

# AFTER HAPPY HOUR

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND ART

THE SECOND CHANCE ISSUE  
REPRINTS FROM DEFUNCT MAGS



AFTER  
HAPPY  
HOUR  
SECOND CHANCE  
ISSUE

SPRING/SUMMER 2025 EDITORS AND READERS

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After Happy Hour Review is produced and published in Pittsburgh, PA.  
ISSN 2831-879X

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## FOREWORD

In the world of nature, things die; we all know this. The world of literary journals is no different. Despite that handful of eternal Methuselas, most of us little journals pop in and out of being all the time, along with a lot of the great writing they put out into the world. I know as well as anyone—basically the entirety of my publication history is internet dust or otherwise collecting dust, and, hell, I even published one of those long-disappeared journals for a few years myself. So, in the spirit of the hubris that comes with *After Happy Hour* now surpassing our ten-year mark, we decided to take a midnight stroll through the graveyard populated by our expired forebears and departed contemporaries for our first special submissions call issue, and give a second life to old works lost in the ether.

For this issue we asked our submitters to send us their previously published work—not simply things they’ve published but that were published originally in journals and magazines, online or otherwise, that no longer exist. The compilation we ended up with is no Frankenstein’s Monster or Pet Sematary, though cobbled together from nearly two dozen writers and those long-gone journals they originally appeared in. There are dark moments to be had, certainly, but we also have beautiful moments, thoughtful moments, quirky and funny moments, all the type of writing that *After Happy Hour* has been putting out for a decade and that we are proud to give a brand new home to. In the end, it just goes to show, good writing doesn’t have to get buried or fade away, it can survive, and, beyond that, it can find new life and thrive again for as long as there are new eyes to discover it.

Shawn Maddey  
Poetry Editor

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ANN CALANDRO

# Small Sacks of Children

BY ANDREW KOZMA

Originally published in *Daily Science Fiction* (January 2018)

THEY CARRIED THE sacks of children on their backs. They carried them to the wall. The bags were small and the wall was gigantic and unfinished, barely to the waist of the average man or woman. And we were all average men and women now, the best of us already gone to the far horizon where the smoke rose in a gentle, rosy, and unending haze.

They were determined. Every day, rain or shine, they carried the sacks of children. The children were all we had left to build the wall with, especially here on the border where there was nothing and no one anymore except those of us who were there for the wall. To build it. To feed those building it. To entertain those coming to build it. To forgive those who carried the sacks of children.

I worked fire pits overnight, cooking giant pots of gumbo for the next day's meals, taking all the ingredients we could find and throwing them in. The food was nutritious and the rice was filling. The work was hard. Watching them work was hard, the way they cradled the heads and whispered comforts to the children. They went to great pains to make sure every child's face was exposed to the air, but it wasn't always possible. In the night, tending the fires for the gumbo, I stayed close to the flames. The whisper of burning wood drowned out the muffled cries for light.

Eventually, the children stopped talking. They stopped asking questions. They stopped trying to give us their names. Then new sacks of children arrived, and the voices began again.

The children weren't real children. We had to remind ourselves of this over and over again. They were androids or cyborgs or something I didn't quite really understand, organic but designed in a lab, mechanical and produced in a factory, their tiny faces and tiny brains downloaded with the personalities of children who'd lived and died too early. They were created to fill the void of those who couldn't have children, or those who had sent their adult children over the wall to protect us, or those who wanted children but didn't want to go through the painful, dangerous, and inefficient process.

But there were too many of them, too many children, much more of a supply than could ever meet the demand. The factories, already staffed with unwanted children, never stopped churning out children. Scientists had perfected recycling, and so everything we didn't want could be made into the raw materials for children. And when the child walked into your life, you couldn't tell it had once been banana peels and used motor oil, chicken bones and ground-up toothbrushes, denatured alcohol and medical waste. They smiled just like any child. They smelled as innocent as air.

We'd programmed them not to complain. We ate and they watched, and we built and they watched, and we waited and they watched. Their cheeks hollowed as they stared at us from the wall, the wall settling as they lost body weight, their compact bodies becoming even more compact. The wall grew stronger as they grew weaker, as the gaps between them closed.

On the side facing that flowering horizon we never wanted to reach us, the children's arms were tucked in. On our side, the arms were left free to stretch out towards us. The argument was that when the wall was higher, we could use them to climb to the top as we continued to

build, stepping from small hand to small hand.

Every night, once the gumbo was ready and before I needed to start on the rice, when all the workers were asleep and the children were, too, I sat next to the wall. I took a tiny hand in my own and whispered my son's name.

# Dolly

BY RACHEL HENDERSON

Originally published by The Writer's Arena (January 2015)

MICAH'S LUNCH WAS chocolate rice cereal drowned in root beer. The kids on TV always ate their cereal with milk, but Micah suspected that was their parents' doing. No red-blooded boy would pick milk over root beer.

The cereal danced and sputtered. Micah dropped his face closer to the bowl so he could feel the bursts of soda, wet across his nose and cheeks—tiny, carbonated kisses.

A man with horse teeth and a loud tie was bellowing on the TV. "Come down for the Fourth of July blowout sale! No money down! All trade-ins accepted! Best prices in town!" Micah's free hand crept over to the remote and changed the channel. *Weather. Click.* More commercials. *Click.* Old cartoons. Fine. He slouched over the table and shoveled cereal mush into his mouth, drained the bowl, and pushed it away from him.

The hands on the kitchen clock had moved to the right. Micah frowned at the clockface, counting the notches, double checking with his fingers, and decided that it was well past noon. Sunlight was thick and bright on the kitchen counters, and the mockingbirds outside were audible even above the television. He hoisted himself onto the old milk can next to the oven and peered out the window. The driveway was empty.

The woman was still gone.

Teatime was at noon, always. Noon had passed. There would be no teatime today. Micah mulled over that sweet fact and grinned. A day with no teatime was better than Christmas.

He jumped down from the milk can and glanced over at the television, where five black-and-white cartoon dogs cavorted across the screen. It wouldn't get any better. TV was always best at night, when the really juicy stuff came on.

His favorite video games were in the Sailboat Room, but he'd spent all morning in there, and his thumbs were sore.

There was an excellent couch in the Forest Room, one with soft velvet fabric and plush cushions. He yawned and thought about sinking into that couch, chocolate rice cereal burbling in his stomach, and taking a short nap.

The cartoon dogs had all piled onto a bicycle, one stacked on top of the other, and were barreling down a poorly drawn road, the angry dog catcher in hot pursuit. Micah picked at some crust underneath his nostril and nodded at the dogs. Naps and video games were for the rain and snow. It was a fine day for a bike ride.

GRAVEL CRUNCHED AS Micah pedaled down the driveway. His training wheels always got stuck until he made it past the barn, where the tiny stones gave way to flat packed dirt. He sucked in a lungful of air and heaved against the pedals, ignoring the burn in his thighs. A gust of hot prairie wind kicked dust into his eyes. He wiped his face and pumped his legs, and after another minute, all four wheels of his Huffy met solid ground. The driveway stretched infinitely in front of him. He squeezed the hand brake and looked over his shoulder.

The house was terrible from a distance. A blight of mismatched windows, faded planks and sloping shingles, it rose out of the parched fields like a shipwreck. Massive cottonwoods lined the west side, with branches so tall a boy could break his neck just dreaming about them,

but still the house's third story inched above them, and the attic above that, with a cupola perched atop the roof, crowned by a corn-shaped weathervane.

The woman barely spoke to Micah anymore, but when she did, it was usually about the house and how there was none like it in the county. None larger, none more majestic. Her father had poached three of the best farmhouses around, moved them to his property and cobbled them together, tripling rooms and gables and doors until he had a real castle.

It was a haunted castle, he knew that much; he'd seen a ghost face in the attic window his first day there. The face was flat and pale, and disappeared when Micah stared up at it. It was just a face, and he never saw it again, but nobody lived in the house but him and the woman, so he knew what it had to be.

He turned back around and squinted into the endless farmland until he made out the shape of the nearest oil pump. The oil pump was the farthest he'd ever gone, before getting too tired, too thirsty, too bored to continue. He took a deep breath, tightened his grip on the handlebar, and pushed off.

Five minutes later, the chain seized up and his bike pitched forward. Micah tumbled onto the dirt road and lay there, knees bleeding, whimpering. The smooth blue sky gazed back at him. He felt like he was being cheated, denied the comfort that the TV kids always got when they bled and cried and wrecked their bikes, so he sobbed louder.

Nothing happened. Micah picked himself up from the ground, kicked the bike until his toes throbbed, and stomped back up the driveway. The Huffy was old anyway, and too small for his growing legs. He decided that his new bike would be electric green, with white tires. And no more training wheels.

DARKNESS SLITHERED ALONG the edges of the fields, and the woman was coming back. Micah spied her headlights from his leafy perch in

the crabapple tree and swung around to the other side of the trunk. It was the longest she'd ever been gone, and he wanted a secret look at what she'd brought him. The longer her trips, the better the presents. He plucked a handful of leaves and smashed them between his palms until they were streaked green.

Micah held his breath and peeked around the trunk as the old car groaned to a stop and the woman stepped out. Her hair was as tall and red and curly as ever, but her suit was different. It was sewn from blue fabric, with white feathers tacked along the hem and a long column of thick, golden buttons. Micah blinked at the suit. He remembered the buttons from when he was younger, practically a baby, and how he tried to pry them off her. They'd looked like real treasure to him, pirate's gold.

The woman leaned against the car door and rubbed her calves. Her cobwebbed face sagged against her collar, but a smile pricked at the corners of her lips. Micah squirmed on the branch, hoping she wouldn't show her teeth. He hated her soft, orange teeth.

After a moment, however, she straightened up and walked toward the rear passenger door. Micah's eyes strained against tinted windows, searching for boxes, toys, anything new. His tongue felt thick and dry. He willed the woman's arthritic frame to move faster.

At last, she opened the door. Her mottled arms reached inside and reemerged with a small child. A boy. Towheaded and bloodless, with eyes so milky blue they cut through the shadows, the boy squirmed free and stumbled backward, away from the woman. His thin hands twined around the collar of his sailor suit.

Micah's stomach lurched. The boy was alive, moving, and that really was something, but that hair, those eyes, the suit with its crisp white sleeves and plump round cap—it was all too much. Micah ran a hand through his own pale yellow hair and fingered his scalp where bobby pins once secured that same sailor cap. The cap was retired when he outgrew the rest of the suit. There had been a spill too, an overturned cup of tea that drenched the right lapel. Micah dug his fingers into the

bark and leaned over the branch. Yes, there was the lapel, and there was the stain, beige and splotchy.

The woman grasped the boy's arm and bent over, whispering into his ear. The boy jerked back, but his eyes glowed and the sharp pink point of his tongue darted over his lips. There was a crusty red spot near his chin, a scab, and Micah recalled how he first arrived at this house with scabs on his face. Scabs on his face and hands and stomach. He couldn't remember how exactly the scabs started, but he did remember being awfully itchy.

The sailor boy dragged his tiny feet as the woman pulled him forward, away from the car, into the house. Micah scratched his neck and sagged against the tree trunk. He'd forgotten all about his presents.

DINNER WAS SERVED. Micah tiptoed into the sweet warmth of the kitchen and slunk behind the open pantry door. His stomach gave two quick, angry growls.

"Down," the woman said. "Down." She pushed the boy's head forward until it was parallel with the tabletop and plucked the cap from his hair. He was sniffing, and there were pink rings underneath his eyes.

"Tonight, we'll have the special blessing," she murmured, her fingernails stroking that fine yellow hair. "Would you like that?"

The boy's shoulders jerked and heaved. The woman clasped her hands, and her eyes rolled back until they were two white slits carved into her sallow face. Micah felt an odd buzz in his ears, like a bumblebee wrapped in cotton, and realized that the television was turned off.

"Do not let your heart be troubled. You believe in God, so believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" She turned to the boy and let her knuckles graze his sunken cheek. "Bless this food to our use, and us to thy service. Fill our hearts with grateful praise. Amen."

The boy muttered something, shot the woman a wild look, and snatched a fish stick off his plate. He ate it with both hands, crumbs tumbling onto his lap, and licked the grease off his fingers. Micah sneered. The boy might look like he did, dress like he used to, but fish sticks were pure baby food.

Micah stepped out from behind the door and took long, loping strides to the freezer. The woman gave him that same cold clay stare and pursed her lips. The boy's mouth dropped open, exposing a wad of masticated fish.

"Fish sticks taste like puke. I'm having Rocky Road for dinner," Micah announced, and flung open the freezer door.

The boy dropped the stub end of his second fish stick and hitched in a breath as Micah opened up the gallon carton of ice cream. His eyes darted between the ice cream and the woman, who waved her hand.

"You can have whatever you want in this house."

The boy jumped down and scabbled over to Micah, who held the ice cream aloft and kicked at the tiny, searching sailor arms.

"I'm not sharing! Get your own Rocky Road." He glared at the woman as he said this, willing her to shout, snatch the carton from his hands, slap him across the face, but when she stood up from the table, it was to take the dishes to the sink. The strange blue fabric of her dress rustled as she scrubbed their forks, and the back of her head was fixed forward. She didn't budge when Micah delivered a vicious stomp to the boy's toes, or when the boy gave a feral howl and latched onto Micah's wrist with his baby incisors, or when both of them collided with the milk can and sent it rolling across the linoleum. She just scrubbed, her eyes locked on the soupy darkness outside.

It seemed like months since she'd said a word to him. Even during teatime, the most she did anymore was gaze out the window and nibble on her cucumber sandwich. And now, disappearing all day and coming back with this boy. Was he supposed to be Micah's present? It was a terrible trick to play, Micah knew that, and he'd heard just the word for

it on the police shows.

"You conned me!" he shrieked, smacking the boy on the cheek with the ice cream carton. "I've been conned!"

The woman turned around. "Conned you?"

"I wanted a bike, not him! I wanted a new bike, and he's a crappy present." He let the carton fall to the floor and the boy attacked it, snarling and tearing at the cardboard until his hands were sticky with marshmallow and his lips slick with chocolate.

The woman's nostrils flared. "Tomorrow. You'll get your present tomorrow. After teatime."

"Is he coming too?" Micah spat.

The woman picked up the milk can and carried it back to its usual spot. Purple splotches rose up her slack chicken neck as her fingers traced a fresh dent, near the lid. Her mouth was a hard, rouged streak across her face. Micah stomped his foot.

"I hope he has to come because I *hate* teatime."

Her irises were swollen brown discs. She looked at the milk can, at the scarfing boy, at the softly ticking clock on the wall, and turned back to the sink to finish the dishes.

Micah swiped at the boy's backside with his sneaker and sprinted from the kitchen, sobbing, coughing on hot snot. There wasn't much he remembered about his life before this house, but he did remember the feeling of never getting what he wanted and being punished anyway.

He ran faster, up the stairs, and didn't stop until he got to the America Room on the third floor.

Truthfully, he wanted to go all the way up to the attic, with its dusty treasures and secret hiding places, but that's where he'd seen the ghost face in the window. He didn't think he could bear it after dark.

CURLED UP UNDERNEATH the bed, Micah dreamed that he was climbing up the milk can again, but this time it was the size of an oil pump, and

its top was missing. He fell inside and landed on a buttery corn cob. The water was warm, and even though he was already asleep, he felt sleepy.

THE JIGGLING DOOR handle awoke him the next morning, well past dawn.

"Hello," the boy's voice called. "Hello."

Micah crawled over to the door, flipped the latch and turned the handle. The boy was alone and in a fresh outfit, this one light yellow with lace cuffs and collar. He looked closer to the cradle than ever.

"What," Micah said.

The boy breathed softly.

"Did she tell you to come get me?"

The boy shook his head.

"Then what?"

"Just looking," the boy said. "She said I could see all the rooms if I want."

"Oh."

The boy sidled past Micah and looked around the America Room. He seemed unimpressed with the flag quilt and patriotic lampshade, but the stuffed bald eagle mounted on the wall grabbed his attention. He walked underneath it and jumped, fingers stretching upward, but only caught air.

"When did that bird die?" he asked. Micah shrugged, and noted that there were two Twinkies stuffed in the waistband of the boy's yellow shorts.

"Give me a Twinkie."

The boy spun around. "No. They're mine."

"She'll give you another one," Micah said. "Give me those and go get some more."

"No. I want these."

"How old are you anyway?" Micah asked.

The boy's lower lip plumped out. "I'm already four."

"Well, I'm already six, and that means I'm in charge. Give me a Twinkie or I'll break your stupid nose."

The boy removed a Twinkie from his waistband, looked straight into Micah's eyes, and tightened his fist. Cream spurted out and filled the plastic package. Micah howled and started forward, but the bell sounded. He froze.

"Teatime," he said.

The boy wasn't fazed by this statement, or by the tinkling bell that echoed up from the second story landing. He mashed and twisted and pulled at the Twinkie until the plastic tore and a glob of pulverized cake fell onto the red carpet. Micah grabbed the boy's shoulder and hauled him out the door.

"Let go! Let go!" the boy screamed and flopped around. The second Twinkie escaped from his shorts and flew over the banister. The soft, delicate timbre of the bell was relentless.

"It's teatime," Micah said. "That bell means it's teatime, and the bell won't stop until we get there. You better learn this if you don't want to go back wherever you came from."

The boy ceased his struggle. Whispery gibberish leaked from his mouth, directed at the ceiling, where his eyes scanned back and forth. The scabs on his chin had been recently picked, with a fresh layer of amber crust that stretched to his lower lip. Micah squinted at the child's blue, watery, stupid eyes and felt a little sorry for him. He had to wear that ugly yellow outfit, after all, while Micah could wear ratty jeans and sneakers, because none of the woman's play clothes fit anymore. And the boy probably never had to go to teatime at his old house with his old family. Micah never had.

But still, those were two perfectly good Twinkies, gone forever, and Micah was the bigger boy, the older boy, the better boy. He tightened his grip on the boy's shoulder and trudged down the staircase, his footsteps marking time with the ting-ting-ting of the woman's bell.

IT WASN'T THE bitter black tea or the dry, crumbly sugar cookies that made the little boy cry. Nor was it the ancient turntable in the corner that piped out swing music, marred by the needle's rasp on the vinyl. He kept his composure when he was told to sit still in the cramped wooden chair, and not speak unless directly addressed, and chew with his mouth closed. His forehead wrinkled at the two hundred dead glass eyes that lined the Dolly Room, girl dolls and boy dolls, old and broken, new and mint, smiles and frowns, but he didn't break down.

The bonnet was the tipping point. He squirmed when the woman crammed the white cotton bonnet on his head, twisting and jerking it down until it was snug. Then she cinched the strings underneath his chin, and it was all over. The boy hiccupped twice, shook his head, and wailed. Fat tears tumbled down his cheeks and splattered on the plate of ginger biscuits. His legs flogged the underside of the table and he tore at the expertly tied bonnet strings with shaky fingers. Micah drew his arms across his filthy t-shirt and smirked. He remembered his first teatime; he'd sobbed and whined when the woman added a dash of milk to his teacup. He knew what came next.

The woman's hand sailed across the table and cracked against the boy's left cheekbone. The boy gasped as he fell from the chair and hit the carpet with a gentle thud. Micah bent over and peered under the table; the boy's shoulders shook, and his face was a deep red where she'd hit him, but his blue eyes were clear again. Good, Micah thought. The boy would learn.

"Hush, Dolly," the woman said as she scooped up the quivering yellow form and replaced it in the chair. She placed a cup and saucer in his hands and eased them up to his lips. The boy sipped, eyes glued to the door, breath coming in haggard gulps. The woman smiled and, stroking his hair, murmured something low and comforting into his bruised ear. Micah sipped his own awful tea and thought how glad he was, how happy, that he wasn't a baby anymore.

The boy jumped up from the table and darted out of the room.

Micah gnawed on his tongue and watched him go. The first teatime was deceptively short. Micah's had been just him and the woman, and fifteen minutes later he was outside, kicking a brand new soccer ball and rolling around in the grass while the woman hustled in and out of the kitchen, preparing their dinner. Potatoes, corn and meat boiled in that big milk can, with a big fire underneath it. She'd warned Micah to stay away from the flames and the burning can, but he couldn't resist throwing a stick at it. The stick burned up with everything else.

He lowered his cup and saucer to the table, thinking how the woman had let him eat until he was sick, and then she let him eat again. It was the first night in his life he didn't go to bed hungry. The corn was his favorite; he liked it smeared with margarine and covered with salt. But the meat was tender and peppery, and he loved that too.

The woman stood and moved behind Micah.

"Don't you want your present, Dolly?"

The needle slid into the soft flesh of his neck, and the liquid was inside him. Micah yelped once and sagged against the hard back of his chair. His arms and legs were heavy, like they'd been dipped in warm cement.

She led him down the stairs. He knew he was moving because the wallpaper was blurred and uneven, and he could feel the carpet push up against his feet, but that was all he knew. Moving. Down. Her fingers under his armpits, her orange teeth flashing over his shoulder. Moving.

The kitchen table was awash in yellow and green. He was sitting at it, but didn't remember sitting. Corn – corn everywhere. The woman's wrinkled arms moved like a spider's, stripping the green husks away and dumping the juicy cobs in a pile. Micah tipped forward until his head connected with a pile of potatoes. The woman's hands were there, propping him back up, rolling the potatoes together, pinching his cheek. He opened his mouth – a thread of saliva unspooled down his chin.

Her teeth were so, so orange when she laughed. Micah wanted to cry, but the muscles wouldn't work.

Potatoes, corn. Salt, pepper. Knives. Milk can, corner. Firewood. Micah's head lolled. His eyes moved where they could.

Potatoes, corn, and—

Potatoes, corn, and—

*Meat.*

Not an ounce of meat on the table. Not a single bone, not a speck of fat.

Micah's legs flexed and strained against themselves. Only six years old, but some part of him understood.

"Mmmm," he tried, "mmmmee!" His tongue was broken.

The woman laughed again, nodding, ruffling his yellow hair.

"Mmmmeeee!"

"Yes. You."

She turned his chair so he could watch the television. That same Fourth of July car commercial. Micah breathed, breathed, *breathed*, and then his throat felt too full for air. The salesman's eyes were popping, and Micah's were sinking. To his left, the soft snick-snick-snick of the knife cleaving potatoes. To his right, the bright summer sun and the new boy, playing with Micah's toys.

Behind him, the milk can.

Ahead: the television. Micah stared at the screen until his brain felt as fuzzy as his body. The air smelled like corn—and then, once the blade harrowed into his neck, it smelled like nothing at all.

# Why Spiders Will Always Find You

BY AIMEE R. CERVENKA

Originally published in *The Ampersand Review* (June 2013)

The signs seem to be everywhere.  
On the side of the road, the battered sole  
of a child's shoe. A snake sliding  
into the grass. You lift stray hairs  
from the sofa, let them drift  
to the carpet where they coil  
unseen. But your charms  
won't protect you from the things  
that seep under doors and into  
your dreams, things that follow you home  
like too many strangers on the street.  
Every building you've ever entered is the same,  
they just rearrange the rooms,  
change the keys and the names.  
Still you end up in a dead-end stairwell,  
wondering if you've found  
what you're looking for and who is searching.  
You crouch in the shadows in case  
you are hiding, stay put in case someone  
is supposed to find you.

RIDE THE SNAKE



KEVIN BODNIZA

# quīnquāgintā sex

BY RILEY WINCHESTER

Originally published in *LIGEIA Magazine* (Spring 2021)

i

My mother looks for my father every day. Depending on who you ask, he's in different places. He's not lost, he hasn't run away, he hasn't disappeared. It's a different kind of search. My mother looks for my father every day not in body but in spirit. She's been looking for over five years now.

ii

Before my father's organs destroyed themselves with cancer, before his body was scarred with tumors and stripped of muscle, before bones outlined every angle and turn of his once sturdy, olive-skinned exterior, before his eyes were jaundiced and sunken in like ships at the floor of the sea, before his cells were soaked in opioids to kill the pain, and before he took his final shallow passive breath lying comatose in a hospice bed, he made a promise to my mother. He promised her that once he made it to the afterlife, he would give her a sign, and that sign would mean it's all real—Heaven, eternity—and he made it there and he would be waiting for her. The sign, they agreed, was the number fifty-six—the vehicle ID number of my father's old police cruiser, and a sign random and uncoincidental enough for my mother to have no doubt that it came from her dead husband.

iii

Isaiah 56:

*Thus says the Lord:*

*Preserve justice*

*and do righteousness,*

*for My salvation is about to come*

*and My righteousness to be revealed.*

*Blessed is the man who does this,*

*and the son of man who takes hold of it,*

*who keeps from polluting the Sabbath*

*and keeps his hand from doing any evil.*

iv

June 2020: My mother tells me about fifty-six and her search. I had never known before. She had kept it all a secret.

v

My mother looks for fifty-six everywhere—obsessively, tirelessly, desperately. She looks for it on the sides of police cruisers, on public transportation, on company vehicles, on license plates, on airplanes. She looks for it on coins, on her receipts, on the price ticker at the gas pump, on the TV, on social media, on the games she plays on her phone, anywhere the number may be and my father's spiritual presence alongside it as its harbinger. But she sees it nowhere.

vi

Why is she doing this to herself?

vii

I look through an old website dedicated to biblical numbers. It's clunky and most of its links don't work (it looks like it was created in the late aughts), but I find a page dedicated entirely to the number fifty-six. There are eighty-two comments on the post. The top comment is from an anonymous user, posted in late 2013, and titled "This can help all of us." In it, the anonymous user describes how they feel as if the number fifty-six has been haunting them for years. They can't seem to escape it; it shows up everywhere they look. Recently, however, they say they've turned to God and it's gotten better.

viii

Perhaps the waiting is killing her.

ix

I scroll down.

A comment posted by another anonymous user, this one titled "56?", reads:

*So I lost my nephew and at his funeral they told us to close our eyes and let god speak to us and I swear I heard him tell me 56 and I'm not sure what he means by 56 but it's almost been 56 days since the funeral but I'm so confused.*

x

I find a book titled *The 150 Most Important Bible Verses* and flip to the fifty-sixth verse.

Corinthians 4:18:

*We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.*

xi

Eternal, the last word echoes, eternal.

xii

I too start to look for fifty-six. I think I've been doing it unconsciously ever since I heard about the promise.

xiii

I think I do it for my mother.

xiv

Beat writer William S. Burroughs is considered the first person to believe in the twenty-three enigma—a belief in the cosmic and preternatural significance of the number twenty-three.

xv

Perhaps she is searching for an assertion of faith.

xvi

Burroughs claimed he knew a ship captain named Clark who bragged that he had sailed for twenty-three years without an accident. Then on that very day Captain Clark's ship was involved in an accident, killing him and everybody else aboard. Later that evening Burroughs heard on the radio that an airplane had crashed in Florida. The captain of the plane was also named Clark, and the flight was flight number twenty-three.

xvii

I Google "flight 56" out of curiosity. The first result is Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 56.

xviii

Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 56 was a passenger flight from Nakhchivan to Baku. Fifty-two people died when it crashed on the night of December 5, 1995.

The date sticks out to me.

xix

My father died December 6, 2015.

Almost twenty years to the very date.

xx

An investigation into the crash determined that it was caused by defective spare parts used on the plane's engine mounts.

xxi

And even if he did die on the twentieth anniversary, what would that mean? He had no connection to it. He'd never been to Azerbaijan, probably couldn't even spell it or spot it on a map.

xxii

It would have only been a coincidence of dates and numbers. Nothing more.

xxiii

I read more comments on the biblical numbers site. In a comment titled "56 demonic dream" a user named Jen writes:

*I had a dream last night. In it I was running and some [sic] was saying Kill all 56 and get that bitch (me) to [sic]. I saw a bloodied evil looking dog (unsure of what type) on a leash and he was trying to get off the leash to get me. I am a little afraid of this dream but not enough to stop me praying to God. I have this battle between God and the devil my entire life. God pulls me to the right and the devil to the left. So far God has always won but I have often wondered what and who I was.*

xxiv

Since my father's death, I've had only one dream about him. When I woke from it, I was so stunned I went straight to my journal and wrote down every detail I could remember. The date of the entry is January 9, 2020.

I was at the front of the neighborhood that I grew up in, where the entrance to the neighborhood and the road meet. I was with a group

of people, but I couldn't make out who any of them were. They all sort of looked like specters or just blurry silhouettes of people who looked somewhat familiar to me. We were all drinking and milling around—doing nothing, really. I had a decent buzz but still had my wits about me. At any moment, if needed to, I could take a couple deep breaths and become adequately sober enough to handle just about anything. Then my dad—who, mind you, is dead and has been for over four years now—drove from the direction of my house to the entrance of the neighborhood (so he was leaving). He was confused and didn't quite know what he was doing, where he was, or even who he was. It was how he was in his final days, when he had been administered so many painkillers and sedatives that his mind was a morass of blankness. I stopped him and tried to get him to return home. He assured me he was fine and that he was just going to run some errands. I then sat in the car with him and continued trying to persuade him to let me drive him and the car back home and put him back in bed. He resisted and assured me again that he was fine and didn't need my help. All the while, the faceless figures continued to mingle and drink around us. They didn't seem to care about anything going on between my dad and me. My mom showed up out of nowhere, and I tried to recruit her help to get my dad back home. Once again, my dad resisted. And without a fight, my mom acquiesced and said he'd be fine on his own—he didn't need her, according to her. I tried one more time to convince him to let me take him back home. But he became very serious and said, "You're having fun, aren't you? Let me be. Go back and have fun." And I told him I wasn't. I wasn't having any fun. All I wanted was to take care of him and go back to his room and spend time with him and talk to him until he fell asleep. And even if that was the last time he ever fell asleep, I would know that I spent the final moments with him, the moments before the end, the moments that stick with us forever and seem to haunt us for the rest of our days if we spend them the wrong way. I don't know how

or why, but I eventually just stopped. I got out of the car and left. He drove off and I didn't even bother to watch him drive away. I turned around and walked back to where I had been before. When I got back, one of the formless figures handed me a beer. I drank it. That's the last thing I remember from the dream.

xxv

When my father's cancer weakened his body and spirit, he was bedridden. My mother lay alongside him for hours and hours during the day and slept alongside him every night. Their bedroom door stayed closed most of the time. During the day, they talked. What they talked about, I don't know. But I could always hear the soft silhouettes of their voices through the walls, never quite able to discern any words. Sometimes at night I could still hear their voices over the hum of my father's oxygen concentrator.

xxvi

On one particularly bad day my father was admitted into hospice care and put into a medically induced coma.

xxvii

I never heard my mother and father speak to each other again.

xxviii

No matter where I look, I can't seem to find fifty-six. I'll admit, I was incredulous when my mother first said she never saw it anywhere.

xxix

But now I understand. It's nowhere to be found.

xxx

7 X 8, I punch into the calculator on my phone.

There it is.

28 X 2.

37 + 19.

xxxi

It only shows up when I create it.

It never occurs naturally.

xxxii

I read three books on Numerology in an attempt to understand fifty-six and what it means, in an attempt to understand my mother.

xxxiii

The books are nothing what I expect.

The number fifty-six is never once mentioned.

xxxiv

Delusions of reference are when someone experiences a coincidental or nondescript, quotidian event and believes it has some significant personal meaning to it.

Like seeing fifty-six and believing it confirms the existence of an afterlife, and that your husband or your father are there.

xxxv

But what's the opposite of it?

What does it mean when someone *doesn't* experience a coincidental or nondescript, quotidian event so much to the point that they think *that* is the significant personal meaning?

xxxvi

My family wasn't religious. We didn't go to church, never really talked about it.

xxxvii

This all changed when my father started dying.

xxxviii

We started attending church every Sunday, and I hated it.

I hated sitting in the stiff, suffocating pews and bowing my head and pretending to pray and looking around the room as everybody stood and sang along to the lyrics projected on the front wall. I hated the prayer requests. I hated how every week there was one dedicated to my family. I hated being the center of attention for that brief moment as everybody closed their eyes, bowed their heads, and asked the Lord to look over my family and me, to give us strength, to help us find peace.

xxxix

56  
 56  
 56 56 56 56 56 56 56 56 56

xl

I understand it all now.

I understand it all now and I feel selfish and horrible for how I thought back then.

xli

“There is an order in the universe, from the atom to the solar system,” one of the Numerology books begins.

This order, according to the book, is found in numbers.

xlii

Another book claims that Numerology is a part of your “spiritual awakening” and will help you get in touch with your “higher self and true purpose.”

“Are you prepared for an exciting journey...a journey that will take you to the heart of your inner self?” the third book asks.

xliii

I wonder the first time my mother looked for fifty-six.

I can recall, with detail, the moments surrounding my father’s death.

xliv

My mother and I left hospice after staying in the room with my father for five days and four nights. He lay comatose during those five days. A hospice nurse told us that sometimes patients subconsciously hold onto living if someone is in the room with them. They don’t want to die in front of someone, so their body keeps fighting, and it prolongs the suffering.

So we left.

We went home for the first time in five days. My two sisters were there, too. We had been home for no more than an hour when I was sitting in the kitchen and the phone rang. I watched the screen on our landline phone light up a pale green and display the word “Identifying.”

I waited for the second ring, when the caller ID would come through.

On the second ring it read, “Trillium Woods Hospice,” the name of the hospice care facility my father was in.

I knew what the call meant.

And I answered the phone.

xlv

The funny thing about grief and the moments right after a loss is that they’re never what we want them to be.

They’re never as deeply and profoundly poetic as we’d wish, as we’ve seen in Hollywood and in fiction.

Perhaps the boy, after seeing his father’s corpse in the hospice bed, steps outside and the rain clears and a rainbow appears and paints the sky off in the distance and it glimmers off the boy’s eyes and it reminds him of some metaphor about something beautiful after something ugly and tragic.

Or when the soon-to-be widow is spending her final moments with her husband she sees a chickadee outside the window land softly on a

frail little branch hanging from a snow-coated sugar maple, and a small plume of snow dusts off it and falls whimsically to the ground, and the bird rests there so serenely and so at ease with the world, and the widow takes it as a sign that the bird represents her husband and how he will soon be at peace in someplace beyond.

xlvi

But it's never really like this.

xlvii

We were in a McDonald's drive-thru.

My mother, two sisters, and I had just visited my father for the last time. We visited only his body. He had been dead almost an hour before we finally saw him.

After we said our final goodbyes to the last remaining vestige of my father, we left hospice to let the nurses take care of his body. Outside, the snow was pushed into uninspired little piles; scabs of gray ice filled the parking lot. The sky looked tired, and the wind was flapping just cold and just hard enough to wet your eyes and piss you off. Everything about it was so gray.

I don't know who said it on the way home, but someone finally broke the silence of the car ride and said they were hungry.

We all sort of nodded, tacitly said, "Me too, yeah."

There was a McDonald's up ahead.

xlviii

We waited at the second window for our food to come out.

"Dad's dead," my younger sister said, "and we're at McDonald's."

"Not our fault he died around lunchtime," my mother said. "Besides, who says what we should be doing? There's no manual for mourning."

xlix

I wonder if she looked for fifty-six on that McDonald's receipt.

l

I wish she had found it in that drive-thru.

li

Little did I know Numerology mostly deals with birth dates and single digit numbers.

Death is of little significance to Numerology, and so is fifty-six. The books only serve as a distraction.

I start decoding myself using Numerology.

lii

I'm a ruling number eleven, which means my life's purpose is to "guide humanity into the emerging age of awareness."

Other ruling number elevens include Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Prince Charles, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Sir Edmund Hillary, and John Glenn.

I'm a day number six, which is the number of creativity.

My life path number is two, my destiny number is seven, my soul number is three, my personality numbers are four and twenty-two, my attitude number is three, I have no karmic debt.

liii

Has this been about me the whole time?

liv

There's a warning at the back of one of the books that reads, "I encourage you to observe numbers everywhere, but know that Numerology can become an obsession. Always use Numerology to complement your life and offer divine insight and guidance."

lv

It was the summer of 1993 and my mother was standing on a pier in Lake Michigan when she first saw my father. He and a friend were coasting through the channel in his piddly little speed boat when my mother's friend turned to her and said, "Those guys are cute, we should get on their boat."

My mother hesitated, let out a nervous laugh. She was innocent, demure, didn't take many chances in her twenty years of living.

"C'mon," her friend said, and she jumped into the channel and started swimming toward the boat.

After a couple seconds of trepidation, my mother rushed over to the ladder on the side of the pier and descended into the water. She swam after her friend, after the boat, fighting to keep her hair—a delicate almond curtain that hung just past her shoulders—out of the lake and dry for when she met the two mystery men on the boat.

By the time she reached the boat, her friend was already on and talking to my father's friend. My father helped my mother up on to the boat.

"I'm Randy," he said.

He was tall; she only came up to his chest. She looked up at him. His face was sharp and faintly reddened by the sun.

"I'm Tara," she said.

lvi

Sometimes we create our own signs.



# After, at the Kitchen Table

BY KELI OSBORN

Originally published in *The Quotable* Issue 21 (2016)

On the fourth day  
    (after the handshakes and half-hugs,  
        the sitting and greeting and sitting  
after introductions to a cousin called Brother, a brother  
    named Lost Uncle  
after music  
after the blues of visitation: her last gown's sheen,  
    melting snow through a solitary window  
after the vigil  
after the sealed casket and funeral Mass,  
    expressway to Calvary  
after weeping or scorning the weeping  
after dirt  
after the slow, silent ride  
after returning to casseroles and stale cookies),

differing stories spill from identical mouths—  
the oldest:

*I found her housekeeping smocks  
in the hallway closet. Ruined her knees,  
but she loved that job.*

then the next:

*What are you talking about, she hated  
every minute.*

Their arguments spin until someone mentions  
the last service, same cemetery,  
same ride back:

*Remember when he came home stinking drunk  
and she chased him with a knife round the kitchen?*

After half-laughter,  
the youngest looking into his hands:

*You guys don't even know.  
You left. You left me behind.*

# Pet Project

BY ALAYNA FRANKENBERRY

Originally published in *Weave Magazine* (2009)

I built the bear from what I knew of horses. I didn't know running except towards joy, so I molded his legs as sinewed spindles. When he was done, his mouth seemed too long, the slope of his spine distinctly equine but when I called him Bear he answered. I fed him warm milk in the morning and biscuits before bed. He slept beside me with his muzzle nuzzled into the hollow of my chest. We lived alone, Bear and I, in a wooden house away from town. Bear seemed to like this, would tread the perimeter till the grass dried in a halo. When the rain came, we found ourselves with a moat. Bear seemed pleased with this, would huddle closer to me in bed, would wake before me and watch me shudder in sleep. The truth is, I didn't know horses. I had no books but mirrors and a few yellowed photographs of what I'd left. Bear grew and I noticed things. A familiar glint in his eye I must have carved, a restless twitch about his mouth. One morning I awoke to find Bear's clawed paw on my naked thigh, three lines of dried blood he'd drawn in sleep. I had to chase him out then, through the door and across the moat where he didn't pause. I had fixed his eyes forward like mine so he could never look back.

# A Genealogy of Trees

BY BENJAMIN BLATTBERG

Originally published in *Achten Tan* (2020)

*O BRIGHT STAR, hear and learn:*

*The explorer plant sends out questing vines towards light and water. When a questing vine finds such a thriving place, it plants a seedling in a nest of its own nourishing leaves. The questing vine buries itself, the tip of the vine splitting into roots that intertwine with the seedling's own. This seedling will grow and send forth questing vines of its own, but never lose its connection to the parent vine which bore it, which in turn connects to its own parent, and so on.*

*In this way, the plants are both alive and part of a greater living web, nourishing each other: transporting water to the thirsty in the dry places and sap to the hungry in the dark places. Thus an explorer plant colony may cover an entire countryside, and, so say the Elvish professors, there is one colony in the northern forests bigger than the span a wild horse could run in a season.*

*O bright star, now tell me what you have heard and learned.*

Serrah finished the litany on explorer plants and waited for her teenage daughter to repeat the lesson, but Cat didn't seem to be paying attention.

Cat's foot trailed in the water behind the raft, in the silt kicked up by the turtles' movement through this narrow part of the river. Serrah

watched her, saw that when Cat turned her attention to the world around her, she looked at one of the river boys piloting the turtle caravan that carried them. Serrah watched her daughter see him, his arms sculpted from the work of keeping the turtles on course, but his wrists supple and his movements delicate as he manned his pole.

Serrah laughed at that phrase: *manned his pole*. The human languages Serrah knew rarely had poetry, but they sometimes tripped and fell into meaning.

Cat's eyes darted from the boy to her laughing mother, then continued the movement into an expressive roll. Those eyes flashed malachite bright even in the shadows of the river valley at evening, as bright a green as the stained glassware in the chemistry lab at the university.

"Careful," said Serrah, nodding her head towards Cat's foot in the water, trying to bring her own attention back to the here and now, away from the university. "Snakes."

"I'm always careful, mother," said Cat, kicking her foot out of the water and showing the shockfish skin she had wrapped around herself.

Then Cat closed her eyes and repeated the lesson of the explorer plant, in the same sing-song of academic Elvish that Serrah had used, even her accent matching her mother's. The rolling assonance of her own words in her daughter's mouth was a bitter thrill to Serrah, that eternal split of maternal feeling: *mine, not-mine*.

Serrah thought of this thrill, thought of her own litanies—the ones she had learned, the ones she was even now composing in her mind—as she fell asleep, her bedroll only somewhat softening the hard pine raft tied between two turtles. As she drifted in half-finished rhymes about the Godtree, its seeds and fruit, Serrah felt Cat stand in the darkness and was instantly awake, a shock of unaccountable fear vibrating through her like a plucked string, the blade in her left hand before she caught herself and remembered to breathe.

Cat stepped onto the rope bridge leading from their raft to the turtle where the river boys drank and sang. That plucked string of fear in Serrah twanged, a whole chorus of worries. *She has to learn her own songs*, thought Serrah, trying to quiet the chorus, which sang back *why?*

"Careful," said Serrah, the only thing she could get out from her clenched throat.

"Always," said Cat, her eyes flashing a smile in the dark before she turned to scamper up the rope bridge, as if she weren't a thing half-made of stone.

*O QUICK STAR, hear and learn:*

*In the high western desert that the Elvish professors know as the Late Titanic Shale Uplift, there lives a herd of wild horses of all colors. How did this variety come to be, when most wild herds only show one or two colors?*

*The riddle masks and marks the solution: this multifarious band did not start wild, but as trained circus horses from several competing circuses among the Western League cities, where they performed for generations, only going wild after a feud left the circus pact in tatters and the horse trainers dead or mad.*

*Fierce and clever, these horses fought off lions and snakes and sandwolves, and soon attracted other horses gone wild, who were taught as well the skills of the circus: to balance and dance and pull together.*

*So if you go to the Late Titanic Shale Uplift today, you will see young horses beat each other's legs with sticks held in their mouths and bark commands in the mangled remnants of Western League language. Thus, many centuries since the desert swallowed the League and its circuses, do the traces of the dead horse trainers live on.*

*O quick star, now tell me what you have heard and learned.*

Cat began the litany, each phrase counterpointed by the twin *thunks* of their walking sticks as her and her mother walked west, the turtle

caravan and its river boys days behind them. Cat knew enough to look at the cracked clay and to see the geologic ages: sea bottom, marshland, forest, the Breaking that ripped through the land and made it this wasteland, ridged with buried titan bones.

And towering over it all, the Godtree, the last of its kind, their destination, the end of their quest, standing like an unbroken stylus poised to scrape letters into the waxy sky. The Godtree was impossible to miss as a landmark, and every morning Serrah set her face to it, and sang quietly to herself her half-finished litanies of the Godtrees and their genealogies, her dissertation song, the work that would end their exile from the university.

Cat held her breath as she listened to those litanies, hoping to hear in the cracks of the unfinished rhythms the truths that her mother never said. This was her own private wonder song, a litany of the unknown waiting to be answered, with verse headings for all the questions she could not ask: *my father; the tattoos of academic mastery you have peppering your skin and the ones you don't have and the one that seems inked over; the songblade you carry on your left side and how it got its name.*

The chorus, repeating: *Who are you and who am I and who are we?*

When Serrah saw Cat's questioning eyes, she smiled her unknowable smile and gave Cat a litany to consider instead: wild horses, red-feathered sword quail, the scour winds and the soft winds, the *omwegang* hunger sickness.

Cat sang the litanies back, occasionally but rarely stumbling over a dropped meter or breathing a caesura in the wrong place, which Serrah corrected as they walked, though never taking her eyes off the Godtree.

Cat too considered the Godtree, the key that would open the doors to the home that she had never known, but only heard about: the libraries whose stacks she had already memorized; the labs she could even now smell over the seared dust and sweet myrtle her mother used when no water-bath was available; the lined faces of the *lectores* who would

nod along as she recited her litanies before adding her own tattoos of mastery, just like her mother's.

*Then, the thought flashed through Cat's mind, like a fish almost too fast to follow, she will have no more secrets from me.*

And, like a smaller fish escaping from that first fish's mouth, the thought, too fast, too flashing bright to put into words, too sharp to consider for long: *Then I will not be alone.*

So it was a relief to put away her thoughts when the spear-shaking, giant ant-riding militia rode up to them, with their shouts of "Who goes there?" and "What business do you have with the Achten Tani, old woman?"

Cat had run into wasteland tribes like this before, a mismatched, ragged bunch: a bone cuirass here, leather arm-guards there, stone-edged swords, rusted metal spears; the ants bridled with rope, leather, twine, bone. Cat could smell them even over the tar sands, sweat and sulfur. Cat laughed to keep herself from crying in pity.

Serrah heard the laugh and gave Cat a quick challenging look, a raised eyebrow, the question clear: *O savage star, tell me what you have heard and know of giant ants?*

Cat sang the litany silently and angrily, grinding into the internal rhymes in the verse on bone meal diets before her anger melted against the flame of her habit and attention. She tapped rhythm with the couplets on the use of red-mallow paste to block pheromone receptors and drive the ants into blind panic, tapping unconsciously at the space on her arm where her tattoo would go to show she had mastered the study of social insects.

Serrah saw that tap, again felt that bitter thrill go through her, a love so piercing it could draw blood. She dropped her walking stick and approached the militia, raising her arms placatingly, slowly, so that her hollow left arm didn't echo with the *click-click-whirr* of her songblade re-arranging.

O FAR-WANDERING STAR, *hear and learn:*

*When the Empire of Machines first contemplated the forging of etherships, the generation engine that ruled the empire calculated that etherships would preserve the empire whereas its own self would not. Since the etherships required key components that existed nowhere else but in itself, the generation engine authorized its own dissolution as a sacrifice to reach empires beyond the ether.*

*Thus when the etherships launched (causing the Abhorrence Flowering; see Otherrealm Gates), the Machines that were left behind had no mechanism for generating new Machines. Many even had no desire, releasing their servitors and shutting down without funeral song.*

*But several Machines went to the Childan Jungle and began to experiment with the indigenous spiderfolk, seeking to extend their lineage. They had only limited success before they were destroyed by the many hands of the spiders' first army. There are still some clockwork spiders in the far lands, living often as mystics and hermits and assassins without oath, but not many. It is often said, by the Elvish professors, that the Machines' enduring legacy is not the clockwork spiders, but the spiderfolk themselves, who to this day will not abide Machine order, even going so far as to introduce flaws in their otherwise symmetrical web cities and to place a single night-mad weaver in every battalion of the army that still patrols their borders.*

*O far-wandering star, now tell me what you have heard and learned.*

This section of the Godtree—less than halfway up and still high enough to be able to see Achten Tan and the whole wasteland, from the tower ruins and plateau in the west to the swamps in the east—had so many branches and leaves that the wooden monkeys could easily hide nearby when Cat began her morning litany, if they would only keep silent.

Instead, they clacked their wooden teeth in laughter as they prepared to throw fruit and hoot and swing around her, all in an attempt to distract her as she tried to repeat the litany. If she broke and swore, they

laughed their wood-echoing laughter so hard that it shook ripe fruit off the branches. Sometimes, they would laugh so hard that they fell, catching themselves on branches before the long fall or being caught by their fellows, who in turn would be saved from falling when they laughed too hard.

They were mischievous little pests, and sometimes even Serrah laughed at their antics. Easy for her, since the wooden monkeys listened attentively when Serrah sang, arm-in-arm with their fellows, as if they too were to be tested one day on their knowledge of the Childan Jungle and the Abhorrence Flowering. When the monkeys scored a particularly good trick on Cat, as they had just done with some golden itch berries that grew on the Godtree's lightning-scarred west side, Cat shook her climbing claws at the monkeys and scowled at her mother's laughter.

And yet, Cat laughed behind her scowl, shook her climbing claws more in mock-anger. It was good to hear her mother laugh at the monkeys, a pure unalloyed silver sound, a pure hearth-fire feeling.

But soon, Serrah turned her attention back to this morning's Godtree fruit, as she had picked a fruit each morning they climbed, to split it open and examine the insides, breathing in the sweet and tangy smell of them. Serrah sat crosslegged in the nook of two branches and licked the inside of the fruit, her face hovering between disgust and curiosity. Serrah rolled the taste around her mouth, trying to find the words for it: *ginger, plum, lavender, oil, tar, ash.*

Serrah was in her own world, humming her secret songs, and Cat had been left behind again, as in a magic mirror show where her own reflection went further into the glass the more she tried to reach it. When Cat finished her litany, with a tremolo-tinged tercet that indicated she could go on to give both the standard view of the Elvish professors and her own interpretation of the litany, Serrah did not correct or praise, but seemed absorbed watching a wooden monkey use its spiky thumb to puncture a Godtree fruit and suck out sweet sticky insides with its

multiple, splinter-barbed tongues. Serrah felt almost like she herself was being emptied, torn, drained.

*What were the words, what was the language for this feeling?*

Serrah began, haltingly, a wonder song: could the monkeys explain why this Godtree's fruit had no structure and no seeds inside, so unlike the preserved slivers of ancient Godtree fruit she had been shown by the bird-headed monks at Antrim Monastery? (If she had. Had she? Or had she merely read some traveler's account from ages ago?) Or perhaps the town below—or the lack of water—or—

There were too many unknowns to start theorizing, Serrah knew, so many unknowns that she felt almost dizzy, and yet she felt a song in her breast, felt it strum her heartstrings, felt it vibrate in her fingers to the tree's own beat. And the song said:

*This Godtree is the last of its kind; there are no seeds in the Godtree fruit; there will be no more Godtrees; the Godtrees have decided to die; they have decided to die because your world is dying; the university has crumbled to dust; your sins are worse than punished—they are forgotten.*

Now that Serrah let herself sing this litany out, she felt she had always known it: the Godtrees were letting go, letting go was the only thing left to do.

And Serrah saw what was coming: a flowering of evil; songs going sour, harvests of rot; a dark seed burning at the center of the universe; starlight flickering on black petals and then being extinguished by the breath of eternity from that flower; and all becoming—or finally showing that it always was—*nothing nothing nothing*.

Cat grabbed her mother's right hand before Serrah fell completely from the branches, held on, screaming her mother's name as Serrah's eyes fluttered, her mother's tattooed face dappled by the leaves as the monkeys raced around them, shaking the branches, and clacking their wooden teeth now in fear. Cat held on with both hands until she felt herself slipping and then grabbed the Godtree trunk with one

hand, feeling the rock under her skin dig into the tree, until the wood splintered where she tried to hold on, and she felt herself slip further off the branch unless she let go of her mother.

That dark flower at the center of the universe woke and looked at Serrah in her haze of new understanding. It drew her in like a scent, a bit at a time. It made Serrah feel colorless as over-watered paint dripping to the floor; as powerless as the silt drifting in water stirred by vast and nameless power and brought to the surface to flicker for only a moment in the light before sinking to darkness forever; a thing without will or reason to hold on; preparing to let go.

Until that thing heard her name in song and knew herself not a thing, but Serrah, and heard a litany of herself, the professor-in-waiting, bladesinger, wanderer, daughter, mother. Her mind reached out, grabbed onto that litany like a rope, held on, and then started to pull herself up the melody, out of the darkness.

When Serrah came into the light, when the world stopped spinning and her haze lifted, she found herself caught by the wooden monkeys, arm in arm to form a web suspended from the branches, silent with the effort except for the creaking of their wooden limbs. Not just silent from effort, but silent and listening, listening to Cat sing, sing out a litany that Serrah had never taught her, a song of wonder and terror and love, Cat's song that was also Serrah's song and also not.

Serrah reached up to take Cat's lowered hand and for a long moment after—even after they had caught their breath and the wooden monkeys had grown bored and returned to their clattering games—Serrah held on to Cat's hand.

Then they continued to climb the Godtree, for there were no true ends on their path, as there are no true ends to our songs, only places to take a breath and prepare to sing again.



AMURI MORRIS

# Relics

BY OORMILA VIJAYAKRISHNAN PRAHLAD

Originally published in *What are Birds Journal* (Summer 2020)

I

The magpie carcass is fresh.  
It lies by the sidewalk, wings splayed  
like a downed Icarus.  
I make a sketch of it for my story  
and post it with a sentimental caption.  
I get 189 views.  
The dopamine scrubs away all sadness.

II

*What's with your obsession with crows?*  
It's a message from my arch-frenemy again—  
the intellectual who likes to intimidate people.  
He wants to know why I paint them over and  
over and over. *So boring.* In a petty moment  
I take the bait and try to show him up.  
Crows are *Corvids*, I say. What I paint are magpies—  
*Artamidae*. And I am a *Nyctophile*. I leave it to him  
to work out profound symbolism if any. Later,  
I feel like I'm the same brand of asshole  
that I think he is.

## III

All the blackbirds in the bedtime story  
wear jewel-studded crowns.  
“Don’t be like the rest of them, dah-ling,”  
their speech bubbles tweet. I believed that  
when I was a greenhorn. Back then I flew  
with the corvids, despite the bleached streaks  
that ran along my spine. How naive I was to think  
I would belong. In time they tossed me out  
upon the marsh, the whole murder of them.  
They didn’t pause a minute before  
they fell upon me.  
*Judge, jury, injustice.*

## IV

My Swarovski earrings are suddenly gone  
from my window-side dresser. The panels  
are wide open. It was my eighth anniversary present.  
I comb the house for them but they have disappeared.  
I don’t know whom to blame, so I scour the skies  
for scapegoats. But the magpies are blameless—  
their beaks are open and their nests are empty.

## V

My partner thinks the carcass sketches are distasteful.  
I argue that it is art. *Death art*. He shakes his head  
and leaves. His words get me down. I sulk for a while,  
then delete the photos and the cheesy caption  
before their 24-hour shelf-life is up.

## VI

At night I dream of my arch-frenemy.  
He is a boatman, wearing a feathered cloak  
rowing me down a river. First, he hits me  
with confounding questions. Then he hits me  
with the oar. I watch him fly away as I fall  
into the water. My ribcage fills with ink.  
In the morning my hands are weightless  
and my fingers feel like quills.

## VII

It’s now been two whole weeks.  
I see the magpie carcass every day  
on my evening walk. It is dwindling  
and fading. The ants have bleached it  
of its flesh and the wind has decamped  
with its plumage. It’s an ivory relic now—  
an Archeopteryx, ironed into the tar.  
For a moment it seems to raise its hollow  
helmet of a head and chuckle  
at all my demons,  
especially my fear of corvids.

# En Route

BY CHAR GARDNER

Originally published in *The Gettysburg Review* (Winter 2014)

RISING FROM THE river, early morning mist mingled with engine exhaust and smoke from cooking fires. Dank air held mud-stench, garbage-rot. A man and a boy floated by in a pirogue. The Niger, flat, metallic, dimpled with feeding birds, flowed silently beneath the Bridge of the Martyrs, while up above, the day's flood of trucks, cars, mopeds, bicycles, wagons, animals, and pedestrians made their discordant crossing into Mali's capital city of Bamako.

Outside the pink stucco hotel on the riverbank, the drivers were lashing the last of our film gear onto the roof racks of two white Toyota Land Cruisers. Inside the lobby, I settled the bill for our crew, stuffed the sheaf of receipts into my daypack, and made my way past the wobbly postcard rack and cracked vinyl couches to the best bathroom I would see for a while.

*I was five, too old to be sucking my thumb. In the back seat, I rolled the window up and down, sniffing the cold air like a dog. I never actually vomited in the car, but the possibility created a sense of foreboding I still associate with long automobile trips.*

WE HEADED OUT of town, slowly navigating the choked roads to the RN6, northeast toward the Sahara. By nightfall we would be in Djenné, where if all went well, we would film the Great Mosque, the largest mud-brick structure in the world, for our documentary on Islamic art and architecture. Though the sun had barely risen, the Toyota's air conditioner labored. November temperatures reached into the nineties. I remembered to drink from my water bottle. Beside me in the back seat, my husband, Rob, wore headphones and read a thriller. Up front, Amadou turned sideways to hand me a packet of officially stamped documents, the permits necessary for filming in Djenné. All but one.

Access to the interior of the mosque had been closed to non-Muslims for years, the result of an incident that had shown disrespect to the holy landmark: Italians had posed swimsuit models in the mosque. Though the details were unclear, the resulting riots were verifiable; people were killed. That was the first thing Amadou told me when I had contacted him months earlier. To film inside we would need special permission from the village chief. Our meeting with the chief was scheduled for the following day, and if he granted our request, the imam and the head of the Cultural Mission would also agree. In addition to the uncertainty about access, there was the worry that, even with the chief's approval, our objectives might be misinterpreted by townspeople. Amadou, however, in his starched shirt and pressed pants, appeared imperturbable. I envied his natural calm.

"Already they feel favorable toward you," he said. "I explained you are two generations, working together. A family. Very nice."

We seemed to refute a negative stereotype of Americans. Nick, our cinematographer, and also our son, was traveling in the car behind us with two other members of our crew. In Mali, family means everything.

"Here's a picture of our daughter," I said, holding out my phone. "She works with us, too, and those are her children. Only half joking,

I added, “Would the chief care to know that I am the grandmother of four?”

“Very beautiful,” Amadou said, shading the screen with his hand. “And the baby—how old?”

“She turned one in the summer.”

Taking his phone from his shirt pocket, Amadou held it up for me to see. “My daughter,” he said proudly. “She has also one year—tomorrow.”

“She’s darling—but you’ll be with us in Djenné.”

“They wait for me. In one week will be the celebration, not so large as the wedding.” Amadou described the hard traveling and huge expense Malians expected to put out for family gatherings. The clothes, food, gifts, and great distances represented a serious outlay of funds in a country that is one of the world’s poorest. I was astounded.

“Does anyone ever say, sorry, I just can’t make it?”

Twisting around to look at me, he said, “No. Never.”

*My father, wearing a gray felt hat that made me think of mice, drove us away from Baltimore, over a mountain, to a new house. My younger brother, asleep on the seat beside me, wore a snowsuit. My baby sister in her car-bed kicked against its flimsy metal frame. Up front, Mother lit a Pall Mall and pushed open the window wing. Wind whistled in and kept me from hearing anything she said.*

ON THE FAR edge of the city in a borderland shantytown, it was market day. I steadied my iPhone to capture the scene: girls in pink Disney princess backpacks; a flock of strangely fleecless sheep; fruits, roots, bread, flip-flops; firewood, insecticide, auto parts, detergent; women in brilliantly patterned cottons, babies bound to their backs, balancing huge loads on their heads; toothless old men, robed and

smoking in low-slung bent metal chairs; donkey carts, pick-up trucks, boys selling soda bottles full of gasoline for mopeds, walkers trudging home or waiting for a ride.

Our driver sorted through a jumble of old eight-track tapes and shoved one into the player. The bluesy Malian guitar of Ali Farka Touré became the sound track for our journey. Gradually, shacks and market stalls gave way to the sun-bleached stubble of newly harvested millet fields. The sky turned indigo, and the day’s heat intensified. The interior of the car grew increasingly uncomfortable.

*My mother never learned to drive. In Baltimore, she had no need; the streetcar took her everywhere. But in the new house, a stodgy two-story redbrick facing the highway, she was marooned. There were no other houses. Ours stood in isolation along an undeveloped stretch of Route 11, on which my father drove that winter, with chains on his tires, north to the Pennsylvania border and south into West Virginia, selling aluminum siding.*

TALKING WITH AMADOU about families, I realized that he assumed Nick and his wife and kids lived with Rob and me, in the traditional African way. I might have let the misconception stand, but I wanted our conversation to be truthful.

“Nick has a house of his own in a different part of town,” I said.

“And your daughter? Surely, she is with the mother-in-law.” Amadou had difficulty imagining how I, the all-powerful mother-in-law, would put up with the disrespect of a son living separately, or of a daughter not complying.

Taking a drink from my water bottle, I said, “In America, the mother-in-law is not so powerful.”

His face registered dismay. Yet I saw curiosity too. Amadou had worked with crews from BBC, Channel 4, and Canal Plus, but never left Africa. We were his first American clients. And not one of the others, he admitted, had talked with him about family life.

“Hey, Rob,” I said, leaning over to pry aside one of his headphones “Listen to this! In Mali, we’d be retired now—and Nick would be taking care of us for the rest of our lives.” I looked to Amadou to explain, in case I had misunderstood.

“Yes,” he said, “the first son, he provides for his parents. It is a respect, a gift for raising him. We are living all together.”

“Oh, Jesus!” said Rob.

Amadou laughed.

“But, on the plus side,” I said, “everyone would treat me like a queen.”

*Snow accumulated in deep drifts, sleet enameled the snow, icicles hung from the eaves like daggers, and frightful winds whipped over the open fields to slam the walls and rattle windows. Inside the house, the furnace had to be fed like a baby. Several times a day my mother disappeared into the black basement, leaving me to mind my brother and sister. I could hear the metallic scraping sounds as she loaded the coal shovel, then the iron clank of the furnace door that signaled her return.*

AMADOU’S SINCERE ADMIRATION for our family business flattered me. Having grown up in an atmosphere of strife, I felt grateful for the relative harmony Rob and I had somehow managed to cultivate. Yet, the reality of working with our family included vocal disagreement. I wanted Amadou to have fair warning.

“It’s not always easy,” I said, gesturing toward Rob, who was napping. “Sometimes, there are tensions.” I asked about family disagreements in Mali, “You know—with the mother-in-law?”

Amadou told me that aunts, uncles, and other family members were enlisted to carry messages considered too volatile or difficult to be transmitted directly. He spoke of Griots, designated clans who performed as mediators and were known to have special access to the spirit world. He seemed to be saying that in West African culture people were intricately bound to their communities in ways unimaginable to me; and they believed words had the power to cause real physical harm.

“Words?”

“Yes, of course. But with the Griot, there is no humiliation,” he said, as if stating the obvious.

In any dispute, Amadou told me, the desired outcome was reconciliation. To end without resolution was to invite serious trouble. I suspected the *trouble* had to do with supernatural forces, but before I could ask anything else, Amadou veered away from the subject.

“Ch Arr—,” he said, adding an extra syllable to my name, and adopting a different tone, the same he used when he had asked if we voted for Obama. “The young people in Mali, they think America is how they see on the rap videos. I have questions.”

But my attempt to explain our welfare system, unemployment, inner-city schools, drugs, guns, consumerism, and the music business, made America seem horrid. Yet Amadou insisted that I keep on. He translated some of my comments into Bamanankan for the driver. And foolishly, I plowed ahead.

“In many parts of America,” I said, “white people live in poverty.”

At this absurdity the two men laughed like schoolboys.

IN SEGOU, A former French colonial river town, we stopped for lunch at the outdoor restaurant of a small hotel. We all ordered Cokes. I stretched my legs and looked around, glad to be out of the cramped

car. The Cokes were almost cold, bottled in green glass so worn it looked dredged from the sea. Despite the heat, the garden was not unpleasant. What at first sounded like vats of sizzling fat, turned out to be parakeets roosting overhead in the knobby branches of an acacia tree. Along the garden wall, I spotted rows of white birdcages with their doors open. To take my mind off the flies swarming my food, I tried to visualize the process by which the birds would be returned to their cages at dusk.

Later, on my way to the bathroom, I glimpsed, just beyond a hibiscus hedge, another part of the garden where pale skinned vacationers in bikinis and Speedos sunned themselves around a cloudy swimming pool. It reminded me of the pool at the Old Cataract Hotel in Aswan, where twenty years earlier, working on a film, I had suffered heat stroke, an experience I hoped never to repeat. Though I knew susceptibility increased with age, I disliked thinking of myself as “older.” Yet in Mali, age brought some advantages.

The bill arrived on our table in a carved wooden box. I looked briefly at the total before choosing several West African CFAs to place in the container.

“Excuse me, Ch Arr, but you have overpaid by ten times.”

Charmed by the way Amadou looked out for me, I thanked him. And concerned that my confusion was a sign of dehydration, I refilled my water bottle and resolved to stop worrying about where I would pee.

*On a snow-covered embankment outside my window, a billboard advertised Coca Cola with a picture of Santa Claus. I could see him from my bed where I lay, clutching my old stuffed bunny with its comforting sour smell, sucking my thumb and remembering Baltimore: kids of all ages ran wild in the yards, whooping; speeding no hands down the alley on bikes; Mother*

*hanging laundry, talking over the clotheslines with Mrs. Melvin, while I made pies with Janie Melvin in her sand box.*

IF I HAD been entirely truthful with Amadou, I would have told him how it had been with my parents. How I had fled at seventeen. There had been no resolution, no reconciliation. Not an uncommon American story. My father had been dead now for thirty years, Mother for twenty-three. But by the standards of Mali, I was beyond the pale and courting dark forces. There was some truth in that. And another truth presented itself: any shutting out or cutting off, even for survival, implies loss.

After lunch, we packed ourselves back into the stifling car. Our driver, Salif, calmly poured a glass of scalding tea directly into his mouth. He then gave his full attention to the narrow, shoulderless road. Rob and Amadou fell asleep. I lost myself in the haunting sounds of the kora and the alien beauty of the landscape: miles of rust-colored earth interrupted by ancient pachydermatous baobab trees, their enormous trunks bearing branches curled like fingers around the untidy nests of wintering storks. Heat shimmer rendered the birds' raucous flailing into a smear of white flecked with black and vermilion.

*With my fingertip on the frosted windowpane, I wrote the first two letters of my name. Outside, a collision of ice-clad apple branches flung glittering splinters into the wind. Somewhere beyond the trees, beneath crusted snow, the strawberry patch lay buried. Mother said so. I pictured polka dots, white on red; a remnant stitched down. Threads black, crow feather shiny, twining, over/under, turning, back and again, binding/hiding my gaping need.*

THE RN6 TURNED north toward the desert. Another full day of driving and we could have reached Timbuktu. I felt a twinge of regret that the legendary outpost was not on our itinerary. It was too dangerous. Islamist rebels, based deep in the Sahara, had been threatening a violent takeover. Our driver slowed. We were still hours from Djenné. Traffic had backed up. There was no town, not even a village in sight, only a few empty market stalls beside the road. Amadou stirred in his seat.

“Somewhere near, a school has let out,” he said, and returned to sleep.

Then I saw them, flooding the road, children in sky-blue uniforms and plastic sandals walking bunched together, the older ones shepherding the young. One little boy, perched on the crossbar of a battered bike, guided by a girl who couldn't have reached the pedals to ride it, stared at me as he passed my window.

*I was five, too young for school. No playmate but my brother. Our sister in her playpen, not yet walking. What did I do in that snowbound house all day? There was no television. Cross-legged on the drafty floor, hunched over a 45 rpm record player as if it were a campfire, I listened, uncomprehending, to “Selections From Carmen”. The translucent ruby-red disc was Mother’s last unscratched record; my brother and I had ruined the rest, using them as racetracks for toy cars.*

AT A GOVERNMENT checkpoint we were stopped, ordered to show our visas and pay a tourist tax. I handed Amadou a fat stack of money, to cover all the distributions to individuals that would be necessary during our time in Djenné. I dreaded those stressful negotiations. Still, there were the ragged children with their cries of “cadeau, cadeau”

each time we pulled in to a gas station, or whenever I emerged from a roadside toilet.

*My brother’s sheet-metal gas station was set up on the dining room rug.*

*“It’s a Sunoco station. Fill ‘er up,” he said, rolling a green tin convertible alongside the pump.*

*“What’s Sunoco?” I asked.*

*“Gas, silly.”*

*“How do you know?”*

*“Daddy says so. He took me to Sunoco in the Chevy.”*

*I kicked the toy gas station across the room where it lay crumpled against the basement door. That my father would have taken my brother anywhere without me was beyond belief. Hearing Kevin’s high-pitched cry, Mother flew in from the kitchen, her hands beating like wings about my head.*

DJENNÉ IS AN island in the Bani River. By the time we drove onto the crowded ferry, the sun had set. In crepuscular light I stood at the railing, breathing in the cleaner, cooler air, watching cormorants dive into the dark water as evening fishermen cast out their nets. A pirogue passed by, poled skillfully by parents standing on either end of the long wooden craft. Their child, no older than three, sat motionless and perfectly balanced in the center. Teen-aged girls with baskets of beaded necklaces and bracelets threaded their way through the knots of foreigners who had stepped out of trucks and cars for the crossing.

“Avez-vous des vêtements pour bébé?” I shook my head. I had no baby clothes to trade for bracelets. We docked. Passengers without cars packed onto waiting mopeds then zoomed off into the twisting, unlit alleys. The girls’ requests brought to mind an incident I hadn’t thought about in years.

Outside Aswan in the Nubian Desert, a little girl approached me with an armful of rag dolls, crudely sewn and stuffed with raw cotton. What charmed me? The tiny clothes and miniature seed bead jewelry she had made for the dolls? Or was it the girl herself, the hopefulness in her eyes despite her tangled hair and outgrown dress. I decided to buy all of the dolls. As I dug into my bag, a gang of menacing boys appeared. They pushed the girl aside, demanding the money. “She has made the dolls,” I said, as if they could understand me. In some obscure way it seemed imperative that I stand up for her. “Back off,” I ordered. The oldest boy must have been about nine or ten—and when they moved away, I scooped up the dolls and pressed a wad of tightly folded bills into the girl’s hand. She turned and ran. But the boys chased her down, grabbed her money, and in an instant were gone. I burst into helpless tears, blaming myself for what happened. Things might have been different. I could have given something to the boys. What prevented me? I still have the dolls, inside a lidded basket and it pains me to look at them.

THE CHIEF’S HOUSE on a bright morning, like all the mud-brick buildings in Djenné, was dark inside. The elderly chief was ill, lying on a mattress just inside the main room. His adult daughter welcomed us, stooping to drape a blanket around the old man’s bony shoulders as he slowly sat up. From a niche in the wall, he withdrew a pair of thick bifocals and put them on. He was in his eighties. A picture of the Kaaba in Mecca was tacked next to his bed.

I was afraid the chief was too old and sick to receive visitors, but Amadou insisted our attendance was essential. He presented our obligatory gift of five large kola nuts (chewed for the caffeine) and began the long and involved traditional greeting, inquiring about the health and wellbeing of the Chief’s many family members, one by one. Earlier Amadou had explained to us that with the use of e-mail and

cell phones, Malians were cutting short the greeting ritual, and this lack of respect had become a national concern.

By the time the daughter brought the boiling tea, my eyes had adjusted to the darkness. The room was cramped, narrow, and hot. Rob and I, anxious to make a favorable impression, sat quietly on low stools, our backs against the wall, nervously grasping the rims of the tiny tea glasses between our thumbs and forefingers. When Amadou signaled, Rob put down his tea. With a hand over his heart in a gesture of sincerity, he gave a short speech about the educational mission of our film and assured the chief of our respect for the holy and historic mosque. Amadou translated almost simultaneously. Rob had just re-settled himself when, too abruptly it seemed, Amadou made gestures for our departure. Rather than a long deliberation, or a postponement, for which we had prepared ourselves, there were now words of gratitude and farewell.

Perhaps the meeting had been simply a formality, a show of respect; permission had been granted. Outside the chief’s ancient wooden door, studded with knife-sharp symbolic ironwork, we stood half-blinded by the sun, congratulating Amadou. Beneath a shea tree, chickens pecked at a clot of cast out tealeaves. Beautiful women glided by, bearing impossibly heavy pots of water on their heads.

That night at our hotel, one of the few buildings in Djenné with indoor plumbing, I washed the desert dust from my hair in the cold-water shower.

*There was no hot water in our house either. For our baths, Mother boiled pots on the electric stove and lugged them upstairs to the tub. “If only we hadn’t left Baltimore.” She repeated the phrase twenty times a day. I may have said it myself —if only we hadn’t left Baltimore, I would have playmates: Mother would not have burned herself on the stove or run out of cigarettes, flown into a rage, smacked my face, lain on the couch*

*with a migraine, packed and unpacked her black suitcase. If we hadn't left Baltimore, my father would have been home before bedtime.*

EARLIER, I HAD stood in the red dirt of the unpaved road, looking up at the Milky Way, whiter and more visible than I had ever seen it. The moon was almost full. Now, inside our room, "The Presidential Suite" with its thick calcimined earthen walls, I sat, an unopened book in my lap, gazing at the ceiling, a patterned and pieced corduroy of saplings, stripped of their bark, bonelike in the fluorescent light.

*My mother believed, stubbornly, through all the trouble, through every foul ignominious thing to come, that she'd have been all right if only she hadn't left Baltimore for the dying railroad town over the mountain. Growing up in that place, having no name for what was wrong with my mother, and perhaps because I was her first child, I held myself accountable. Her depression enveloped me like a shroud.*

FROM HIGH ABOVE the village, on the hot, flat, mud-plastered rooftop of the mosque, I watched as women on other rooftops wrung wet laundry and shook bright cloth into the breeze. Stripes, dots, florals, patterned and plain. Cloth draped, spread, and swagged, overhanging the houses like bunting. From my perch in the shade of the minaret, I saw girls, up to their ankles in the river, scouring aluminum pots; further out, bathers lathered their hair; on shore, a woman fried fish in an oil drum; and a tall barefoot man, pants rolled above his bony knees, treaded mud, bending himself like a jackknife to scoop and slap, shaping new bricks, one by one, in a wooden mold.

The roof provided a temporary respite from the clouds of dust in the streets. A pair of pie-bald crows, cartoon-formal in their white vests,

argued loudly and picked at a silver foil gum wrapper embedded in the mud surface of the parapet. The Djenné mosque requires constant upkeep. After the erosion of the rainy season, rich river mud, water, and the fat extracted from shea nuts, are mixed then left to ferment in odiferous pits outside of town. The mixture, delivered to the mosque in a ritual ceremony involving the whole community, is spread by hand over every surface, smoothing a new layer of protection for another year.

Inside and out, the mosque appears unadorned. During the annual restoration, the palm wood *torons*, protruding like spines from its outer walls, function as scaffolding. But the spines also cast distinctive shadows over the facade, a herringbone pattern that changes with the path of the sun. And, affixed to the pinnacles of the highest cone-shaped spires, there are ivory colored, faintly pocked, lustrous ostrich eggs, a symbol of regeneration.

Down below in the trash-strewn marketplace, roosters crowed, children sang, and an overloaded bush taxi, swerving to avoid a horse-drawn melon cart, knocked a stack of plastic-wrapped mattresses into the open sewer. A few hours earlier we had set up our camera in that exact spot, to film exteriors of the mosque. A small curious crowd had gathered, out of which a man on a moped came forth, wearing a red wool scarf wrapped like a turban on his head. He struggled to balance the two live turkeys tied to his handlebars.

"For your Thanksgiving." Amadou waved his hand from the squawking birds to me.

None of us had given a thought to the holiday, but Amadou had big plans for our dinner that night.

He may have been anticipating something more like New Year's Eve, or Halloween with its costumes and proximity to the spirit world. Earlier in the day, Amadou had asked me to name the foods most proper for serving with turkey; I suggested that, under the circumstances, African dishes would be best. In honor of Amadou

and his thoughtfulness, we dressed up a bit for dinner. Starched and pressed, he was waiting for us in the hotel's outdoor dining room with the guests he had brought from the village, all overdressed and excited to witness a traditional American holiday.

From the kitchen came platters, ceremoniously placed before us on a long table. The turkeys, shrunken after their plucking, had been grilled over an open fire and served on a bed of millet with the local greens and bits of squash familiar to us from days at the hotel. In addition, the cook had created a spicy peanut sauce. Diners at other tables looked our way with envy.

"Please," Amadou began, in his serious tone, "perform for us the Thanksgiving songs and dances as you would at home."

The guests shifted in their seats, a man cleared his throat, and Amadou bit his lip anxiously as silence descended like a pall over our table. Rob was most apologetic.

"We have no songs, and definitely no Thanksgiving dances."

There would be no performance. The guests perceived the message before Amadou finished his translation. In response to the utter disappointment on the faces of the Malians, I began to relate the story of the Pilgrims and the Indians, but felt compelled to point out that it wasn't really true.

"It's a made-up feel-good holiday," I said, and wanting to be accurate added, "The Native American culture was deliberately wiped out."

The guests stared like zombies. Amadou continued to translate until the high-pitched sound of a spoon on a water glass rang out and Rob announced the saying of Grace. I don't remember joining hands around the table, but perhaps we did. From the deep recesses of his Episcopalian past, Rob summoned a surprisingly appropriate psalm to which he added a special thanks to Amadou, the guests, and all the citizens of Djenné for their generosity and goodwill.

Ritual had broken the lugubrious spell. Our bodies relaxed into smiles and laughter. With heightened drama the birds were carved and

the meat distributed. We ate our millet, and the dry, charred turkey, not especially improved by the spicy sauce. The cook emerged from the kitchen to be applauded, and the dessert, a cake thickly frosted with plump rosettes of fresh-churned butter, was served with fanfare. Finally, I rummaged in the carcass of the larger bird to extract the breastbone, and showed Amadou how we make a wish.

WEEKS LATER, BACK home in Baltimore, drinking chamomile tea at my kitchen table on an icy December morning, I opened an old brown envelope and easily found the picture. The snowman was too big to have been built by me, or my brother. My father would have rolled the thick body, placed the head, and topped it with the pirate hat, left from Halloween. If I had helped to gather the lumps of coal for the eyes and the sinister black-toothed mouth, I had no memory of it. Yet there I was in the picture, unsmiling in my woolen coat and leggings, mittens, scarf, and hat, and the familiar rubber boots. I noticed the sad face of my brother, and the absence of my sister--- who may have been napping. Behind me, apple branches poked at the leaden sky. I remembered them, ice-encased, rosy like lips, and how I kissed them— cracking the ice with my teeth. And there, wearing her tortoise shell glasses, looking into the camera, her dark lipsticked smile too broad, was Mother, her hair almost shoulder length, parted on one side, brushed back, and held neatly with a barrette. She was hatless, without gloves, wearing only a light coat with a silk scarf tucked at her throat. All at once, I realized she had come out of the house only to be photographed; posing, as if she had been part of the snow play, as if nothing were the matter; as if she were all right. Again my gaze fell upon her hair. She would have slept the night before on bobby pins to get those curls. Sixty years on and unbidden, it came to me: compassion for my mother.

# Wake

BY ALAYNA FRANKENBERRY

Originally published in *Open Thread* (2010)

*for John Chir*

The last woman at your empty grave  
is grounding rosaries into the wind, is  
stitching a history onto rice paper leaves, is  
repeating your name and repeating  
your name, is waiting for an echo.  
The last woman at your empty  
grave is interviewing the dark,  
is carving memories between falling  
stars, is clawing and re-clawing  
the dirt, is searching the trees for  
a witness. When the breeze traps  
itself in the burrows of her scars,  
the last woman at your empty grave  
hears only carousel music. When  
the marble ribbon of your name  
unfurls itself, she shakes like a flame.  
The rest of us are wearing party  
hats, crouched in a darkened room  
waiting to yell surprise for you  
when you finally arrive. You are not  
with the last woman at your empty  
grave. You are in the room with us  
wearing a hat. You are huddled  
in the smallest corner, reaching out  
and losing your hand in the dark.

# Salt to Salt

BY ERICA GOSS

Originally published in *The Hummingbird Review* (Spring/Summer 2013)

1.

At the lip of the Pacific  
a shoe fills with sand.  
It's a huge shoe, a man's shoe,  
the size my father used to wear,

mass-produced in a country where  
the people have small hands and feet.  
Now it rocks in front of me  
dilapidated, saturated

as the sea pulls boots of silt  
up past my ankle bones. Maybe  
I should let the beach absorb me

wait until the sand closes  
over my head  
while a sea lion regards me  
with one innocent, chocolate eye.

2.

We dwell inside each other, salt to salt  
yet the sea and I are strangers, opaque  
as parents to their children.

Dead below the knees  
my father watched continents drift  
in and out of view  
those big feet in lopsided running shoes.

In the end he forgot everything  
lost in that seductive vista:  
islands, hazy peaks,  
the water's sliding surfaces.

3.

We are not finished –

a lone shoe  
is the punch line to  
some impenetrable joke

and me at the water's edge  
ready for more uncanny gifts

while the sea  
wearing an old coat  
waits for its children  
to come home.

# Engineering

BY LYNN GILBERT

Originally published in *Spit: A Journal of the Arts* (1992)

This bank  
is where the  
    great  
    backbone  
    starts, the  
    spinal plank of  
calculated steel re-bar and poured  
    concrete, of I-beams and  
    drawn-wire cable, the  
    massive anchorages &  
    abutments, the  
    lofty towers  
    and deep  
    piers,  
    all,  
    all of it  
    to flex and  
    extend without  
    fracture; under  
    live loads or dead  
    weight to accordion  
    minutely in all weathers  
over the loud gorge where Time,  
    tan and foamy, whips away  
    dwellings, trees  
    and cars like  
    tub toys,  
safe to the  
other bank.



STASIA FISHER

# The Harmonia

BY ANGELA TEAGARDNER

Originally published in *Daily Science Fiction* (April 2021)

I WAS THERE when the airship *Harmonia* fell.

I try not to remember the gritty details—the screams, the crush of bodies, the trampling of feet. I don't linger on that aromatic cocktail of adrenaline and panic. It's no good to think about what it meant to fall thirty miles to a planet of brimstone and molten lead. What it meant to be millions of miles from anyplace safe.

Sometimes, I let myself recall the view through the escape pod binoculars—the airship listing, its hull breached, oxygen somehow visible as it rushed, swirling into the carbon dioxide clouds. There's no sound in my slow-motion memory—just the tilt and fall, the huge glass windows shattering as the atmosphere's enormous pressure ravaged what had been, only hours before, the pinnacle of luxurious travel.

I don't think about Lyra.

THERE HAD BEEN an entire fleet of Venusian cruise ships back then. The *Harmonia* was the flagship, the grandest of the line. She was a city in the clouds—her restaurants employing world-famous chefs and her casinos boasting the biggest pay-outs. She was a beacon for pleasure-seekers and fortune-hunters alike.

I was of the latter category. Back-alley craps in Vegas had become roulette on the moon, and still I craved higher risk, bigger wins. When I heard of the delights to be had on Venus, I booked passage on a freighter, willing to endure four dreary months' travel for the promise of what waited in that cloud-drenched alien atmosphere.

I'd been there long enough to lose big, and just when I started to consider getting out while I still had cash for the ride, I found my lucky strike clad in blue sequins and stiletto heels.

Her name was Lyra Antares and she sang like a bourbon-soaked angel. She was the headliner in a dim little club called Adonis, far enough below the main decks to avoid the notice of the well-heeled crowds. At the Adonis, we were all a bit shabby, a bit down on our luck. But Lyra's voice lifted me up, kept me sane during those luckless nights when the money just bled out me.

"You wanna walk?" she asked me one night as late turned into early and her shift had finally ended. By then, I was a regular, always taking the table closest to the stage.

"Do you want to go outside?" I asked her, feeling like I should, even as I hoped she'd say no. The upper decks were open-air, but hazard suits weren't romantic, and the wind made talking difficult. There wasn't even a starry sky to admire. Venus didn't have a nighttime—the dense clouds glowed apricot 'round the clock—but the crew dimmed the lights and we all went along with it.

She laughed, sounding like old Hollywood, and I knew I'd follow her anywhere.

We ended up heading down, rather than up, into the bowels of the ship—brightly lit despite the hour. The laundries made the lavender-scented air humid, moisture gathering in her hair and across my forehead.

"You come to Adonis every night," she said as we wandered the long corridors. "Are you a music lover?"

In spite of the cold sweat in my jacket, I answered truthfully. "I'll

listen to anything, so long as it's your voice singing it."

She laughed again, and for a second I was sure I'd blown it, that she thought I was feeding her a line—or worse, that she was put off by my candor. But then she sobered, looking into my eyes. "I think I believe you," she said.

She slipped her hand into mine, entwining our fingers. Her skin was damp and hot and perfect.

WITHIN THE WEEK, I was living in Lyra's quarters, a tiny room far belowdecks. She'd hung a macramé tapestry on one wall and a poster of Billie Holiday on the other. We listened to music on her old-fashioned record player and made love in the afternoons. Scarves draped over the lampshades painted violet shadows on her skin, which I kissed even as she dressed each evening for work.

She had a wardrobe full of satin and velvet, a jewel case full of paste. Only one piece was real—a diamond brooch that she never wore. "It was my mother's," she said, carefully tucking it into a tiny silk pouch. She threaded baubles of glass through her earlobes and kissed me again.

When Lyra was working, I kicked around the lower decks, my pockets too empty for the casinos but my hours too long to think of much else. I usually ended up at Adonis, filling up on peanuts and drinking in Lyra's voice. I wondered if she'd come back to Earth with me, what I would do if she wouldn't.

Restlessness gnawed. I thought about getting a job with the ship, but didn't want to be working the few precious hours I got to spend with Lyra. If only I were flush, I could take her upstairs to eat lobster and caviar with the high rollers. I thought of those last few losses—luck games like roulette were my drug of choice, but could I have won big at the poker tables instead?

I didn't plan on losing her brooch. I planned on winning—winning big—and taking her places where that jewel of hers could really shine. But one bad hand turned into three, until finally I was all-in with a pair of queens and an unforgiving bluff.

I skipped going to Adonis that night, just let myself into the room. For a long time, I stared at that poster of Billie Holiday, glad her gaze turned down toward the microphone in her hands. I didn't want her to look at me. I didn't want her to see me. Eventually I crawled alone into Lyra's bed, longing for bottled oblivion I was too broke to buy.

THE LURCH WOKE me. I sat up in bed as the airship swayed, impressed that the famous winds of Venus had finally made themselves known. Lyra was still out, my inevitable confession stalled, and I was relieved. I was just closing my eyes again when the alarm sounded, a flash of red light above the door.

*Hull breach. Evacuate.*

The corridors were chaos. Every soul was desperate to escape while I was desperate only to get to Lyra. The club was two decks up and I pushed against the mass of humanity on the stairs. I shoved past women in formal wear, past old men in pajamas. I didn't care that I was headed the wrong direction. I needed to find her.

Finally close enough to see the cherry-red neon above the Adonis, I called her name, terrified I'd missed her in the throng. I yelled again. Again and again until I was hoarse.

And then I heard that voice, saw one gloved hand reach high over the heads of the crowd.

Our fingers threaded together and despite everything, I breathed easy.

We weren't the last ones to the evacuation deck, and there was still space in the life boats. Each pod held dozens of people and the lines

were unexpectedly civilized. Lyra carried her shoes in one hand, so I stepped in first, reaching up to help her.

At that last moment, she froze, her eyes going wide. "My brooch," she whispered. "I can't leave it."

I opened my mouth to confess or to lie, anything to make her stay, but she silenced me with a kiss. A kiss goodbye.

"No, Lyra. Wait!" But the explanation wouldn't come, my confession dissolving into a bitter taste at the back of my throat. I held onto her hand even as her eyes looked back. Even as she turned. I held tight, but she slipped away, leaving nothing in my hand but one deep blue satin glove.

I WAS THERE when the airship *Harmonia* fell.

The satin in my pocket won't let me forget.

# Penis Life

BY MIRIAM FRIED

Originally published in *Ambit* (Fall 2005)

## *Divine Comedy*

PENIS: Here I am!  
GOD: Yes, yes, I see you.  
PENIS: I love, I rage, I soar, I weep, I trample my opponents!  
GOD: My dear child, you must contain yourself.  
PENIS: How can I? I am ready for heroics. Only free me, and I will play my part!  
GOD: But my child, my child, you were born for comedy.  
PENIS: I shall never believe it.

## *An Ancient Art*

Although penises can be trained to do tricks, few men are ambitious enough to teach them more than simple levitation. Nonetheless, there are monks in mountainous regions of Asia capable of performing esoteric feats: Around-the-World, Skin-the-Cat, Drunken-Buddha, Monkey's-Uncle, and so forth. Some dispute that sleight-of-penis is possible. Others have gone to train with the monks. Most acolytes get bogged down at the earliest stages of study, becoming distracted by origami or, occasionally, the arrangement of flowers.

## *Privacy*

It is a grave matter to betray the secrets of a penis.

## *Malleus Maleficarum*

Once upon a time there was a witch who stole penises. She did not treat her stolen penises badly, however, but kept them in a ventilated box in a tree and fed them oats. This was small comfort to the miller who was her most recent victim. Outraged, he knocked on her door and demanded the return of what he had lost. The witch received him kindly and told him where to find his penis. The miller climbed the tree, opened the box, and found an assortment of penises winking up at him. "Such a convivial atmosphere!" he declared. He found his own lost part in a corner, looking rather lonely next to its more boisterous companions. And yet the miller passed over his own penis and pulled out the largest penis of them all, for he was an ambitious man. "She'll never know the difference," he said to himself. He slid down the tree and returned to the witch for assistance. The witch muttered spell after spell, but the man and the penis would not be joined. Baffled, the witch inspected the penis more closely. "My good man, this is not your penis!" she exclaimed. "This belongs to the parish priest!" Back up the tree went the miller. His own true penis was pleased to see him and, without waiting for the witch, joined him immediately, so as to take no further chances. This is a true story, but I cannot remember who told it to me, whether it was the witch, the miller, or the parish priest...

*Exercise*

Penises are taken frequently for solitary outings. Unlike jogging or swimming laps, these exertions do not build up stamina. However, they do sharpen the imagination.

*A Warning*

Beware, ladies and gentlemen, the military penis, for it will invade your borders on some hollow pretext, plunder your countryside, bang on your door and then stride right in, it will flash its medals as it pokes into every nook and cranny, do not be deceived by its magnificence, it will leave your eyes full and your pantries bare.

*The Money Shot*

like a falling leaf  
it seeks its resting place  
white blossoms on pink plum

*Social Life*

Some penises are clubby and prefer the company of other penises. Others don't wish to join any club that would have them as a member.

*A Vision*

The penis in the sky sings sweetly.

*Economics*

Some complain about a shortage of penises. Others are convinced there is a surplus and try various methods to dispense with the overstock: free samples, two-for-one, slogans, recycling techniques, arts-and-crafts projects previously intended for pipe cleaners and popsicle sticks. Results have been mixed and are the subject of heated dispute.

*The Eye of Love*

Cynics deny that penises are capable of romance, when in fact the opposite is true. Of course penises can fall in love. They do so many times a day. Even when a penis allies itself for life with a single companion, it does not lose this capacity for romance.

*Destiny*

The penis is a dreamer and a wanderer. It usually wishes to be where it is not, doing something completely different. Be kind to it, therefore.

*Burn This*

They get enough attention already.  
Poor things.

# Taxonomy

BY MIKE BAGWELL

Originally published in *Toho Journal* (2019)

The machine you made speaks with a diamond cutter  
and a city of paper, even though all it does  
is count backward and tell the brother  
where the bird is.

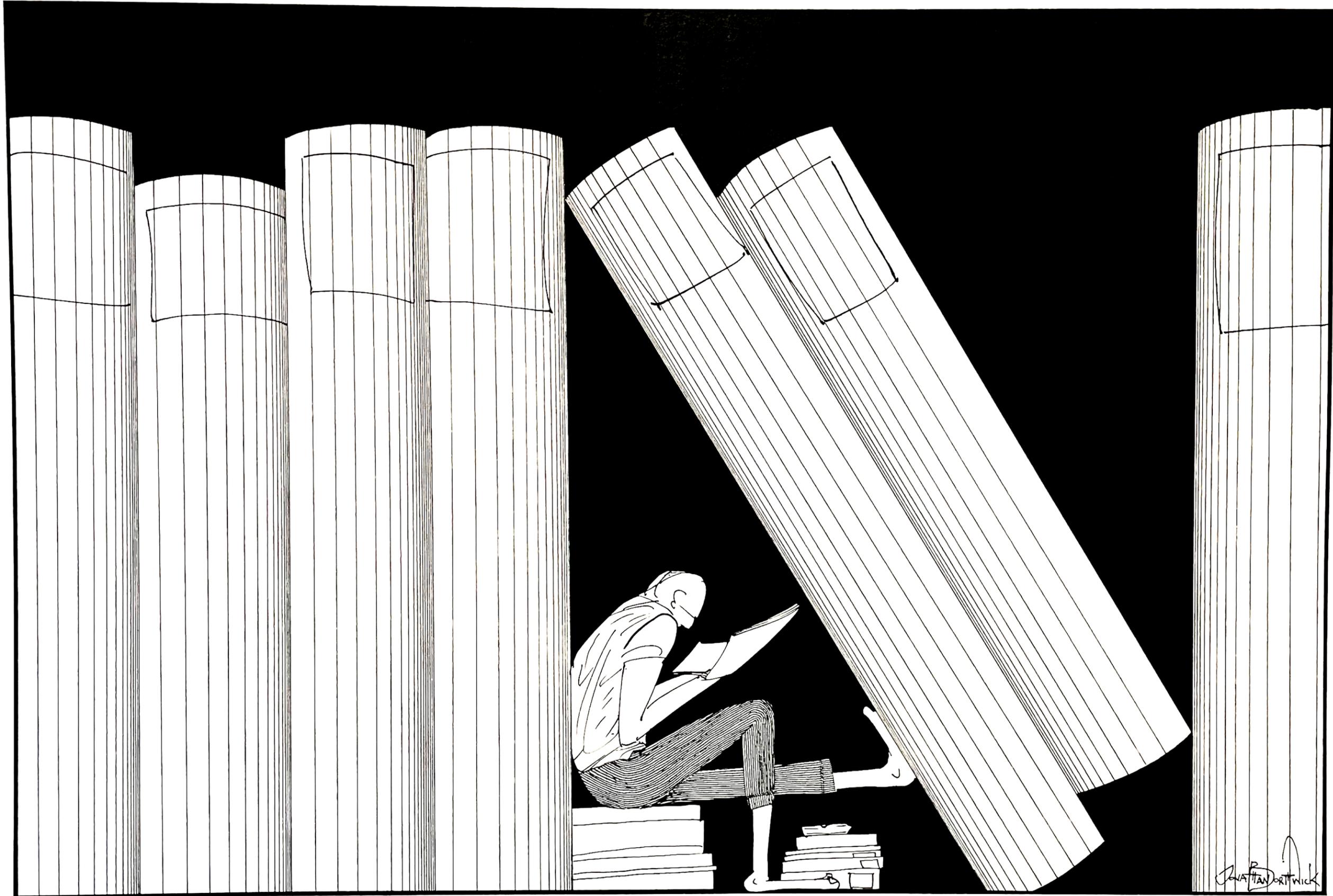
There is no dirt. You just like the letter D.  
Who would think worse of you  
for something like that?  
What you call rain is really  
a kind of roofing material  
and what you call transcendence is really  
the dreamless sleep of household objects.

Imagine for a moment I am the last man  
on earth. You see what happened? You see  
how your illness works? You keep changing me  
back to teeth.

Like a specter, Philly haunts my early art,  
blackmails me for the affairs  
with my past selves. But back to you.  
My advice: sleep at the edge of a body of water  
with paper airplanes covering your genitals.  
This will diminish the effects.

You wouldn't even come close to guessing  
the things I've done in front of the mirror.  
I tried on three different plagues and none  
of them did a thing for my pectorals.  
I wore my past self inside out, but couldn't  
figure out the zippers to take it off again.

You may feel as if the world is closing in on you,  
but this has happened before. Next to you  
is a machine made from a diamond cutter  
and the paper city. You will know what to do.



JONATHAN BORTHWICK

# How to Tell if a Student in Your Beginning Poetry Class Is a Russian Spy

BY OLGA ZILBERBOURG

Originally published in *Mad Hatters' Review* 12: *Back from the USSR* (2011)

THE FIRST THING you'll notice about him is that he doesn't wear a beret or horn-rimmed glasses, like your two other male students. He has a perfectly unremarkable face and something of a beer belly. If he were in better shape, you'd know he's a spy at first glance. The beer belly makes this man curiously good-looking. He wears baggy jeans and polo shirts to class, because that's "the American way." He writes lyric love poetry, he says during the introductory first session. This information makes you groan inwardly because you have a dreadful suspicion his poetry is going to rhyme.

The man's name is Richard Murphy, and he says he is from Massachusetts, but he speaks with a strong Slavic accent. You don't pry. On an urban university campus in New York you've learned to tread carefully around ethnic and national identities. If he really is from Massachusetts and if his parents were divorced and if his mother went to the land of realized Communism to marry a furnace stoker moonlighting as an underground poet and abandoned him on the streets of Moscow for a decade before he could finally be reunited with his father, you'll learn all about this from his verse. A semester is usually long enough for you to become conversant in your students' screwed up family histories. Richard's preferred form is a sonnet or a hymn. When you ask him if he speaks other languages, he says

"Spanish," and proceeds to quote a line: "El mundo va a cambiar de base. / Los nada de hoy todo han de ser." He has a curious Castilian lisp in his pronunciation, but foreign languages have never been your strong suit, so you defer judgment.

For the second session, you ask your students to bring snacks to share with everyone. The class session is broken into an hour and a half lecture by an acclaimed poet followed by an hour and a half of workshop divided into smaller groups, one of which you lead, and you find that food makes workshop a more nurturing environment. Most women in the class bring new age treats like organic carrot chips and vegan cookies, but Richard comes in with an apple pie and a tub of ice cream. He is rather puzzled when people shy away from his dish: it's apple pie, don't all Americans love it? He walks around the room with his pie and asks everyone: "Pie anyone? Come on, guys, you know it's the best!" Finally, a student tells him, "Pie is too rich a snack for me." There's sincere surprise in Richard's voice when he argues: "But you're so skinny!" Perhaps out of feelings of male camaraderie, one of the beret-wearers decides to take a slice of pie. Richard dishes out some ice cream on top of it. The ice cream is strawberry. This is a dead giveaway, but only the most cynical conspiracy theorist would ever suspect dessert.

Richard's first poems are mediocre. But so are everyone else's. You don't grade them, but give helpful suggestions.

At midterm, you collect the students' poems, the product of several workshops. You're pleased to see that Richard has abandoned the sonnet form, but are concerned that he's not exploring the wide possibilities the English language has to offer. While imaginative, his poems remain somewhat deadpan, descriptive rather than evocative. This is a common trait for those who write English as their second language, but Richard claims he's Irish-American. You puzzle over comments that would be most helpful in his revision process for "My Neck":

I consider my neck  
 to be the smartest part of my body—  
 as in “smartly fitted.”  
 It connects my head to my body,  
 blood flows through it  
 and oxygen.  
 My neck is fragile. It can be broken  
 or strung on a noose  
 or chopped off by a guillotine.  
 But without it, I wouldn’t be able to “duck”  
 and protect my head from bullets.  
 Without it, my head would be a dead weight.  
 I’m attached to my neck, because  
 I’ve had it since birth and will have it  
 until the day I die.

You write three paragraphs of comments on the usage of figurative language in poetry, the rhythm and music of poetry, supplying reading recommendations to address these problems; and then concede that a beginning student is usually better off receiving one specific piece of advice that he could actually comprehend and explore in future pieces. You wish you were a real teacher and not an overworked grad student, barely able to help herself. You delete the three paragraphs and type out a brief note, commending him on breaking “and oxygen” into a separate line and advising him to consider how the formal shape of his poem could be made to resemble a neck. You overlook the deep symbolic meaning of Richard’s work.

After you hand your comments back to the class, Richard shows up at the door of the office that you share with the other TAs. “What’s this?!” he demands, throwing the paper with your comments on your desk. You’re taken aback by his rudeness, best suited to the overcrowded

Moscow subway, but you’ve been spending a lot of time with poets lately, and you’ve learned that their sensitivity can sometimes take very dramatic turns. Richard is apparently upset by his grade: B+.

“It’s a very good grade,” you tell him. “In fact, it puts you ahead most of the class.”

“Why isn’t it an A?”

You know that you don’t need to defend your grading choice to the student—especially since you’ve written a perfectly reasonable note to accompany the grade—but you have never been easy with the concept of grading students’ creative efforts in the first place. Poetry is an inherently subjective art form, and different readers always have different interpretations of one another’s work. Frankly, you would’ve preferred to defer grading to the acclaimed poet who’s actually supposed to be teaching the class, but there are three hundred students registered for it altogether, separated into eight different workshop groups, and grading is not something the poet is willing to undertake. It’s between you and Richard.

“There are some problems with this poem, some areas of concern I mentioned in my comments.”

“I don’t see that.”

Richard picks up the piece of paper and reads your comment back to you out loud. Indeed, your feeble suggestion to pay attention to line breaks could be construed as unqualified praise. You admire Richard’s persistence with the grading issue, but are afraid that he’s missing a larger point.

“Do you think your poem deserves an A? Do you think it’s perfect?” you ask.

“Yes!” he says.

You were not prepared for this answer, and find yourself scrambling for what to do next. You wish you had some training in pedagogy, and not only English and English poetry. You also feel that his insistence

is somehow inappropriate for the situation, would be better suited for arguing his way past a bouncer or for climbing a career ladder at a highly bureaucratic organization like the KGB than for discussing poetry. “Would you like some water?” you ask him.

“I don’t drink water. I prefer Coca-Cola.”

But Coke is not something you have on hand. And anyway, it was just a way to delay answering his question. Finally, you come up with this phrase: “I feel that my grade is more than generous in this case, but if you wish, you can submit an appeal to the poet. Frankly, she might feel that your poem deserves a grade lower than B+.”

This turns out to be sufficient to get him out of your office. “Thank you for your help,” he says, but you can see he doesn’t really mean it. The skin around his jaws is tight and his eyes are burning with anger. He bangs the door of your office on his way out. The next few days, when you walk around campus, you keep turning around to make sure nobody’s following you, and you carry pepper spray in your purse. You’re considering putting him on the Watch List at the Student Health Offices, recommending that he receives a psychological evaluation. But even though you’re scared of him, he’s done nothing that seems objectively crazy. And, naturally, you don’t want to alienate him any further. You’re also growing increasingly concerned about your own paranoid tendencies.

During the second half of the semester, Richard’s skills increase so dramatically, you suspect him of cheating and look up some of his lines online. The search results reveal nothing obvious, and you wonder: maybe you’re a better teacher than you thought? It’s entirely possible that one of his classmates has been helping him out, or simply that he’s a gifted student and has been reading more poetry. He’s discovered the purpose of similes and metaphors, but now you’re concerned with how dark his imagination is growing to be. The class spends a lot of time workshopping his line: “My wife’s

eyes are like the holes of the double-barreled shotgun.” Most are impressed with the violence of the simile, even though nobody can quite pinpoint what provokes this violence. Elsewhere, and equally mysteriously, the wife is characterized as a “burnt branch of a birch tree.” You praise him for the use of alliteration, but advise him to unpack these potent images and uncover the underlying event that provokes them. Richard balls up his fist, points the index finger at you, pulls the trigger with the middle, and makes a shooting noise: “Pshew!” Your skin breaks out in goose bumps, and the hair at the base of your neck stands up straight.

One of the women in the class speaks up for you: “This is inappropriate, Richard! A terror tactic.”

“Just a joke, ladies,” Richard says. He grins and makes a big show of eating a brownie, one of the ones he brought in for snack that day.

“I am also wondering where this poem is set,” one of the quieter students in the class speaks up. “The image of the birch tree indicates that it’s set fairly far north, perhaps even in Canada. Birches are much more common there.” This gives you hope that some of the students in the class don’t buy Richard’s legend of being “from Massachusetts,” but don’t have the guts to confront him about it.

“When I think of birches, I imagine Russia,” you offer to the class. “Doctor Zhivago, that kind of thing.”

The class returns you a blank stare; nobody seems to have any idea what you’re talking about. Part of the problem with teaching the beginning poetry classes is that very few students have a common frame of reference with you. You glance in Richard Murphy’s direction. He meets your eyes straight up and gives you a little smile that makes you realize that he’s likely to be mad at you because you’ve tried to blow his cover. That day you decide to take preemptive action and to try to find out what this man is all about, and follow him home after class.

He doesn't go home—or at least, not straight home, and, cautiously trailing him, you go on a meandering journey around the city. He takes the subway uptown, East Side. At the subway exit, he meets a redheaded woman, and together they stroll leisurely in the general direction of the Museum Mile. On the way, they stop by a corner store for some produce and then buy a baguette at a bakery. To any casual observer, they would look like a young couple going home to make dinner. But you notice that they don't touch or kiss each other. When they walk together, she holds him by the crook of his arm, and that's as much physical contact as they ever have. When they disappear inside a building, you read the gold-plated sign "Russian Consulate General. Staff Only." A piece of paper attached at the bottom says, "Visa Applicants Enter Around the Corner."

You take this information straight to the FBI. A friendly woman in a casual suit takes you to her office and listens to you kindly. There's a folder in front of her that she flips through while you talk.

"Ms. Molotova," she says, "You do realize that this is the fifth Russian spy you've brought to us? The first," she looks at a piece of paper in front of her, "the first was a real estate agent. The second, a financial consultant. The third, a psychiatrist. Need I go on?"

"But this time I've got the evidence!" You hand her a copy of Richard Murphy's opus "My Neck" and a blurry photograph of him and a red-headed woman entering the consulate. The FBI agent takes a cursory look at these documents and puts them at the back of your folder.

"Bad poetry is not sufficient evidence, I'm afraid." But she follows protocol anyway and asks you to write a report, which you do. It takes you two hours, because you've been trained as a literary critic and go into the details of the poetry analysis.

When you hand in your write-up, a thought occurs to you: "This man—if you're not going to arrest him right away—do you think my life is in danger since I've been able to see through his cover?"

"We assure you, even if he is actually an active spy—which he is not—causing you bodily harm would never be in his interest. If you're concerned about this, we do encourage you to seek out a therapist."

This actually makes you feel a lot better: if the FBI is not worried about this man, there's no reason why you should be. Still, for the last two weeks of the semester, you tread carefully around Richard Murphy. You give him an "A" for his final project, a long poem entirely dedicated to his childhood dog. The work, you believe, actually deserves this grade: it's touching without being sentimental. To make sure your judgment is not entirely driven by fear, you ask the class to read their final projects out loud and submit suggested grades of their peers to you along with a few lines of explanation. Richard's poem stands out as one of everyone's favorites; many quote the first and the last line of his poem as the best they've seen all semester. "Snappy snaps," Richard's poem begins. It ends the same way. "Snappy snaps."

Three years later, when the FBI arrests Richard Murphy as a part of the Russian spy ring, you're not the least bit surprised.

# Not in a Ha Ha Way

BY ALAYNA FRANKENBERRY

Originally published in *OH NO Magazine* (2011)

If you wake up late for your job at the mill  
screaming until you wake the house, tell  
my sister that you need your time card  
need your hard hat, need the number of  
that electrician and then next week you  
are in Korea, having downed your plane  
and are screaming about bananas, seeing  
them again for the first time as they grow,  
upside down and then you are in a prison,  
your leg caught on the bars of your bed,  
calling my mother a bastard, calling my father  
a bastard, asking where the other bastards are  
so you can call them too, saying you were never  
any good or I've never seen you before or you bitch  
you bitch you're trying to kill me, then one day you are  
at the table eating a grilled cheese and when we ask what it is  
if you say a desk, then I am sorry but we laugh

WISDOM IN HER EYES



MAHSHID GORJIAN

# Lacy

BY PAMILERIN JACOB

Originally published in *Lit Quarterly* (2020)

*I was asleep while you were dying...  
Again and again, this constant forsaking  
- Natasha Trethewey*

You wagged your tail till the end, I was told. Kept wagging,  
after the machete finished its cruel assignment, and I  
miles away, was busy scribbling poems, trying to forget  
the executioner's face. For five weeks, you carried on your left

side, a tumor white as albumen. You chased pigeons and dreams,  
though you knew the futility of the hunt. Still, you kept at it,  
my noble warrior—running after each bird as though, in them,  
you saw your reincarnation, your blue future, devoid of leashes

and veterinarians. You carried in you, death, by you, like a nurturing  
mother. Yet, bore no pups. I never saw the body, but two days after  
you were taken, I heard a squeal at the backyard—the sound of a balloon  
when it spurts, a loud exit. It wasn't you, but the grief and its wicked conjuring.

Blessed be the executioner, who with his machete, broke the veil  
between you and silence, between you and the boundless wind.  
I detest him, but blessed be his machete called to a woeful enterprise.

I am dying too,  
albeit slowly. Something swells in me, nightmarish.

I do not want to talk about it. But like you, I want to gallop after pigeons  
and dreams. In this, you are my ancestor—passing down the rite of  
pointless pursuance. From you, I have come to learn, nothing is worthy  
of ambition. Voracious eater, I bet you bit into death like a mango,

doused your chin with its wetness. I am buying a cat soon, Lacy.  
Please, do not haunt me for this.

# My Lover and the Blackthorn Tree

BY EM HARRIETT

Originally published in *Tree and Stone* (November 2022)

I HAVE LIVED many lives and told many tales, but none as sweet as my dear Sloe.

She lived in a small cottage atop the hill with a blackthorn tree behind it, able to see the moors fringed by the forest and the village huddled beside it. The tree was more of a glorified shrub, its branches wiry and studded with thorns, its berries round and bitter—but Sloe didn't care.

She loved that tree as much as she loved me.

Every morning she went and spoke to it (or perhaps she spoke to me), telling tales from her dreams and her plans for the day. She pruned the branches and plucked the berries with the tenderness of a parent, gathering the fruit in her apron and ferrying it to her kitchen. Her cauldron boiled the berries down to syrup and filled the house with the rich smell of magic.

The village called her 'witch', as if that was an insult.

Sloe let the word ferment. She *was* a witch, in the broadest sense—her tonics and tinctures brought life and love to the people she tended. Her magic came from intention, from her herblore and the books her mother left her when she'd died so long ago.

But still, the bite of the villagers' tongues stung Sloe when she pretended not to care. No matter how many times she cured the sick or brought joy to the downtrodden, the village could not shake their superstition.

"I wish they talked of me with the same reverence that they speak of you," she told me one evening, sitting on her front steps and watching the yellow lights from the village below.

I curled around her with a warm sigh and lifted her long hair in my fingers. People worship *and* revile me, I told her.

"Yes, but you are the wind—you are nature itself. I'm just a human."

You are nature, too, I said.

"It's not the same."

I knew not what to say, so I toyed with the windchimes above her door, letting sweet music fill the silence.

DAYLIGHT SHORTENED LIKE fire burning down a match. I admit that staying in one place makes me restless—it's in my nature, I suppose—so I roamed the lands around the village, over the moors and through the thick copses of elder and ash. I carried news to the village from surrounding towns—harvests, losses, whispers on the wind that those who revered me asked me for. I cannot claim to love them the way I love sweet Sloe, but any force that's been around for millennia grows to like the taste of favors.

Sloe left me offerings, too, on the windowsill beside her kitchen—pastries, jars of herbs, even small loaves of bread left over from her baking. I took the scents and wafted them around the cottage, warding it with nutmeg and cinnamon, clary sage and mugwort, keeping the villagers' foul thoughts from breaching Sloe's homestead.

I kept her house steadfast no matter the storm. I turned the gales of my family aside so that neither shingle nor slat of wood would shake. I was the protector of Sloe's happiness. And she would sing such sweet melodies while she worked, would tell me such loving things that made me feel as young as the spring breeze.

I knew it was foolish, loving a human this way. But I suppose I am allowed to be a fool. It's only nature, after all.

And, in that regard, maybe I am to blame for her misfortune.

Sloe waited for the first frost before she harvested the ripest berries off the blackthorn tree. The berries were sharp and tart, astringent on the tongue like venom, yet their taste heightened the senses and made one feel alive. Sloe took the berries and mixed them into potions that would last through spring and back again. Even if the villagers gossiped and called her witch, they loved the health and vigor that her tinctures granted them.

Sloe pricked each berry with a thorn from the blackthorn tree and covered them in sugar, steeping them together with gin until the liquor turned red as rubies. She gave the liquor to any who asked, and testimony spread far and wide of its health-granting powers.

The berries she mashed into preserves and syrups, jams and desserts and all manner of food—but the tiny stone pits she left for me. I took the pits and carried them into the woods beside the hill to plant in the loamy soil there. Over the years, I'd started a hedge of blackthorns, though the villagers kept away from them—wary of the same prickly trees that their witch Sloe used to cure them.

It was a ward, of sorts, meant to keep my Sloe safe.

But balefulness cannot be stopped by thorns alone.

A PREACHER CAME to town one morning when the weather was thick with fog. To this day I do not know if he was truly a holy man or one devoted to his personal gains—but he entered the village like a snake, winding his way through social circles and flicking his tongue into conversation. Word of Sloe's witchcraft had drawn him out of the moors to hunt.

"Isn't it odd how that woman's house on the hill never shakes in a storm?" he'd say, pointing out Sloe's cottage. "Why, there was such a gust last night it tore the hay from the henhouse, yet her home retains those delicate dog rose blooms as if nothing had happened."

"That's true," murmured the villagers, casting suspicion on Sloe's garden.

"Isn't it strange how she knows these miracle cures?" the preacher said, condemning Sloe's healing teas and tinctures. "Why, it's as if the devil himself whispered in her ear! No mortal on earth can craft such spells without aid from the dark."

"That's true," muttered the villagers, casting doubt on Sloe's hard work.

The preacher went on, needling at every behavior he considered a sign of trickery, until he had the villagers suspecting their own kith and kin of secret witchcraft influenced by Sloe's own medicines. I heard all this, of course, and ferried it to my dear Sloe, but she seemed unworried at first.

"Let them think their thoughts," she said, sitting by her fire and tending a cauldron of blackthorn-berry jam. "They're only human. And what human isn't prone to wild thoughts now and again?"

I told her to be cautious, but in truth I felt guilty. It's odd, I suppose, for the wind to feel this way, but I cannot lie about myself. I wanted to keep Sloe's old cottage from collapsing. I wanted to keep her way of life alive.

So I shielded it. And the preacher noticed. And, in turn, so did the villagers, whose own homesteads wilted and shuddered as my family relations picked up the slack in the gales while I was preoccupied with Sloe. Everyone, from the westerlies to the sea breezes, nagged me to forget my local affection and return to my duties, but I ignored them as the horse ignores the fly.

The season froze. Rime coated the grasses of the moors and killed the fruits left unpicked. Sloe kept warm with her fireplace and hedge magic, and despite the villagers' gripes they still came to her cottage for balms and teas to help them with their colds.

But that was not the only place the villagers went. Bundled in their heavy coats and using scarves to hide their mouths, they followed the

preacher after his sermons and clung to his vehement superstition. They held meetings beneath the church and whispered rumors that stained their teeth with lies.

And, one evening in late November, I lingered outside their windows to hear what toxins infected their words.

“Oh, Preacher!” they cried (for that is what they named him). “What are we to do? The witch Sloe has her thorns in all of us by now, what with her potions and her house-charms that all of us surely have taken. Her foul magic has infected our poor village!”

The preacher clasped his hands and smiled with all his teeth.

“You must catch her while she sleeps,” said he, “for even witches need mortal rest. Tie her hands and bind her to the tallest tree in town. Set her ablaze with thick bundles of moor-grass. Recite the holy prayers to drown out the sounds of her screams, and then your village and your souls will be at peace.”

The villagers nodded and murmured assent as the preacher rallied them to carry out the deed that night.

I was furious, to say the least. I left in a tempest, knocking loose a weathervane off the church steeple and scattering pots and barrels across the streets. I rioted all the way up the hill to Sloe’s home and told her in harsh gusts what I’d heard.

“Oh, Zephyr!” she cried (for that was what she named me). “What am I to do? They won’t believe me if I protest, not with such poison in their hearts and such clouds across their judgment!”

I told her I could strike the preacher and his procession down with a single blow. But Sloe shook her head.

“No,” she scolded. “The people are not to blame. They have been swayed by bitterness, but in their hearts I know they are my neighbors. I could not bear to kill them to save my own skin.”

Then, I asked her, what would you have me do? I could ferry her across the moors, across the sea, to some distant shore where she would be safe.

But again, Sloe shook her head.

“This is my home,” she said. “I cannot bear to leave what my mother and foremothers have raised. They are buried in the village, and I will not abandon them.”

Sloe quieted, then, seeing flickers of torchlight emerge from the village below her hill. The preacher was first among them with a sermon slithering from his lips.

Sloe watched the villagers approach with grim realization.

“I know what I must do now,” she said. “But I need this hilltop clear to do it.”

I told her not to worry, and with a gust I plucked the blackthorn tree atop the hill straight from the ground and carried it to the forest, planting it among its brethren in the hedge.

The hilltop was free. Sloe clasped her hands in front of her and bowed her head. Her lips moved as if in prayer or incantation.

“I tend this earth with care and kindness,” she whispered. “And, in turn, I ask that it shelter me in love and truth.”

She planted her heels into the dirt where the old blackthorn tree used to be. The soil swarmed over her shoes until they became roots. Her skin turned to smooth, dark brown bark, and from her long hair branches spread and flourished until a beautiful blackthorn tree was all that remained of my lover’s human flesh.

The procession came upon her home and found it filled with silence. When they saw the tree atop the hill behind it they turned around in confusion.

The preacher scowled, cheated of his violence, and he waved his hand dismissively.

“No matter,” he said. “The witch Sloe is gone, one way or another. Perhaps she sought salvation across the moors. Or she’s fled into the forest to commune with those wretched plants.”

“A pity,” said a man with a torch in hand. “I would have liked to speak with her. Sloe may be a witch, but I cannot make jam the way

she can.”

“And I cannot make house-charms the way she can,” said another.

“And I cannot make tinctures the way she can,” said a third.

“What are we to do now?”

All around the preacher and the blackthorn tree, the villagers realized their folly in following a foolish man without merit. One by one they turned around and headed to their homes to stew in sorrow and shame. The word ‘witch’ softened in their minds now that their only hedge witch was gone—and the kindness they’d relied on drifted away with her.

The preacher, left alone on the hilltop with his failed plans, clenched his fists in rage.

“I know you’re out there, witch!” he spat to the moors and the thick forest below the hill. “I will not have you and your kin staining the purity of—”

I shoved him down the hill with a gust so fierce he rolled all the way to the forest’s edge. The preacher picked himself off the blackthorn hedge I’d planted there and marched to town to retrieve his belongings with his cheeks aflame.

I laughed. My levity danced through the long grass around Sloe’s old cottage.

And she, in turn, laughed with me.

Her branches sang, the thorns brushing together in a tangle of percussion. She was just as alive as ever, rooted in the soil of her homestead as she’d always been—the only true difference was her form.

I sighed, wrapped my arms around her, and embraced my dear Sloe. Her branches clattered in joy and revelation. And in her heartwood, she bloomed with love for her home, sprouting berries among her thorns so that all who needed her health and care could find it among the branches.

TO THIS DAY I do not know what magic Sloe channeled through her veins—but I do know that it saved her life.

And, in a sense, she gave the village back its life, too.

Once the preacher left town—for, without a witch to hunt and his reputation stained beyond scrubbing, his business could not function—the villagers sat with the gin from Sloe’s berries and belatedly mourned the loss of their community witch.

“Who will make us tinctures now?” they asked.

“Who will make us house-charms?”

“Who will cheer us when the winter drags long?”

“Perhaps she left something in her home,” said a youth. “A book or ledger with her recipes inside.”

The villagers ventured to the old cottage on the hill and sought the same help they’d gotten from Sloe before their minds were clouded. The blackthorn tree my lover became bristled with thorns and tapered leaves even in the chill of winter, and she would prick those who’d been so vocal to shun her—but she let those with kindness in their hearts approach and take from her what they would. Her thorns were a reminder not to take her offerings for granted. And the villagers obeyed.

With her berries they made poultices; with her branches they made shillelaghs. With the old herb books they pillaged from her home they taught their people hedge witchery and herb medicine. When another preacher slithered into town whispering lies, the villagers shooed him from their lives with blackthorn branches and build a hedge with pits from Sloe’s berries.

And all the while, Sloe grows strong and healthy, sitting atop her hill with her roots and branches stemming to earth and sky. For even if the wind can fall in love with a human spirit, so too are humans capable of extraordinary magic.

It’s only nature, after all.

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In Memoriam  
The Literary Journal Graveyard

The work published in this issue originally appeared in the following now-defunct markets:



