Everything went off (mostly) without a hitch!! Even for a veteran ghost hunter and livestreamer like me, this is a serious endeavor. First and foremost, one must consider the maintenance of bandwidth and dataflow constancy from my computer and recording devices to the wide swaths of the Internet—all the way through six feet of old dirt and some marble atop that! Not to mention these big batteries or the precarious prospect of my airflow too. It is musty down here...

I digress. I wanted to keep this journal as a kind of alternative documentation of this venture. There is the outward journey—the clambering down into this old mausoleum, the stream content, my subscriber goals, and the all-important back-lighting (thank you so much Mark and Lily for discounting your equipment and showing me all the necessary tips & tricks for what I can only call Dungeon Cinematography; big thank you as well to groundskeeper Crowli for showing me how to construct my quatro of breathing tubes and get some real air circulation down here. It's not exactly comfortable but I shall manage just fine).

Another digression! There is the inward journey too. I must not forget that; I am not just doing this for those juicy Twitch ad revenues. I am here to discover! To make some kind of weird history. To meet my maker (one of them at least, heh). And maybe even learn his language. (Jewels can expect this journal to be posted on the blog by the second week of November!)

Heene is not just any spirit, he is my blood. My father's father's father was named Frederick Samuel Heene I and he was born right here in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He was married to a dressmaker and was a stern father of four. Heene worked for much of his life as a biotechnician for Charm Sciences. He studied microbiology and helped make various antibiotics that are still heavily used today.

What an absolute legend, right?

But that's not all he did. I like to think his genes are partly responsible for my own intrigues into the realm of the paranormal (him and my three-pointed vanguard of lil fur babies always leading me onward toward new houses in need of *my*haunt...thank you Mark for feeding my cats during these next 10 days!) Great Papa Heene was *also* an amateur mycologist, a masterful gardener, and to hear it from the most vocal locals of his day, he was something of a necromancer too.

Local legends say that Heene could speak with the dead.

And while parish historians cite Heene's love of supernatural stories and weird fiction, I happen to believe it to be true.

There must be some reason why my great-great papa used all his savings to build such an immaculate mausoleum here in the dead center of the old Lawrence cemetery. Now here he stays for all time, surrounded on all sides by the other great men and women of this venerable New England jewel. Through these marble walls comes packed mortuary soil, old mahogany coffins, and elder minds past, buried across this patch of earth from Barker to Yale. They are all consecrated by the presence of a locus monument made of Plymouth granite, carved with artistic renditions of various beetles, and housing the body of one of the great modern sorcerers of America.

Heene covered his ziggurat with more seals and cyphers than any tomb I've yet encountered.

For the next ten days, I—Julia Heene III—will find out why. Alongside all of my precious viewers, also known as Jewels! (Jewels can expect this journal to be posted on the blog by the second week of November!)

Let's get musty, kiddos. We have spirits to turn and ancient truth to unveil.

Ciao,

Jules

MONDAY, OCTOBER 21ST

READINGS & SIGN-GATHERING

OK, today was *very* productive. If I am going to reach a communion by All Hallows' Eve, then the first step is to gather the signs. That means beginning work on two fronts: one, transcribing all of Grandpa's symbologies in an effort to begin cracking the code of his cypher, and two, walking around this fourteen-square foot tomb and reading off the wyrds of some of Heene's recovered journals.

(Including some of my own books of poetry! I figure gramps will want to know what a wondrous poet his great-great granddaughter has become!!)

The micro-ziggy (read: ziggurat) that Old Papa Heene designed and had himself buried within is practically a puzzle box of Cenobitic proportions. Atop the beetle-shell crenellations of the entombing structure are small scrolls of parchment and scraps of gampi paper; these canvases feature amazing letters of new origin, wyrds of esoteric make, each one unique with unknown purpose. Deciphering them is one of my first primary tasks. How exciting!

I have begun that process, while also reading off Frederick's journals, gifted from my grandfather's own personal effects (Rest in Peace, Poppa.) Had Grampa Freddie read his father's words? What had he thought of macabre concepts such as "Reverse-Curses" and "Daemon Bacchanalia"? What about Heene's opus—"Hellish Harmony"—wherein one spends the night submerged in Hell, but only subconsciously, to tap into clearer esoteric visions and greater necromantic spellcasting capacities? Somehow, I doubt his son cared about any of this. It can be pretty scary to learn that you know so little of your father.

I think the truth is that I am the first of Heene's ancestors to *really* know him.

And if the warmth emanating from the edges of his ziggy is any indication, I think Grandpa appreciates me the most, by far, of all his great-great-grandchildren.

Can't wait for tomorrow...the Jewels will be in for a real treat.

Ciao,
Jules

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22ND

STORYTIME!

OK, so before going much further in this little misadventure, I reckoned chat needed to understand more about Heene's lore. What event marked him for the path of necromancy and such darkling communicate with the lands of the dead? What the heck is his origin story? It is storytime!

Transcribed here, in words, is the gist of the tale from Heene's journal, which I recounted on-stream earlier this evening via an interpretive performance, part-charade, part-dance. Enjoy!

~Killian Proctor was a Catholic-Calvinist priest born in 1888 and was the primary preacher at St. Mason's, which was the church that the Heene family visited. When Frederick Samuel Heene I was

only six years old, in the year 1930, he voluntarily submitted himself to an impromptu confessional before Priest Killian. Heene was all shook up because he'd accidentally killed a beetle the day before by stepping on it. First, the priest asked how big the bug was, next what color it was and the shade of its guts too. At first, Heene struggled to remember. Then he got it—size was about as big as his thumb, outward color was metallic green while the innards were deep brown, or maybe yellowish. The Japanese Beetle, Proctor explained; how many other such beetles had you ever encountered? the priest asked. Heene answered: none. The priest returned: false. Japanese Beetles cover the grounds of New England, all and everywhere. They are a lucrative invasive species. You have seen them many times, walked right over them. You only noticed the beetle now for the first time because you killed it, the priest said. Remember it forever, for the life of that beetle will remain with you. About a month later, Killian Proctor was killed in a car crash on the 93. When Heene attended the young priest's funeral, he swore he heard a word on the wind. It would be the first 'wyrd' of Heene's young life, and it spoke in the voice of the priest, levying that same tone of stewardship from the confessional:

“Remember your beetle, Heene.”

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23RD

DELVING GRAMPS' PHILOSOPHY

Heene was something of a collector. (Just like me fr.) Only instead of haunted dolls and hot anime guy figurines, Gramps was into Seals. Over one hundred of them now covered his crenelated granite coffin. These ancient parchments carried a special purpose for occultists, sometimes crafted from rice grain and other times made of wax.

According to most myths, they do just what their name says—they “seal” spirits into places. With the right mixture of proper Seals in place at cemeteries and inside tombs (or upon old battlefields), one could restrain or even harness much spiritual energy. Generally, they were used as seals for dark souls. Sometimes, they were imbued with defensive enchantments to repel grave robbers and prevent sorcery that may harm the souls of the dead.

However, according to GGGrandfather—Seals can “invoke” too. From his journals, we see that old man Heene used these papers to *empower* his spellcasting, calling down spirits from afar and attracting their presence at a new location. Like a haunted hotspot. Apparently ~ they are well and truly powering his afterlife home too, even now, all these years later.

I can practically smell the mana flowing off of Gramps' ziggy.

Perhaps my Astral Body is doing some passive observing, maybe even a little absorption? Some of Heene's journals even reveal that one's mystic ability should start to be realized by 30...so tick-tock! Ha! Anyway, it has been a long day. I am getting pretty tired...but there is one more thing I want to touch on. It was something we came across during the 2PM Speedreading Power Hour segment of my broadcast, when me and chat try to race each other to speed read a scroll, and then quiz each other on its content. Whoever is faster gets 1.3x more points for their correct answers. Though if you are too fast, you will miss valuable information...anyway, by reading Journal Entry #33 of Heene's personal diary, I think we discovered one of his philosophical cores:

Absolute Isolation.

Great-Great-Grandfather Heene believed in the practice of absolute isolation. For the sake of his "Art," that is ~ his necromancy, Heene "believed wholeheartedly" in living by a quotation from Fyodor Dostoevsky:

"Isolate as much as you want to become stronger, even if you see that loneliness is an unbearable hell, it is much better than the multiple masks of humans."

Well, Gramps, looks like I am following in your footsteps. I am alone and I too am unmooring from my masks...

Ciao,
Jules

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 24TH

MOVIE NIGHT

Tonight, me and chat and good ole Heene caught a gnarly double feature.

Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987) & *Nightbreed* (1990), the director's cut.

These happen to be two of my favorite movies, and not just horror movies either. Clive is a master of visceral body horror and linguistic soul damage. *Hellraiser*, or *The Hellbound Heart*, asks ~ and vehemently answers ~ the violent and desperate call for absolute experience; the sublime, otherworldly melding of pain and pleasure manifests a punishing, Old Testament-style fate for those seeking to surpass their mortal limits. *Nightbreed* posits the reality that not all those that inhabit the under-earthen realms are "monsters"; just because one is an outsider, and looks or acts differently than you, does not make them an enemy. Those living above and below have souls, codes, loves, and hates.

Clive's monsters are not "heroes", but they do have serious things to say to us human beings.

I believe me and Gramps got a good listen. I think Heene woulda loved Clive just like me.

Ciao,

Jules

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25TH

FUN & GAMES

Good morning!

OK, so before I begin, let me just remind chat...or rather, my readers, that I DO NOT believe in Ouija boards. Especially in a solo capacity, there is something to be said about the hypnotic hysteria of a trio of teens trying to contact the ghost of Elvis or Bowie at midnight on a summer Saturday. Sure, whatever. But spirits speak in other ways, not through ancient wooden Speak-n-Spells...

However, I may be shifted on this perspective after tonight. I see how the Ouija effect can manifest in other ways, and through other sorts of objects. Originally, I had the idea of taking out a chess board and just letting it sit next to the ziggy while I sorted some of my old *Magic: The Gathering* Elder Dragon Highlander decks. I thought Heene might contact me if he could, through the moving of the white pawn to start the game. He never did.

But then I found myself doling out two seven-card hands, two of my favorite graveyard recursion decks suddenly laying opposite one another. My green and black Meren of Clan Nel Toth deck in my hands versus my green-black-blue Muldrotha, the Gravetide deck standing against. As I played out the turns, going from hand to hand, it felt as though I was playing two different games; every time I turned from one grip to another, casting my enchantments and creatures, weaving my strategy based on the currency of the board state—it was like my mind was perfectly bifurcated. Given the position of the Muldrotha was upside down and the strategy more than somewhat foreign to me, I can say with confidence that Heene had *chosen* the tri-colored Elemental Avatar as his Dragon.

And he'd chosen *me* as a temporary vessel for one-half of the card strategy gaming sesh!

It makes sense. I would say that with the thousand-dollar mana base I have going inside the Muldrotha deck ~ it is even more overpowered than my perfectly engineered Meren deck, filled with demons and bugs that love to enter the battlefield again and again. Heene has good taste, just like me. I'd mark him as a Spike in the pantheon of player archetypes, the most dire of strategists who value winning above all else.

We filled our graveyards and unburied our beasts for seven games. I won the series 4-3. Gramps is good...but he has many MTG mechanics yet to master. What a treat that I get to take him on as an apprentice!

Later, I started to introduce Heene to the elaborate rules, and general tabletop role-playing gameplay guidelines, of *Call of Cthulhu*. But I fell asleep before I could get to the Elder Gods.

Can't wait for today's goofs and gambits! This stream is just getting started folks!!

Ciao,

Jules

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26TH

ENCOUNTER ONE!

Chat, is this real?! I just had one hell of a time. What time is it?

It doesn't matter. OK chat, listen to me. I have NEVER been that good at drawing. OK, do you understand? I don't know how I did any of that...and what a portrait. It is scary! And scary good!!

Ha! Maybe I have this untapped potential within me, you know. Not just for blood painting, but for capital-A Art. Think about it...I have never really tried to write before this journal, some BS in college and high school before that. But that was all SparkNotes and faking it. Now I feel power coursing through me. I have talent! Streaming is just the beginning. I am still a neophyte, only just now glimpsing the horizon of my true potential. Painting, writing, sorcery?

And this painting...my god, I am playing back the VOD of myself again. How did I do this?

So glad I brought the big drawing paper. Best spirit sketch ever!! And thank goodness the cut in my hand isn't that deep. But hey, I *did* need a lot of paint. I had to make all those flourishes upon the iron, across the granite, and into those mangled, marbled interiors of man-flesh.

Heene really wanted me to draw him well! Thanks for the assist, Gramps.

OK wait—here for the blog, let me practice some more of this excellent writing I've been on and try to sincerely describe, in words, what Grandpa's Portrait ended up looking like:

A half-flayed man sits upon a gleaming golden throne slick with lifeblood. On his face is affixed a daemonic iron mask, wide-eyed and long toothed; he is strapped down to his seat with leather buckles that tighten strongest around his armpits and loins. His fingers clutch the lion paw armrests so hard

that his nails are cracking, fingertips bleeding down the sides. Sashes marked with esoteric Seals are fluttering off his nudity, wrapping arms and legs and across his neck. As the parchment flows in unseen wind, gaping wounds are unveiled upon the chin and the neck, every delicate muscle revealed in an ever-present redness of a visceral inward metropolis. Though the painting is still and Heene's face cannot be seen under the bulky mask, it is implied by the activation of the exposed sternocleidomastoid and specific flexions within the network of neck muscles that the old necromancer is *singing*.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 27TH

ENCOUNTER TWO!!

I can hear his song!

OMG. Oh my god. Hold on, let me just listen a little more...collect my thoughts for the journal.

Chat has been going crazy; they still are! I have taken to doing an infi-stream now. Sleeping, waking, the actions in between—the cameras are catching it all. Batteries be damned, I will be fine just as long I set my rig to lower-usage mode. Tone down the streaming quality to 720p. It's fine. It is worth it. Can't miss anything now; Heene may try to contact me in my dreams, or even wake me up for a good old-fashioned sleepwalk again. Chat cannot miss a beat.

The music...Heene's sweet, sweet singing voice. I can hear it as clear as day. Chat tells me they can hear it too. Incredible.

Tonight, we had a dance party. Me and chat and Gramps. I started to sing along. We harmonized.

The only way I can describe his music to someone who could not hear it: Angelsong.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 28TH

LISTENING TO OUR FAVORITE ALBUMS + PARTYTIME!

“Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purpose through him.” ~ Carl Jung

I understand this quote now, papa, from your journal.

While chat researches this Jung guy for me, Heene and I have been listening to a trio of favored artists

of mine, and now Gramps too:

Franz Schubert, Brian Eno, Mogwai.

Sweeping orchestration and electronic rhythms, hypersonic phantasies, and soul-style tunes. Music has become a language to me; I feel as though I can hear all of Lawrence singing, past and present. Me and chat had another dance party, as Heene and his choirs laid down aural auras of their own.

This is what it means to be a necromancer. Or should I say, *necrodancer*.

Hehe, I am honestly having the time of my life.

Look at me: Jules, ghost hunter, necrodancer, streamer, writer, painter, *singer*.

And my viewership numbers are now in the millions...my revenues are 10X'ing.

But I can't think of any of that right now.

All that matters is the communion.

I can hear Heene,

He adores me.

I can't wait.

Ciao,

Jules

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 29TH

ENCOUNTER THREE.

I have few words for today's experience.

Heene invited me into meditation.

Chat was gone from me, silent.

I sat before his ziggy.

Silence @ Mind x Body x Soul.

What I saw there in the void underneath my eyelids I shall never forget.

Yet there is no documenting such a sublime experience. Redness and fire and wonderwinds.

There, I witnessed not images but visions, not words but wyrdcraft. Latin voices and *heat*.

It is that which the camera nor the eye can see; it was heavy, burdensome. Not always pleasant...

But it was *freeing* too.

I feel weightless now, as though my Astral Body has been cleansed twice over.

What are you preparing me for Heene? I cannot wait to find out.

Godspeed,

Jules

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30TH

REQUEST FROM CHAT

OK, since today is the eve before our big finale, I am taking requests from chat.

They have cast their votes on my primary activity for today's stream.

I will give you one guess. Yep, that's right:

They want me to open the tomb.

Remove the Seals, unlatch the beetles, solve the puzzle, un-build the ziggurat.

Peer inside Gramps' grave.

Go face to face with my GGG.

Ever the consummate professional, I the streamer am yet again obliging my chat.

(You owe me, my Jewels.)

Deep breath. Here we go!

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31ST

FIN

Greetings World,

The day of divinity is here. My child has borne witness to the Hellish Harmonies of our Reality.

Flesh is no longer a nemesis; metallic masks cannot contain my songful screams anymore.

Brimstone dreams and Seal sorcery and the long song of the people of Lawrence can be thanked.

My days amongst daemonia have come to an end, my quarry again becomes humanity.

I have destroyed the cameras and forged new Seals.

My ziggurat has been rebuilt.

A new inhabitant rests.

Julia, thank you.

I will put your decks to good use.

I will return with more songs.

I will take care of your cats.

Rest in peace,

Heene

THE END.

Dylan Orosz is a writer from Texas, focusing primarily on fantasy x science fiction x horror novels and short fiction. As an imaginative lover of the sublime and fantastique, Dylan writes to entertain readers with mystifying phantasy adventure fiction within worlds larger than themselves. His books are character-driven and fast-paced (and he is currently working on publishing them!) Through the storytelling power of myths and archetypes, Dylan wants to bring about transformative alterations in the consciousness of others and himself. Readers can expect stories of divine beasts and dark magicians, supernal villainy and secret agencies, cyber-detectives and AGI archangels. Dylan writes to express visions that will awaken, evolve, and cultivate the world. His website is DylanOrosz.com and as @finalboyo on Twitter/X & BlueSky

Prism *by Tayla Jankovits*

Trigger warning: This story touches on sensitive topics that may be upsetting for some readers.

The thing about looking through water is not the distortion, but the beauty inside the distorted. Kind of like looking through a prism. The view is lovely and mesmerizing, but it isn't real—a gorgeous perversion of light, blurred images as if melted. Fine lines are erased, and the color is milky and spilly, like when I lose focus and color outside of the bold borders in a coloring book. Water in itself is already glittery and mesmerizing. Lakes and oceans are always described like diamonds. Light and water, a beautiful marriage of earthy compounds. They do fantastical things together when combined.

When I was young, and I can say that, even though adults laugh at children when we say that. As if we were never younger than we are in the moment in which we declare this phrase. Adults are always so condescending and bossy as if their long lives mean more than our shorter ones. As if a child, because of their newness to this world, knows or sees or feels any less intently than they do. But when you are dead, you were absolutely younger once. When all you have had is six whole years to live, then anything earlier than that is when you were younger.

When I was young, I found this pretty, little thing in my mother's underwear drawer. Her underwear was either lacey like a tablecloth on my grandmother's dining room table, or like old t-shirts, big with holes and tears, elastic coming undone like string cheese. If a drawer of underwear could be a metaphor, then it would be my mother.

I'm not sure why I was digging around in there. Why was I in her bedroom at all? Kids don't overthink their actions. Spontaneity is often our gift, and it was likely a whim that led me to open this drawer, to touch some of my mother's most private items. The thing I found was long and cylinder-shaped. Wooden along the length except at the top, which looked like a reverse eyeball, a round glass bulge that made me want to rub it like it was lucky.

The first several minutes that I played with this treasure, I pretended it was a wand and then a microphone where I sang "Jolene" in front of the only full-length mirror in the house. The one that hung on the back of my mother's bedroom door. The one she either stared too long into or not at all when she should. And then, I decided to be an explorer. I brought this toy to my right eye while my left one squinted. And I was delighted by the surprise, the discovery that this is what it was meant for all along. The colors! The show of colorful light and shapes was so mesmerizing that I hadn't noticed my mother.

Where'd you get that?

Stunned at having been caught where I shouldn't be with what I shouldn't have, I dropped my new toy to the floor. The glass eye popped out, the mess of it between my mother's slippers and my bare feet. I scrunched my eyes, preparing for a verbal blow that didn't come. Instead, she bent down and picked up the wooden shaft, and pushed the glass back into the top, giving it a little twist until it fell back into place. Then she brought it to her own eye and peered through it to look at me.

It's pretty inside.

It's pretty from what I'm looking at too, she said, focused right on my face. I blushed, grateful for this compliment.

What is it? I asked, really meaning *give it back to me*, but I wouldn't dare to say that to her.

It's called a prism. She lowered it from her face and handed it back to me. Raised back up to her full height, which wasn't tall at all but seemed like it was when you're still small at someone's knees.

Where did you find it?

I was too scared to make the admission out loud, so instead I pointed to her drawer. She looked at it, noticing now the mouth of it half open. Her underwear was in disarray, the good ones mixed with the bad so that you couldn't really tell them apart.

My mother gave it to me when I was little. I didn't even know it was in there.

I sighed. Flooded with relief that she was bypassing a scolding I likely deserved.

Grammy? I asked.

Grammy was so severe. Her hair so bright, platinum blonde she would tell me, like Marilyn Monroe. It hurt my eyes to look at it. She wore bright-colored lipstick and dress pants that would wrinkle when she sat. I didn't love Grammy, but I did like her. She would let me poke through her purse for hidden dinner mints that she stole from restaurants in the handfuls on her way out. She would admonish me, *It's not stealing! Don't accuse your grandmama of theft!* It was free, she explained, and there was no golden rule that said she couldn't take as many as she could grab. And I didn't steal the prism from Mommy's drawer, I was just borrowing it.

If I catch you going through my stuff again, I'll smack your bottom so hard you won't sit for days. For emphasis, she took a long suck out of the lit cigarette she had been holding and blew it long and slow in my direction. We both stood with the snaking smoke between us, a stare-down I didn't know I was committed to until she turned and left her room.

I wasn't sure if I could still play with her prism or not. I didn't want to play with it anymore anyway. The room felt different. The smoke had ruined all the light, all the color, all the fun. I very

suddenly didn't want to be there, near her things. I felt this so strongly it made my eyes burn and I didn't want to cry because babies cried. Mommy always made sure to remind me of that. I guess in some ways that was a nice thing to say, to tell me how grown up I am.

I dropped the prism again but this time on purpose, just to see what would happen. If the eyeball would pop out again. It didn't. Mommy must have secured it really well. It was always a surprise what she might break and what she might fix. Like one time she broke all the dishes on the dinner table. I wasn't paying close enough attention to know why. I had only asked if next time she could get the chicken nuggets that looked like dinosaurs, not the weird shape of an egg. I knew about the dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets because one time Mommy forgot to pick me up from my friend Bobby's house and I was crying so much that snot was dripping down my face and then Bobby's Mommy who only ever wore soft-looking clothing, sweat pants, or sweaters that looked like cotton balls, couldn't get my Mommy on the phone and then she suggested we eat some dinosaurs and my eyeballs popped open and I forgot about being sad because I never ate a dinosaur before. It turned out to be a chicken nugget. But the game was fun. She heated some frozen broccoli florets in the microwave and me and Bobby pretended the dinosaurs were so big walking along trees of their same height. Mommy remembered to pick me up late that night, scooping me off Bobby's living room couch, nice and gentle where I had fallen asleep waiting for her to remember me.

The dishes broke all around us. Some in big chunks, others in tiny little pieces that disappeared across the kitchen floor. Mommy was shouting things, but I was focused on the broken dishes because I wasn't wearing any socks and I was nervous she might just walk away and leave the mess for me to clean because, well, she wasn't so good at cleaning, and then she did leave and I sat and sat, not sure how to walk across glass. How to get to the broom.

But then another time, I was so sad because my beautiful jewelry box broke. Grammy had given it to me one birthday and there was this beautiful ballerina inside it that swirled and twirled when I opened the top half of the jewelry box. You had to twist a screw in the back though to get it to move and it played nice music that made me both sleepy and very excited, like maybe I could also be a ballerina one day. Like I could be anything one day. When the jewelry box fell, I was practicing gymnastics in case I ever got to take a gymnastics class like my friend Bethany. I was trying to do a handstand but ended up rolling like a lumpy potato and I knocked into my nightstand, and it shook, the jewelry box crashing to the floor. First, I was crying because I hurt myself. It was my knee that smashed into the nightstand, and it was throbbing so bad, and I was holding it and crying, but not too loud, because I wasn't a baby. But then I noticed the box with its top open and the ballerina looking still and sad on her side. I reached to right it and thought it would be nice to hear the music while I

waited for my booboo to get better when I saw the screw in the back had come off.

I screamed loudly without thinking. It just came out because I was mad and sad and I had all these feelings running around inside my chest and I just wanted to get them out so that my chest would stop hurting because already I had a hurting knee, and that was too much hurting at once. Mommy came into my room. She was wearing a bathrobe and holding a coffee mug. Her hair looked nice even though I could see she hadn't brushed it since Friday. Wouldn't brush it until work on Monday. I showed her the jewelry box, waiting for a scolding, but then she took it into the kitchen and sat down at the table and began to twist things into the back of it and within minutes the screw was in place again. She wound it up, spinning the little screw in the back around and around until she placed it on the table and told me to open it. I did and then there she was again, this beautiful little ballerina spinning but never going anywhere. Mommy scooped her chair back and I sat on her lap, and we listened together, and she said,

Not everything that breaks can be fixed. And not everything that's fixed can't be broken.

I didn't understand what she meant but I wondered if the prism was one of the things that were fixed for good. I wondered if Mommy was broken forever.

Mommy had another baby. One after me. I didn't understand how because I didn't have a daddy so I wasn't sure how we could have another baby, but Mommy told me this baby didn't have a daddy either. My friend Bethany said everyone has a daddy and my friend Ian said he has two daddies, and this kid Sasha told me my daddy was a deadbeat, and I didn't understand how Ian could have two daddies if I couldn't even have one.

After the baby came, Mommy was really sad. She only wore pajamas. The same pajamas. Over and over again. And she smelled bad. And she stopped going to work. And she stopped putting food in the fridge and then one day she stopped putting food in the bottle. My baby sister would cry and cry and I would do little dances for her to try to get her to stop and Mommy would scream and yell for her to shut up and that only made my sister cry harder and I tried to tell her Mommy wasn't mean she was just not feeling well. I filled the bottles with warm milk, I even added some sugar to make it sweet. The baby ate it, but she still cried a lot. So did Mommy.

Grammy came by with a basket full of baby clothes and a box of diapers. She was supposed to come two weeks before, but she said she couldn't make the three-hour drive in such winter weather, so she didn't show up until five weeks after the baby came and almost a whole week after Mommy stopped putting food in the bottles. When she walked in, she was all smiley and her pink lipstick was so shiny, and she smelled like a birthday cake, and I wanted to eat her I was so hungry. But then, her face turned fast, and she started saying *oh dear* and *oh my god* over and over while she walked

through our small house.

I followed her with my eyes, noticing now that maybe it looked a bit messier than usual. But I was only five at the time and I really couldn't do much. I watched as Grammy put her basket full of pink ribbons down on the dining room table. It was so bright and happy. It looked out of place in our house. I was torn between wanting to open it, even though it wasn't for me and wanting to throw it outside in the trash bin. As I tried to decide what to do with it, I watched Grammy walk into our kitchen, open the fridge, peer in the sink, kick her foot at the garbage bin. And then she looked right at me and said, *where the hell is the baby?*

That part was easy because the baby couldn't move. I pointed to the car seat in the corner of the living room. And Grammy said, *what a fucking shit of a mother.* She ran over to the baby and picked my little sister up, cradling her little body as she sat down on the couch and started crying and crying. It was strange to see Grammy crying. Her mascara was running down her face in black streams through the grooves of her wrinkles and it was kind of scary to look at. I went to go wipe her tears, but then I thought that maybe the mascara tasted good. So licked my fingers after. It tasted salty. Like my own tears. Like my sister's tears. Like my Mommy's. Then Grammy stopped crying, her eyes got really big and weird looking, and she didn't say a word until she did. She asked me when I last ate. I shrugged.

Grammy, still holding my little sister, got up off the couch and went to Mommy's room. She threw the door open and started yelling really loudly and I wanted to listen, but I also wanted to see if there was any food in that basket. There wasn't.

Grammy ended up staying three weeks. Which I was really happy about because she put milk and eggs in our fridge, and she cooked us dinner each night and she made waffles in the morning, and she fed me and fed me until my tummy felt ready to burst. She also made me bubble baths and scrubbed my hair with her long nails, and it felt nice to have someone wash me and tuck me into bed each night. And my little sister liked it too. She ate all the bottles Grammy gave her and Grammy even let me give her a few and my little sister made really cute noises when she sucked on her bottle, and everything was going really well. Mommy started washing her hair and putting on other clothes and by the time Grammy left things felt a lot like they did before. I liked sharing a room with my little sister and even though Mommy sometimes forgot to wake up to feed her in the middle of the night; she always remembered to feed her in the morning.

Grammy stayed only one week after my sister died. I think she would have stayed longer but her and Mommy got into a big fight and Mommy told her to get the fuck out. Grammy told Mommy the baby died because Mommy was a bad Mommy. Mommy told Grammy that she didn't have much to

learn from and that SIDS can happen to a bad mother or a good mother and it had nothing to do with her. And then Grammy and Mommy both said some awful terrible things that made me want to cry. They both agreed it was better that my sister died.

I slept in my sister's crib a whole year after until Mommy sold it to a nice lady who had a big tummy and five twenty-dollar bills. She told the nice lady it was my old crib. Which was both true and not true. When the lady was finally leaving, after a man who was with her strapped the crib into a red truck and was honking his horn a lot, I told her I hoped her baby doesn't die like ours did and the lady stared and stared at me until I felt weird and ran to my room.

After my sister died, I was scared we wouldn't have milk and eggs and cereal again. But it was okay. Mommy was okay. She wasn't great. But she went to work each day and came home and heated up some of those good dinners in boxes from the freezer. She let me watch cartoons before bed and a few times she bought me those really good snacks that Sasha would have where there was meat and cheese and crackers each in its own little spot. That was a really good week. Other weeks weren't so good. And I had to pay careful attention to see which weeks meant I might get a burger and a shake for dinner, and which meant there would be broken glass on the floor.

I knew Mommy was sad a lot, but I didn't know why, and after their big fight, Grammy stopped visiting and she didn't call anymore, and Mommy said we didn't need anyone anyway but I think that we did. Because our little house with two rooms and a leaky roof felt so big and quiet with just the two of us, because during those bad weeks, you can't talk out loud. You can't ask for dinosaur chicken nuggets or if you can go outside to play, you have to be really quiet. You have to disappear like a dead little sister.

But then those weeks that are good are so good, she lets you sit on her lap and watch your ballerina spin, and she strokes your back with the tips of her fingers that don't have long painted nails like Grammy's but are still really nice on my back. And then there are other weeks.

When she told me she wanted to give me a bath, I wasn't sure what to say because I had been giving myself baths since I was three. She told me once how to do it. Said I was a big girl and only babies need a mama to wash them. One time I mixed up the handles and made the bath so hot that it burned my feet, and I cried and cried, and I got blisters and couldn't walk, and Mommy said that was a good nice lesson to remember better next time which handle is which. She was right though, I never forgot again. So, when she said she wanted to give me a bath, it felt like a gift. Like the prism.

I jumped up and down because I was excited to get this attention. I was nervous she would get upset with this reaction because she didn't like when I got jumpy or moved around a lot or suddenly,

but she didn't get upset. She just walked into the bathroom and turned on the bath. She even put her wrist beneath it to feel the water which made me remember my blistered feet. I pulled off my clothes and climbed over the edge of the pink bath and got in. She was sitting on the toilet lid right next to me and I was so excited I started blabbing and blabbing and I hardly realized how high the bath was until I did and I even said *oh wow Mommy that water is really high* but she didn't say anything and then she got on her knees and as if she was praying. She looked at me and I was still talking and then she reached for the shampoo and pumped out a bit of the white gooey soap and then she reached for my head and started to rub some soap on it and then stopped and it seemed strange so I stopped talking and I looked at her and I could see now this was a bad week. And then she started to cry, and I felt my heart spinning and twirling like the ballerina except it wasn't slow and pretty, it was ugly and fast, and Mommy's hands were so big and so strong, and I could barely scream before she was pushing me down underneath the water.

My feet weren't blistered, but they were on fire. Kicking and twisting. My hands tried to push at her hands, but it was so wet and slippery and then I found I couldn't. I couldn't push and kick anymore because I was getting very fuzzy, so I stopped fighting her and just looked up through the inches and inches of warm bath water. I saw her face through the water. How distorted it was. Her face and not her face at the same time. And how the water, moving and rippling made her face shimmer, and it was like looking through that prism. Everything there was exactly as it was, but all of it was broken into parts. Colors separated and running at different speeds, bending, and spreading into something beautiful that must be handled with care, turned around and around to be fully appreciated. And it was beautiful—her face, her distorted face. And I wondered briefly if I was beautiful beneath that water, if my own distortion possessed any beauty at all. If my own light meets water refracted. If I was being dispersed into seven colors, a spreading, oozing rainbow. If she even saw me at all, or if I was already bent, changed. A wave passing from one medium to another. Just another beautiful broken thing.

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Back Down to Earth *by B. Elizabeth Beck*

Charlotte can barely see through her tears as she puts the key in the ignition and turns the engine on in the car she can no longer afford. Not after today. She wipes away her tears with the back of her hand and scrolls until she finds the song she seeks—the only one that can provide solace, especially since she hadn't originally picked up her phone to play music. She had picked it up to call her mother, who could no longer answer, whose voice Charlotte would never hear again, causing a fresh torrent of tears. Six months and Charlotte still can't remember her mother is gone. How many times a day does Charlotte reach to text her mom? When will that instinct fade with the reality that her mother is dead, her ashes spread around a tree? Charlotte knows her mother's spirit will always be with her, but her body, mind, and gentle guidance are gone forever, only to be found within the lyrics of Carly Simon's songs.

Charlotte turns up the volume to hear *Embrace Me, You Child* loudly, listening to it from beginning to end before she is empowered enough to reverse her car out of the spot in the parking garage. She winds her way into the heavy rush hour traffic to drive downtown to her apartment. Charlotte skips *Waited So Long* to hear *It Was So Easy*, singing along with gusto. Memories of following her mother through the garden, dancing in the living room, and driving in the car with the windows down flash as Carly gently sings the melancholy tune about childhood beliefs. Charlotte recites, "Step on a crack, break your mama's back," as a nod to Carly's wisdom. The singer may have been crooning about romantic love, but Charlotte's mom always made every Carly Simon song about them, like quoting lines from *The Right Thing to Do* because she always said being a mother was her life's path, her river, so to speak, and that Charlotte was as precious to her as a bouquet of flowers, as sweet as any Carly Simon song.

Mom tucked Charlotte in every night and then used Carly Simon's lyrics as taglines in their future adult texts. But Mom isn't with Charlotte now, and for a moment, Charlotte is relieved, spared the humiliation of admitting that she has failed. Fired from the job Charlotte worked years to achieve, first serving at the front desk until she had established herself worthy enough to become concierge of one of the most prestigious hotels in the city. Her mother cited, *Nobody Does It Better* when Charlotte called to share the news of her promotion, making Charlotte laugh.

She felt *the best* at that moment, but the magic inside her has now disappeared. What is Charlotte going to do? She is at a loss, feeling humiliated, broke, and devastated by the injustice that led to the general manager closing the door to conduct the termination meeting.

Fortunately, the funky Steely Dan-ish beat of *You Belong to Me* cues up in Charlotte's music

shuffle. By the time she turns left onto her street, Charlotte is singing along, distracting herself from grief mingled with shame, compounded by the frustration of locating a space on the road to parallel park her car. No matter how often her mother encouraged her to find a better apartment now that Charlotte was earning more money as a concierge, Charlotte stood firm. Her first-floor apartment is perfect. Where else would she find her apartment's charming features, such as crystal doorknobs, original pocket doors, and fourteen-foot ceilings? She conveniently forgets the bad parts—the lack of central air conditioning, the wonky appliances in the kitchen, and the low water pressure in the shower installed in the claw-footed tub. Every time Charlotte steps out of her kitchen door into the small courtyard garden that is hers alone, she feels privileged to be the tenant on the first floor of the brownstone converted into three apartments. Directly above Charlotte lives Mrs. Parker, an old widow who rarely descends the steps, preferring to perch in her open window to watch the street below. Above Mrs. Parker, in the attic studio apartment, lives a young man named Leo, who attends art school during the day and is rarely home at night.

Charlotte's mom proposed the idea to plant a corkscrew willow in the courtyard that, in three years, has grown to provide shade over a bistro metal table and chairs where Charlotte drinks coffee on summer mornings and wine in the evenings. The brick exterior walls of the buildings enclosing the courtyard are blanketed in ivy and Virginia creeper, whose leaves turn bright red in autumn. A concrete birdbath in the far-left corner installed by a previous tenant or perhaps by the original owners of the brownstone entices cardinals, wrens, and sometimes sparrows. Charlotte plants impatiens in a ring around its base every May, the day after Mother's Day, as is the rule for planting annuals, the only flowers Charlotte plants every spring, unlike her mother, a devoted gardener. Letting go of her mother's gardens was harder than losing the actual house when Charlotte sold it last month. She can't believe she will no longer tease her mother about caring for her roses. Her mother carefully pruned, fertilized, and spread her magic elixir of coffee grounds and eggshells as tenderly as she would have cared for grandchildren she dreamed of and now would never have.

Charlotte leaves the box containing her personal items from her now abandoned office at the hotel in the trunk of her car. She can deal with that later. Right now, it takes every ounce of energy she has to use her key to open the door, drop her purse on a table, and open the refrigerator to uncork the bottle of Sancerre she was saving for a special occasion. Choosing the stemless hand-blown glass her mother found at a flea market, Charlotte carries it and the bottle to her courtyard sanctuary, kicking off her high heels to walk barefoot outside. Although she cannot see the sunset, Charlotte studies the dappled golden light reflecting on the cobblestone patio as she sips her first glass of wine. Before she pours a second, Charlotte retreats into her apartment to use the bathroom, then changes into yoga pants and a tank top before retrieving her phone from her purse. She scrolls as she walks through the

kitchen, so *Coming Around Again* plays on the outdoor speaker, tricking Charlotte into thinking she is being welcomed. To what, Charlotte isn't quite sure, only that the syncopated beats of the song are as familiar as her heartbeat, as haunting as her broken heart. Nothing may stay the same, and Charlotte was sure she was willing to play the game, but the song was pissing her off. Charlotte doesn't believe in love, and her mother had no right to be quixotic with the string of broken romances she left in her wake. Why did she teach her daughter to believe in fairy tale romances? Especially since she died alone, not in a lover's arms. Alone when the aneurysm she had carried in her brain since birth suddenly decided to explode.

As if to mock Charlotte's despondent mood, the first beats of *You're So Vain* strum. Charlotte can't help the bark of laughter that escapes. Dammit, Carly Simon. This isn't the first time Carly has betrayed Charlotte. Shame still burns the memory of third-grader Charlotte's innocent response, "Warren Beatty," to Mrs. Murphy's question, "Who can define the term *vain*?" Although the teacher was gentle, hiding a smile and responding, "Well, he is one example, I suppose," the derisive laughter of her classmates still rings in her head. Charlotte wanted to melt into her desk; she felt so embarrassed.

That afternoon, Charlotte realized the lyrics of *We Have No Secrets* had nothing to do with the trust between a mother and her daughter but instead about a lover betrayed by lies. After swallowing humiliation on the yellow bus and finally entering the front door of her home, Charlotte made a beeline to the albums stacked alphabetically on a shelf in the living room. She pulled all Carly Simon's albums, carried them into her bedroom, locked the door behind her, and read the liner notes. Before the advent of the internet, that was the only way to access lyrics. Read the print on the album, something Charlotte had never done before. She had just learned to read, opening doors to the wonderful worlds of Judy Blume's stories and lifting a veil of innocence, leaving Charlotte weary of her mother, the first fissure of distrust inevitable in all mother-daughter relationships. Other than *Itsy-Bitsy Spider*, none of Carly's songs were what Charlotte's mother had her believe.

Of course, adolescence brought its avalanche of arguments stemming from power struggles between Charlotte asserting her autonomy against her mother, who anguished over her daughter's maturation journey. Her mother's sentimental tears as she took pictures of Charlotte blowing out candles on her birthday cakes, Charlotte awkwardly pinning a corsage on the lapel of her prom date's tuxedo, and finally, Charlotte in cap and gown. It wasn't until Charlotte moved away to college and felt homesick that she returned to the comfort of Carly Simon's songs. Charlotte forgave her mother for leading her astray with her interpretations of the songs, especially after suffering her own romantic disappointments. When Charlotte turned twenty-one, the age her mother had her, Charlotte's respect

for her mother as a single parent deepened. Suddenly, the lyrics took on a dual meaning, more profound each year of Charlotte's life, until they became the soundtrack of Charlotte's life and the shorthand of her discourse with her mother.

Charlotte poured the last of the wine into her glass and scrolled until she found the perfect song to end this terrible day. She sings with gusto; every lyric of *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of* slides easily off her tongue in her own backyard, not looking any further, knowing it is time to make a wish on the stars Carly Simon would shoot off.

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The Descension of Persephone *by Ashini J. Desai*

Oh, dear Mother, how could I have known my world would change so quickly? I know I will be rescued so I must be patient. Maybe it is my fault for not knowing better.

I recall the events of the day and regret falling for those flowers in the fields of Nysa. Helios was reigning the sky that day, full of glorious sunshine and vibrant white clouds on blue skies. The fields were covered in a magnificent bloom and the fragrance of the vibrant pink and white flowers were alluring from afar. However, once I broke the delicate stems of those flowers, the gateway to hell opened in a furious storm.

“Kore, look out!” my friends had called to me as we all stumbled during the quaking.

Four black horses leapt up from the earth, struggling for a foothold on the broken sod, as they pulled forth Hades’ golden chariot. I was awestruck by the spectacle. I remember suddenly feeling a strong arm around my waist, lifting me into the carriage. I had but a moment to reach my arms to the sky and call out, “Helios, tell my mother Demeter to save me!” As quickly as the chariot had appeared on earth, we were immediately submerged into the ground. And into the darkness. Into Hell.

I now fidget to move my body. Have I been living in this obscure confinement for days? Maybe weeks? I do not know because time has no meaning here. I feel the worms fighting to weave themselves around the dried flowers that have been matted into my hair. Grime has worked its way into my skin, and my pores tingle with creeping filth. The air is musty and sour. I can barely keep my eyes open. My eyelashes are withered by salt; I have no more tears since the water in my body has long been exhausted.

My mind tells me to run, but I do not have the strength. Where would I go? Cross the River Styx with Charon? The dog Cerberus guards the gates with his three-heads ready to devour trespassers. I feel rooted to this dirty corner in the earth’s dungeon. I sit on the cold clay floor of the entrance hall with my knees tucked under my chin, tugging my dress around me for warmth. I know fires blaze in the other rooms; he has used them to entice me to join him in the halls of his subterranean palace. I see candles twinkling, but I would rather sit in this bleak foyer—neither inside nor outside—than follow him into his palace.

They say one can freely return from Hades if nothing is consumed, otherwise they will be part of this Underworld forever. Trays of food have appeared only to have servants take them away untouched. I refuse to eat. My body is weak and fatigued.

“Taste one. You are my guest and my love,” says the voice.

I raise my head and squint my eyes. The only light in the gloomy room comes from the stunted wax candles, casting long shadows against the stone walls. He is here again. He has slithered closer because I sense his heat upon my neck, yet I also glimpse his shadow move by the doorway. My heart quickens. He constantly visits me.

The candles flicker as the flames suck on the last bit of wax. One more candle is extinguished, and I sense the shadow coming closer.

Love. How dare he use that word. He abducted me. The word is forever soiled by his breath. I hear him step forward and can barely glance at him.

His presence is large and strong. It is as if I am in an eddy with his force swirling about me. I sway to the pull, but I cannot look at his face. I stare at a spot in front of me. He is holding something in his outstretched hands. A red fruit seizes my gaze.

“This is for you. Take it,” he says as he offers the pomegranate so generously.

A power unseen lifts me on my knees and my hands pluck the pomegranate from his hands. I rub the round firm husk and take a deep breath. I inhale the freshness of the world I left behind, the figs and oranges on the trees kissed by sunshine. The clean citrus air churns through my senses. I cannot get enough of this scent! It fills my blood. My skin tingles and tightens. My tongue comes forward, ready to lick and devour what I can.

I hear a noxious chuckle, and I remember where I am.

“No!” I shove the fruit into his hands. In an instant, my body misses its sweet essence. I collapse to the floor again.

I tilt my head slightly to see him toss the pomegranate into the air—swiftly catching into his palm and releasing it back into the air.

“You keep saying no, but you will acquiesce to me one day.” He stops and I watch his sinewy, muscular fingers break the fruit. These hands hold the Underworld. They decide who enters and how they shall be treated, fulfilling the path the Fates had designed. Only the Gods have such fingers. My Adonis, though he is a mortal, has slender fingers. I asked him once if his graceful hands were marble or flesh. My fingers ache to hold those exquisite hands again and feel the protection they once offered.

Now, Hades shows me the split half of the pomegranate—it beckons me with a crimson smile. My lips are parched, and my throat yearns for the juices bursting from the shell. Oh, to sink my teeth into the fleshy seeds and drink the luscious drops of the claret.

He offers me a handful of scarlet kernels and smiles. “You have not eaten a thing, my darling. You

want this. And you know it too.”

“Go away. My mother will rescue me. I do not need you!” I turn my head away to face the wall. He laughs at me and his powerful bellow echoes off the stone walls.

“Demeter does not know you are here. My brother Zeus and I decided this without her. I need a bride, after all. I saw you and I fell in love.” He leans towards me, and I could feel his heated breath radiate in the air. “Your long auburn hair fluttering in the wind, your skin... glowing with youthful blush. Your body... your body is so willowy and lissome. How lovely it will be to have your beauty grace my home.” His broad finger grazes upon my cheek and I feel a surge of energy on my skin.

“Zeus? My father? This was planned?” I ask. No one told me this. How dare these Olympian gods do this to me? Do they stop at nothing?

“I had no choice but to snatch you. Your mother is so attached to you and would not have agreed to let you go. Therefore, we had to devise this plan. My darling girl, I will not leave you like this.” He gestures around the dank room. “Once you are my bride, you and I will rule the Underworld together. You will be an immortal. I will give you whatever your heart desires, from any world!” He leans in closer to me, his breath with the essence of smoke. “Have you had enough of this oubliette? Will you agree to stay with me?”

I gaze into his eyes and see blackness. I close my eyes and fiercely evoke memories to take me away from this moment. I remember the lush green meadows of my home and the sapphire blue seas that ripple like silk when the sunlight dances upon them. My mother, whose skin smells of spring blossoms and olive leaves. The last day I saw Adonis.

“You will be my Queen...the mortals will be falling to their knees when you appear. You shall command anything you wish. Why be nothing above when you can be supreme here?”

“I wish to leave, my Lord,” I say quietly, with my eyes still closed.

“I would rather you not,” he says. I hear his footsteps walking away from me. The last candlelight is out, and I collapse onto the damp floor.



Adonis kneels before me, glowing in his white summer robes. His beauty shimmers. His long blond tresses fall into his eyes, and I reach to touch them. His bronze skin glows from inside, and I long to caress his face. My lips crave to touch that spot on the side of his throat, under his jawline.

“Adonis, you’ve come to me!” I clutch his hand and can feel it is more than a vision. Warm fingers trace my face, and slowly into my mouth.

Adonis, upon your fingers, my dry lips find droplets of moisture. You guide the pure liquid into my mouth, and I lick my lips and discover an unquenchable thirst.

You follow my lips with a plump seed. The precious juice spurs my mouth to open for more. The fragrance of the capsule overwhelms me. How I remember thee well! I devour the kernel. The seed bursts, filling me with sensations of intoxication. A waft of citrus sweeps into my lungs.

Your touch on my lips is tender and subtly encourages a new seed. With delight I welcome another seed and lap the liquid trickling down the fingers bestowing it. This one has an ambrosial and familiar sweetness that reminds me of my childhood.

Like a bird, I sense another one is coming forward; I snatch the seed in your palm and kiss the pool of juice. I dive in deeper and lick your palm like a thirsty kitten. Will there be more? I widen my mouth in anticipation, allowing my tongue to come forward to accept another drop. A sumptuous coolness slides down my throat.

“Adonis, more?” I ask breathlessly. A kernel dances upon my lips but dares not fall into my ready mouth. Ah, you tease me. My senses follow its perfume to your lips, where the seed rests. I slowly trace those beautiful lips with my mouth. Like a thief seizing a ruby, I leave nary a trace as I savor my bounty.

“What? Is there another jewel upon the pillow of your lips, Adonis?” I lean forward as his lips thrust a seed upon me. I laugh in delight.

Suddenly, my glorious Adonis is gone. Instead, I recognize the dusky shadow of Hades. The Lord of Darkness, Desolation, and Death. This was an illusion.

“No!” I spit the seeds from my mouth and wipe my face. The fruit is still in his hand, and I grab it. I throw it against the wall and watch the red liquid leave a stain like blood.

He laughs at me. He leans in close to me and in his eyes, I spot my own face within this wretched realm as his bride. He vanishes as stealthily as he had entered. His parting words ring in the air, “You are mine now. You have accepted my seeds.”

I draw my breath, weighted by the pits. I plunge my fingers down my throat, begging my body to thrust them out. Instead, it only gives hoarse coughs and empty heaves. My depraved body has already absorbed the evil.

I crouch, encircling my arms around myself, transforming into a ball to roll away. My fingers upon my flesh, I suddenly feel my skin. Upon it, is my shame. I claw my skin to remove it until I am streaked with bloody scratches. What have I done? *Why did I offer my hand to temptation and ask to*

be led, to be outcast? Is this my fate to accept?

I inhale deeply, gathering every bit of wicked pain and yearning in my lungs that I can clutch. I release a primal, guttural howl that ricochets against the walls of this hell, hoping someone above will hear me. Then there's silence. A silence so profound I hear the pounding of my heart and the blood that swooshes through it.

What if I keep this private? No one shall know. What are a handful of seeds anyway? I shall pretend this never happened. I will be saved. Or am I truly doomed?

But what if I do stay? He claims to be in love with me. He would let me have my way. I would master my own life in the underworld. The Queen. Mother, my dear Mother. How I miss her. Why is she not here? The tartness lingers on my tongue and my breath carries the tang and bitter traces of my deed.

"My lady?" says a small voice.

I raise my eyes to see one of the servants. She is a slim short woman with black hair pulled back, clad in black robe tied with a red rope. Her face is blank of emotion. She kneels and stares at the floor in deference to her status.

"Master has asked me to lead you to your chambers," she announces loudly.

I lift my torso from the floor slowly to face her.

The woman quickly glances over her shoulder and leans in close to me. "My lady, perhaps you would like to see this," she whispers. From the folds of her robe, she pulls out a shard of glass about the size of a man's palm. "Look."

I squint my eyes in the dimness to see. In this glass, I see my mother. I let out a soft cry of surprise. She hushes me.

The bewitched glass shows my mother searching all over the world—far and wide, high and low. I see her talking to Helios, and how she screams in fury. I see her talking to Zeus and her face is wrought with horror. Her anger makes the gods shudder. I see the leaves from the trees wither and fall as she walks by.

"You will be Queen of the Underworld forever. The earth will mourn for you," says the servant. I see more images in the glass. I see my own future. My light hair will turn darker and my cheekbones, so sharp they could cut a hand. My skin emits a gray glow, and my demeanor reads somber and morbid. No longer Kore, the sun-kissed golden maiden. I am Persephone, the Bringer of Death, the Goddess of the Underworld. Alongside Hades, I will usher the dead into the desolate valleys and the

heroes into the Elysian Fields.

I shake my head in confusion. This is a fate unexpected. What can I do? I touch the cold stone wall behind me to boost myself to my feet. The woman tries to hold my elbow, but I wave her away. I take a deep breath and stand upright. I hold the wall and take a step. My foot awakens with sharp pins and each step shoots needles up my leg. I rub my thighs, warming my legs to continue the journey.

“Leave that glass...” I say to the servant. She has disappeared, but the glass remains on the floor. I glance around the foyer and the candles are suddenly lit. The room is so aglow with brightness that my eyes hurt to open fully. I squint to see a figure in front.

Hades is standing in his full Olympian god form within an iridescent halo of light. The white folds of his robes glisten under a heavy velvet black cloak. A silver crown circles his head and compresses his long chestnut hair. His square face appears to be sculpted—his jawline square and his lips are full under his fleecy, bronze beard.

I am nervous to see him, but this time it is different. I feel more fire inside of me. He holds forth to me a small silver diadem, much like his but sparkling with black diamonds, emeralds, and sanguine-red rubies.

“I first admired you for your beauty, but I now see your strength and determination. You are not an ordinary girl, Kore. I see how you complement my temperament and will match my resolution. I ask you once again, will you rule with me? Be Persephone. Be an immortal.”

“My Lord, I will accept my fate to be forever tied to the Underworld because I consumed the kernels of the fruit. However, I have a proposal for you, one that is fair and just.”

Hades raises his eyebrows, surprised any mortal would challenge him.

“I agree that I ate six seeds. However, I was under a spell, a bewilderment. I did not do this in full consciousness, the consciousness that I have now as I speak to you. Therefore, this was not done fairly, and I should not be held for submitting under an enchantment,” I thrust my chin forward to give myself more largess. I see him wince.

“It is my world, my rules,” he declares with a grin. I take a deep breath as I continue.

“My Lord, why should I be punished so harshly for six seeds? To be wrenched from my life above ground for eternity as a punishment? I did not consume the whole fruit. I did not consume six pieces of fruit or six types of fruit. It was a few seeds. Had a bird eaten those six seeds, she would have stayed famished.” I see his face remain unchanged.

“I imagine the fruit might have had more than 300 seeds. Do you agree?” I ask, and he shows

no acknowledgement. I take a deep breath before speaking. “Therefore, my proposal is that I only stay here for a few days. For six days a year, I will stay in the Underworld and for the rest of the year, I will be returned to the land of the living.” I look into his eyes and hold his gaze, though my body is trembling.

Hades laughs, and the sound resonates off the walls. “I cannot believe a mortal is telling me what to do. You know my rules. Any food consumed will tie you to the Underworld. Come now.” He turns away from me, expecting me to follow. In desperation, I plead my final argument.

“Wait! The bewitched glass,” I say, pointing to the floor. “Do you not see what is happening to the earth? Demeter is in mourning. As she grieves, the trees are losing their leaves, plants are withering. The bees will not create honey without the flowers. The fields will wilt, and animals will die. Humans will suffer and die by the hundreds from starvation.”

Hades strokes his beard. “Tell me.”

“The more people die, the more overwhelmed the Underworld will become with dead souls. It will be too much,” I say, holding his attention.

“What you say is true. The balance of life and death will be lost.” He pauses. “I will consult with Zeus and see what can be done to appease Demeter.”

“To appease Demeter? You do not need to ask Zeus. You are Hades, you have power, and you know the answer. It is simple—return me! Take me to my mother! Afterwards, I will return for six days to accept the crown as Persephone.”

“Six days is not enough. I will need you for six months.” My heart feels like a weight was thrust upon it and a bubble is trapped in my throat, unable to talk or breathe. I frantically try to think of other reasons. I exhale a deep breath, reminding myself that moments ago I was doomed to an eternity in the Underworld with no hope of returning home. Somehow, a compromise has been achieved. This is not the end I foresaw.

“I will take you back to Demeter and Zeus now. This is not my preference. This is not my optimal situation. However, I make this decision to maintain the stability between the worlds. It is my duty as an Olympian,” Hades declares.

A glimmer of the candlelight reflecting on the magical glass catches my eye. I move swiftly to pick it up and I inspect it. I see my mother and I united in an orchard full of fruit and blossoms and a community of light. Where we walk, flora arises in our footsteps. Humans and animals thrive and flourish.

My heart quickens to know I can return home. If I am obliged to be here half of the year, I will need to divide myself into Light and Dark. Earth and Sky. Death and Birth.

Roots and Leaves of the same tree. I, as the one with the seeds, must cede.

He comes forward to take my hand to lead me from the dungeonus caverns. My spirit feels rejuvenated as I take my first steps out of this netherworld towards the light.

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Creative Nonfiction



[Indian Girl in White Blanket](#), Robert Henri 1917

Chicago Snow *by Anna Cabrerros*

Trigger warning: This story touches on sensitive topics that may be upsetting for some readers.

I sit and watch the pitiful snowflakes rise and swirl outside my uncle's apartment window. Never falling, always rising up, up, and then tumbling sideways and around in loops and spirals, never permitted to fall. The wind in this city pushes the snow around helplessly, teasing the heart with the false promise of a romantic winter afternoon. But this is January in Chicago. It's -14 degrees with 25 mph winds. There are no twinkling lights, no horse-drawn carriages here. No fat, wet snowflakes to laughingly catch on your tongue. Only the impassive grey sky and the rising, swirling ash-like particles of leftover snow from dirty rooftops.

I try to remember why I am here. I vaguely recall my mother saying that my uncle missed us and wanted to see how we had been doing these past three months. I sit next to the radiator and allow it to burn through my thin pajamas. I think of the broom. The faucet. The stairs. Disconnected images, too large and abstract to total and weigh. The psychiatrist's drugs numb me from feeling, but not from remembering.

My mother walks in the room. She is surprised to see me.

"You're awake."

"I heard Uncle Louis come back early this morning."

"He's going to meet us for lunch later. On his break."

She is dressed for the cold and must be sweating underneath the layers of clothing.

"Where are you going?"

"Louis told me about a yoga studio close by. He says I can walk there." She looks doubtful.

"Did he give you directions?"

"Yeah, well...you know Dad's family."

I don't, but I nod anyway. She pulls her scarf up over her mouth. All I can see of her are her nose and eyes. Green, like Jacqueline's, my sister. She's in Charleston for college, enjoying above freezing weather and probably a lot of cocaine.

"Well, I'll see you for lunch then," I say.

"Do you want to come with me?" Her words catch in her scarf.

"No, Mom. You know I hate yoga."

“You don’t hate it.”

“Well, I don’t like it.”

“Are you going to be okay here by yourself?”

I just look at her.

She starts for the door. “If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure.”

She leaves the apartment. I sit and listen to the creaks and groans of the radiator and the wooden floors, watching the ashen snow.



It was October of my senior year in high school. My father had lost his furniture business a year before and he was still unemployed, claiming disability due to a back injury. For a whole year, he lived in the den downstairs, the “creepy” room from my childhood, where Jacqueline used to pretend to be E.T. and brokenly whisper “Ehhh-leeeee-uhhht” through the slats in the bi-fold door as I walked upstairs to our bedroom.

He lay down there all day with the lights out, blinds down, TV glowing. He took Oxycontin and drank alcohol intermittently, and then would go through shaky, sweaty, groaning “detox” periods administered by my mother. These detoxes would last three or four weeks at best, and then I would find him, smiling triumphantly in the kitchen, screwdriver in hand. Shortly after, he would fall down into his den again, a bitter and pained presence that never left home anymore. I found myself longing for the days when he would disappear for sometimes twenty-four hours at a time, reeling through cocaine and tequila binges with Jerry, the owner of the Mexican restaurant next to his furniture store. But the store was gone now, Jerry was in jail, and my father was *always* home. I hated myself for hating him so much.

It was maybe five o’clock on a Tuesday night. I had the night off from my hosting job at the Italian restaurant near my high school. I tried to lock myself in my room and do homework, but it wasn’t my most productive spot. I would get distracted, climb out of my window onto the roof, smoke cigarettes, sometimes take shots of rum that I had smuggled from the liquor cabinet, and gradually lose hold of my motivation to study. I much preferred to do my homework in the dining room, at the large glass table with the broad bay window open to the fall breeze outside. But his room was right there, and the light from his TV bleeding through the slats in the door infuriated me. He slept all day while my mother went to work, only waking up to eat the meals she still cooked for us every night. Though I

knew he was depressed, and probably suffering, I couldn't feel sorry for him. His self-pity was too oppressive to make room for anyone else's sympathies. And his bitterness was slowly seeping from under his door to under my skin, poisoning my chances of making a clean break from the toxic environment my home had become.

On this particular evening, I gave up on my cigarette and decided to go downstairs to the kitchen. It was a disaster area. Pretzel crumbs littered the stovetop, spilled orange juice slowly drying on the granite counter. His empty vodka bottle was out, lid off. Four or five dirty glasses sat on top of the counter, and the sink was full of dishes filthy with chunks of dried food. I opened the dishwasher and saw a load of clean dishes waiting to be put away.

I started to unload the dishes, top rack first, filling the cabinets with clean glasses and cereal bowls, allowing them to clank noisily against each other, and then slamming each cabinet shut after I loaded it up. I stared at the large, clean chef's knives for a moment before carefully sliding them back into the butcher's block. Then I unloaded the bottom rack, slamming each cabinet after I assaulted the kitchen implements. Plates first, clinking them dangerously together as I stacked them one on top of the other, *ca-chink, ca-chink, slam*; silverware next, flinging the drawer open, tossing the forks, knives, and spoons into the drawer with loud metallic clangs, *clang, clang, slam*. Finally, the pots and pans. I opened the cabinet to the left of the stove where my mother stored the pots, pans, and wok, and found it in its usual state of disarray. Smaller pots and pans on the bottom, because they weren't used as often, larger ones haphazardly stacked on top, wok tilted crazily on its side, slicing into the wooden cabinetry, barely able to be jerked out. I yanked everything violently out of the cabinet, stainless steel shrieks clamoring through the open floor plan of the house in violent echoes. I spread it all out on the kitchen floor and sat myself down, determined to organize this mess once and for all.

I felt his presence before I heard him. I turned to see him standing in the fading light from the bay window, eyes glazed and unfocused, his hand held to his left temple. The blue flickering light of his television spilled out from his sick room across the floor, illuminating the dust and cat hair against the blonde wood.

"*What* are you doing?" he growled.

"Cleaning up," I said.

"You look like you're making a mess to me."

"Well, aren't you the expert on messes?"

"Huh?" He knitted his eyebrows together and sneered.

“Aren’t. You. The expert. On messes?” I carefully pronounced each word. “This kitchen is disgusting. Mom started the dishes this morning and they were still sitting in the washer just now. What have you been doing all day?”

“I’m sick,” he groaned.

“You’re not sick. You have a hangover. Big difference.”

“I am your *father*.”

“I don’t see how one thing has to do with the other.”

He swayed in the doorway.

“Move. I need water.”

“You can just as easily go around the other way. I’m busy.” I clanged another pan into the cabinet. He winced.

“You *woke me up!*”

“Yeah, and you wake me up every night getting popcorn at two in the morning. I get up and go to school anyway, and don’t say shit to you about it. Normal people aren’t asleep at five in the evening. Forgive me for not living by your fucked up ‘schedule’”—I indicated air quotes—“or whatever you call it.”

“You’d better watch your mouth.” His voice was getting lower.

“I’ve heard you say worse.”

He let loose a weird, high-pitched laugh and stormed past me, kicking my hip on his way to the sink. It wasn’t a hard kick, but it was deliberate, and I could feel the tension of unexpressed violence behind it.

There was a dangerous silence as I stared up at him, watching him fill his glass with water from the sink and then down it in loud, thirsty gulps. I grabbed another pot and started stacking smaller pots into it. He turned to look at me.

“Where’s your mother?”

“At *work*. Remember? Work?”

He pointed at me and spoke through his teeth. “You’d better watch yourself.”

“You asked.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’re starting to turn into a real little bitch, you know that?”

“And you’re turning into a deadbeat. You’re the only one in this house without a job.” I grabbed for another pan. “How pathetic that your seventeen-year-old daughter makes more money than you do.”

He kicked the pan out of my reach. I laughed humorlessly and reached around his legs for the pan. My face was right next to his shins. He could have grabbed my head and broken my nose with his knee. He probably wanted to.

I turned my back to him, shoved the pan into the back of the cabinet and then placed the stacked pots on top of it.

“I’ll tell you what’s pathetic,” he said. “How disrespectful you are to your own father.”

“Boy, you love pulling that ‘father card,’ don’t you?” I grabbed the last pan from the floor. “You think biology makes you a father?”

“Who do you think paid for that fancy private school education of yours?”

“Ooh, biology *and* money.”

“Yeah, and working myself sick so that your mother can work that *hobby* she calls a job.” My mother ran the group fitness program at the local gym. She worked “part-time,” 35 hours a week, mornings, evenings, and weekends. Lately, she’d taken on more personal training to fill up her afternoons, too.

“Dad, I’m not a fucking idiot.” I jabbed toward his vodka bottle. “Work isn’t what made you sick. And you’re not even sick, or disabled, or whatever the government calls it. Your pain isn’t anything special. You’re just another drunk, prescription drug-addicted loser who’s too chicken-shit to put himself out of his misery.” I spat the words like venom.

I turned to put the last small omelet pan in the cabinet when I felt the shock of cold water pouring over my head and shoulders. I turned to see my father, standing over me with the detachable faucet in his hands. When I turned, he shifted his aim to spray the water directly into my eyes, and, blinded, I threw the pan at his bare feet, heard him yelp, and as suddenly as the water had started, it stopped.

I tried to stand up, run toward the stairs, but he was faster.

“You fucking *bitch!*”

He grabbed my shirt and stood me up against the cabinets, then put his hand around my throat to pin me there. I froze in his grasp, half hoping he wouldn’t decide to squeeze, half wishing he would.

His face was an inch from mine. He was so close I could see my reflection in his eyes. I stared into it.

“You think it’s okay to talk to your father that way?!” He screamed and spat. His eyes were dark and glassy, and I could see every vein and wrinkle in his forehead. He had never looked more like a junkie to me in my whole life.

“Do you?!”

I didn’t answer. He let go of my throat to wind up and I took my chance, twisting underneath his arm and dashing for the stairs. He caught me by the ankle, and I fell face down, hitting my chin hard on the wood. I vaguely remembered that I would soon be on stage, delivering my senior speech on the emancipation of minors. I hoped I wouldn’t bruise.

Presently, he was climbing over me and up the stairs. He stepped on my hair. I flashed upon a memory of him trying to brush my hair when I was five and my mom was out of town. He didn’t want to pull my hair too hard, so I went to my kindergarten class with tangles.

He entered Jacqueline’s old bedroom and slammed the door shut. I swiftly tip-toed to my room to find my keys, but they weren’t there. I eased myself down the stairs and through the kitchen, nearly slipped on the wet floor, and grabbed my keys off the counter where I had left them.

The next moments are a blur. I saw him standing at the top of the stairs with a broom. I burst through the front door, down the porch stairs and through the gate, not bothering to close it. I got in my car and tried to start it. I saw him through the windshield, broom poised over his head. I threw myself out of the car and angled my body toward the upraised broom, willing to do anything to protect my only mode of escape. He pointed the stick end at me, and told me to move, or he would bash the living shit out of me *and* my car. I don’t know how long this went on.

Someone called the cops. Or maybe they were just there. My mother came home. My dad paced like an animal behind the back of the cop who questioned me. His eyes were still furious, his face still foreign. I have no idea what I said to the police.

For some reason, after the cops and my dad left, I drove to the public library and finished writing my speech.



My mother and I walk through the icy wind toward the restaurant whose name my uncle had written on the notepad that morning. Even though my coat, scarf, and hat are warm, my pants, gloves, and socks are made for Southern winters, and I am freezing.

We arrive first and snag a table away from the door. After almost a full cup of hot tea, Uncle Louis

walks in, big smile on his face. He spent the night at his boyfriend's the night we arrived, and since I was still in the guest bedroom when he came back to the apartment to change for work, we haven't seen each other yet. I've always liked him, even though we don't know each other very well. He is a writer, and lately, he's been bragging about his brief flirtation with David Sedaris, while at the same time giving the impression that David Sedaris is a narcissistic asshole.

"But then again, what man isn't, honey?" he quips. "I must admit, I had hoped either you or Jacqueline would be a lesbian so you could avoid the pitfalls of dating men."

My mother looks slightly horrified. He notices.

"Oh, Connie. It's great to be a lesbian these days, at least in Chicago. I don't know about Virginia Beach."

My uncle is a founding member of the *Chicago Free Press*, which is a highly popular LGBT newspaper in Chicago. He is my only literary family member, and so we connect on that level if on no others. He has a charmingly crass sense of humor, kind eyes, and every annoying quality of my father's minus the violence and alcoholism, but without those two attributes, the annoying quickly becomes endearing. He is easy to love, at least from a distance.

"So, my beautiful niece, do you have a boyfriend these days?" he asks.

"No, not really." I do. He's twenty-one, we're having sex, and my mother doesn't know about him. He waits tables at the restaurant where I hostess. We started dating two months ago, in November. Lately, he's been poking me in my stomach where I've gained weight from the anti-depressants. I am fully aware of the fact that he's a jerk.

"Well, then I suppose my dream is still alive!" he says brightly.

"I don't think so, sorry to disappoint," I say, slight smile on my face. "I'd know that by now, I think."

"Oh, you'd be surprised, baby. I was engaged to a woman for two years before I realized I was gay. Broke her heart, I did. I'll never forgive myself for it either."

He is speaking so swiftly and cheerfully; I barely hear the next part.

"You know, I tried to tell your dad that I was gay back when I was 24 years old, and he was only 20. He was so upset that he took me outside and punched me until I was unconscious. Left me all bloodied up in the parking lot of this bar, went inside to find my friends to take care of me, and walked his drunk ass home."

He puts his hand on my hand.

“He can be very cruel, but he could have killed me if he wanted to. He was much stronger than I was. And he didn’t hurt me any more than he felt he had to. Of course he was one hundred percent wrong, but he knew when to stop hitting me.”

I have never heard this horrifying story before.

“So, how *is* Paul?” he asks. He addresses my mother. I find this segue confusing, and I feel slightly sick. I put my fork down.

“I’m not sure,” my mother says. “We haven’t spoken in a few days. He was sober last time we spoke, says he’s going to meetings.”

“Oh good, that’s good. Alcohol has always been his demon. I know he wants to give it up. Where’s he living?” my uncle takes a big, messy bite out of his burger, smearing ketchup on his face. Everyone in my dad’s family is a messy eater. My mom picks at her nicoise salad.

“I don’t know,” she says, looking down. “Harry’s maybe? Hotels? The streets? I really have no idea where he called me from.”

“The streets?” my uncle asks incredulously. He dramatically throws his hand up to his temple. “Oh, Connie, you can’t let him live on the streets! Paul’s not the kind of man who can live on the streets. He’ll start drinking again, will probably drink himself to death!”

“What am I supposed to do, Louis? We can’t let him back in the house.” She glances at me. I avoid her gaze. My uncle finally wipes his face.

“How long has he been gone?”

“Since the fight...almost three months.”

We all silently eat for a moment. No one wants to acknowledge “the fight.” The whole idea of it is foreign to both my mother and my uncle. Neither of them witnessed it, and even though my mother kicked my dad out of the house immediately afterwards, I knew she had a hard time imagining his hands around my throat, his arm poised to strike me. And he hadn’t struck me. It was true. I was not an abused child. Not even a child, really. We all knew I was no angel. Everyone in my immediate family had experienced my famously vicious tongue-lashings. In truth, my father was right when he had said that I was turning into a little bitch. I was already a pretty big bitch, I felt. My mother had even called the way that I spoke to my father “brutal.”

“You know just the right words to wound him, Gabrielle,” she had said. “Remember, you can never take back what you say. And people don’t forget. The things you say to him sometimes are just plain *brutal*. I hope you never speak that way to anyone else.”

I think about my uncle's story, and how he mentioned that my father probably could have killed him if he wanted to, but he knew when to stop hitting him. He hurt him only as much as he felt that he "had to." And I know now why my father didn't hit me that day, even when he had the chance after I had ducked away from him.

I look up from my meal and mutter, "Well, Mom, you kicked him out. I guess you could kick him back in."

Before she can say anything, my uncle says, "Gabrielle, you have always been such a fair, objective person. I'm so proud of you. Your dad is too. He tells me all the time how proud he is of you girls."

I say nothing more and let him continue to chatter on. How can I tell him how wrong he is about me, and my father too? How can I tell him that if he had started to hit *me*, he wouldn't have stopped? And that I know this because I know without a shred of doubt that I would have done the same thing to him, if I had the physical strength? That I try to kill him with words instead, because they are the only weapons I have? That I *never* know when to stop? And when it comes to me, neither does he. So, he doesn't start.

We are more alike than I can ever admit out loud.

I gaze beyond my uncle's smiling face to the grey window. I watch the snow gusting in the pitiless wind and thank the anti-depressants for shielding me from the full emotional weight of what I know.

Anna writes fiction and nonfiction inspired by life's daily beauties, struggles, and mysteries. A high school English teacher, Anna makes it her mission to prove that those teach also can do, occasionally. She lives in her childhood neighborhood in Virginia Beach, VA with her husband, two children, and geriatric, probably bionic pit bull. Her fiction and creative nonfiction have been featured in Pigeon Review and Dandelion Revolution Press. She can be found on Instagram as @cabre_rosanna and on SubStack at cabrerrosanna.substack.com.